

I HAVE DRUNK AND SEEN THE SPIDER

By Alexander John Fowler

There may be in the cup
A spider steep'd, and one may drink, depart,
And yet partake no venom, for his knowledge
Is not infected: but if one present
The abhorr'd ingredient to his eye, make known
How he hath drunk, he cracks his gorge, his sides,
With violent hefts. I have drunk, and seen the spider.

The Winter's Tale.

Forward

Influenced by Dante's extensive and skillful use of numerology as a means of conveying thematic and spiritual significance through formal aspects of his verse, I have arranged these 33 poems into 3 distinct yet interrelated sections of 11 poems each, with numerical subdivisions within each of those sections themselves, all of these arrangements being invested (more or less) with meanings illustrative and ancillary to the poems contained in the respective sections. My "adaptation" of Dantean numerology has been largely informed by Vincent Foster Hopper's old but good study *Medieval Number Symbolism: Its Sources, Meaning, and Influence on Thought and Expression*; any additional superstition and insanity arises from my own idiosyncratic reading of Dante. I have endeavored to keep the "semantic range" of numbers virtually the same as it stands in Dante, but have utilized numerology to symbolize not the ineffable order of the universe, as does the great Tuscan, but rather the modern longing and simultaneous incapacity to entertain that vision of cosmic order (or its revelation through someone like a Beatrice).

The three sections, which are there to express totality (the Aristotelian beginning, middle, end) and the unity of the disparate poems and experiences they represent, are undercut and echoed by there being 33 poems contained in the work (which is, not undesignedly, the amount of cantos within each canticle of the *Commedia*, save the imperfect *Inferno*, which possesses an "evil" even number of 34 cantos); this number is one 3 short of the angelic perfection embodied by the number 9, beloved for its being 'thrice three,' $3 + 3 + 3$, at the same time an expression of the Trinity multiplied by itself (3×3) into the three dimensions of the material world; 9 is the number which Dante associates most with Beatrice, and the integer so totally surrounds the events of her existence to the point that the number becomes "her very self." Although 9 is able to be "achieved" by multiplying the individual digits of the number of poems in the work, symbolizing the latent possibility of the kind of revelation brought about by a Beatrice figure in postpostmodern life, when the numbers are added they produce 6, its inversion, which alludes to the world of matter proper, matter void of design and divinity, due to the fact that the material universe was created in six days according to Genesis, completed and perfected on the seventh day of rest. Thus, the purport of the poems being 33 in number represents the *possibility* of completeness, perfection, and the revelation of order, but finally the failure or inability to truly transcend the limitations of matter.

As mentioned previously, each of the three major sections of this work contains 11 poems; 11, being the addition of one to the ideality and completeness of the "sacred decad" of the "original numbers" (i.e. 1-10), it symbolizes transgression, excess, or departure—this seemed the number most representative of the arc of my philosophical and personal development, consisting as it did indeed of a series of transgressions and departures. Each major section's "decad" is subdivided based upon the themes of its respective parts, with a long poem "hanging over" and passing beyond the "decad" as the eleventh in the series. For example, the first section's "decad," which focuses on the initial debauch and psychedelia of my first few undergraduate years, is split into 2 parts (suggestive of division, confusion, strife, alienation) of 5 poems each (with reference to the senses, due to the hedonic subject matter of the poems). Under the headings of the three major sections I have included footnotes as to these numerological minutiae, *hic ne longior sim!* Whether there be any real aesthetic merit in any of this, I have endeavored at least to suggest the work's debt to and admiration for Dante as model from the outset, and to show a series of responses to his text through my own use of numerology in mine.

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Preface

I sang of death—but had I known
The many deaths one must have died
Before he came to meet his own!
Oh, should a child be left unwarned
That any song in which he mourned
Would be as if he prophesied?
It were unworthy of the tongue
To let the half of life alone
And play the good without the ill.
And yet 'twould seem that what is sung
In happy sadness by the young,
Fate has no choice but to fulfill.¹

“Jesters do oft prove prophets,” I often repeat to myself, and Frost’s jest here is a bitter and hard-learned one. I am sure that what I have here written will both be found true and at the same time recall to me my foolishness when I wrote this.

Somewhere in an interview, Frost comfortingly says that all poets begin with insufficient knowledge, usually between eighteen and twenty-five, and it is from the heat of that initial vision that all later and greater works mature and attain that quality of crystalline perfection which is the mighty labor and the pride of a talent long in acquiring. The fact that Frost can welcome the early songs of *A Boy’s Will* without too much shame into the golden company of the first ten poems of his *A Witness Tree* is encouraging, and so is Keats, who says that the reader of his *Endymion* “must soon perceive great inexperience, immaturity, and every error denoting a feverish attempt, rather than a deed accomplished... It is just that this youngster should die away: a sad thought for me, if I had not some hope that while it is dwindling I may be plotting, and fitting myself for works fit to live. This may be speaking too presumptuously, and may deserve a punishment: but no feeling man will be forward to inflict it: he will leave me alone, with the conviction that there is not a fiercer hell than the failure in a great object. This is not written with the least atom of purpose to forestall criticisms of course, but from the desire I have to conciliate men who are competent to look, and who do look with a zealous eye, to the honour of English literature.” I myself could not improve upon his words here to describe my own feelings; only he can do so: “The imagination of a boy is healthy, and the mature imagination of a man is healthy; but there is a space of life between, in which the soul is in a ferment, the character undecided, the way of life uncertain, the ambition thick-sighted: thence proceeds mawkishness, and all the thousand bitters which those men I speak of must necessarily taste in going over the following pages.” Frost says that one must “have that kinda courage,” really more of a certain dumb temerity, to dare publish such early compositions.

Although it will be evident from the above and what follows, in the maelstrom of quotations, I wish I had been born among other times and other men, it is imperative that I live with my own life and truth, among living people and their concerns and mine, and to deal with postpostmodern life with “that kinda courage,” if any such can be mustered. Dante reminds us

¹ Lines from Robert Frost’s poem “The Wind and the Rain,” from *A Witness Tree*.

often, once explicitly and everywhere else in the grit and grandeur of his endless art, that a poet who is “*al vero un timido amico*” is worthless. The hell is that today one who approaches the altar of Veritas at all is deemed deluded; all truths now are dust beneath our enlightened feet, and Mallarmé’s unwritten gospel, *The Beauty of the Lie*, might be called our holy writ in progress. We are what Milton says of the Original Twain, after they tasted the fruit of knowledge,

As with new Wine intoxicated both
They swim in mirth, and fansie that they feel
Divinitie within them breeding wings
Wherewith to scorne the Earth²

Freed from the past and its errors, we rejoice that the truth cannot be told; each is master of his own universe, and each is right; our biases and illusions so becloud our vision that we no longer need search each other or ourselves, luxuriating in an unassailable intellectual complacency, pro nihil: *le genti dolorose c'hanno perduto il ben de l'intelletto!*³

Frost, in his charmingly simple way, finds the truth like well water with witchhazel:⁴

It will turn true again, for so it goes.
Most of the change we think we see in life
Is due to truths being in and out of favour.
As I sit here, and oftentimes, I wish
I could be monarch of a desert land
I could devote and dedicate forever
To the truths we keep coming back and back to.
So desert it would have to be, so walled
By mountain ranges half in summer snow,
No one would covet it or think it worth
The pains of conquering to force change on.

I am bound for the desert, but before then I must say something about what I have breathed through thus far, and attempt to give what I have learned and done some shred of significance in the life I will leave behind me, though someday the praise or blame hurled at my ears will make no noise. Plotinus says this of retrospection, “If in the greater length of time the man has seen more deeply, time has certainly done something for him, but if all the process has brought him no further vision, then one glance would give all he has had.”⁵

It will become clear that the main themes of this work will be youth, death, and alcoholism. I am aware that there are many who would not find my actions, inclinations or thoughts of any interest, and would fain be spared the minutiae of what I consider a “formative epoch of my existence;” there are many, doubtless, who would even find it offensive to have thought of, never mind done, some of the things which I will recount in the span of a mere four years, and still more who would just cackle at the bulk of it. As to the former class, I hope that I

² *Paradise Lost* IX.1008-1011

³ Vergil’s description of the damned in *Inferno* III, “The woeful people who have lost the good of intellect.”

⁴ It is a New England “folkloric” belief (one which Frost often playfully alludes to in his poetry) that well water can be found using a wand made of witchhazel.

⁵ *Enneads* I.v.3

will veil enough of my life in myth for art's sake in order to repay their reading, and to the latter I reply with the mystic Jan Van Ruysbroeck: "I must rejoice beyond the bounds of time, though the world may shudder at my joy, and in its coarseness know not what I mean."

I am constrained by the Honors College to explain, however inartistic it may be for the writer of a work to write commentary upon it, the allusions and aesthetic choices which I have made, to better concretize the fact that at least a few thoughts went into the composition of the work. I chose Dante as my model both because of my admiration (one might call it idolatry justly) of his works and for his unique treatment of the *prosimetrum* genre in *La Vita Nuova*. As I found in my own life so many dissimilarities with the vision of love Dante fashions us therein, and had so much desire that it were not so, I thought that imitation of this work would be an expedient way of including the necessary "commentary" without the result being aesthetically egregious. I mean to make no invidious comparison between Dante and myself, however, but wrote so merely out of veneration; I would say of him what Lucretius said of his master:

You I follow, O glory of Tuscan⁶ stock, in your footsteps
Made by the tread of your feet in the dust of the world I will follow,
Not from a lust after contest but rather for love that I bear you,
Thus do I seek to be like you, for how can the song of the swallow
Conquer the swan's; tell me, what can the goat with its rickety gait do
Matched alongside all the rush and the valor of galloping horses?⁷

There will be here references to passages familiar to not a few, but I will nonetheless cite and somewhat explicate their provenance and germaneness to my work, in addition to those which would probably be considered arcane to most readers, for the sake of completeness. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted, and although there are indeed myriad translators more skilled and correct than myself, I am here most attempting to delineate how literature has directly influenced the course of my life and thinking, and so my own interpretation of a source's meaning will be of slightly greater relevance to my project than rendering an absolutely exact and literal traduction of the text in question.

⁶ As can be seen from the original, Lucretius speaks of Epicurus as the 'glory of the Grecian race', which I have here capriciously changed to 'of the Tuscan race' so that it might refer to Dante; I think that if "*Tuscae*" were substituted for "*Graiae*", it would still scan the same, so I can at least feel a little less contrite about fiddling with Lucretius.

⁷ *DRN* III.3-8:

*te sequor, o Graiae gentis decus, inque tuis nunc
ficta pedum pono pressis vestigia signis,
non ita certandi cupidus quam propter amorem
quod te imitari aveo; quid enim contendat hirundo
cycnis, aut quid nam tremulis facere artibus haedi
consimile in cursu possint et fortis equi vis?*

I HAVE DRUNK AND SEEN THE SPIDER

And so it was I entered the broken world
To trace the visionary company of love, its voice
An instant in the wind (I know not whither hurled)
But not for long to hold each desperate choice.

Hart Crane. "The Broken Tower"

*Sine me, obsecro, et da mihi circuire praesenti memoria praeteritos
circuitus erroris mei, et immolare tibi hostiam iubilationis.*

Augustine.

I

Budding Before Spring

*Sed nox atra caput tristi circumuolat umbra*⁸

*How will thy shame be seeded in thine age,
When thus thy vices bud before thy spring!*⁹

In the book of my forgetfulness¹⁰ there are many pages razed out in anger or stained and blurred with wine, but the few that are not wholly torn or sere I will transcribe here for my conscience, and though my soul stands on end to recall and flees from itself to tell what I have done,¹¹ I must begin with the time before and after I read the words “*Incipit agnitio Mortis communis*,”¹² written in bubbles on every brim.¹³

It was no vision that came to me winged and aureoled, but rather a shadow ever-following and gaining, faceless and endless. Demons crowned me with poppies¹⁴ while whispering, “*Vae soli!*”¹⁵ and “*Pestis, nulla pax, tibi!*”¹⁶ at me in my favorite tongue, as all wines flowed at the universal banquet of my own death and the death of every other. I heard my liver, not laughing along with them but weeping; it spoke the very same Latin which Dante himself attributes to it: *Heu miser, quia frequenter impeditus ero deinceps!*¹⁷ In my nights I met with two gods (only by metonymy) most frequently, Dionysus and Death, twin brother of Sleep, and I asked of Fate why this should be.

Three times thus far in divination I have conducted the *sortes Vergilianae*,¹⁸ the first time in high school Latin class as a joke when I suggested we all pick up our *Aeneids* and try, in which my levity was somewhat rebuked (although in the *Aeneid* it is hard to find a smile) by these words preceding the lament for Marcellus: *sed nox atra caput tristi circumuolat umbra*—

⁸ *Aeneid* VI.866; cf. third paragraph underneath, and compare with the headings of the two other sections.

⁹ Shakespeare “The Rape of Lucrece”

¹⁰ In contrast to Dante’s “book of memory” with which he begins the *Vita Nuova*, this will be a record of what has not been forgotten, despite all of the many moments which have been obliterated by drunkenness.

¹¹ Cf. the end of Aeneas’ opening speech in *Aeneid* II.

¹² Both “Here begins the knowledge of universal Death” and “Here begins the common knowledge of Death,” underscoring the central theme of this work, and in antithesis to Dante’s “*Incipit vita nova*.” *Communis* can be taken as either genitive agreeing with *Mortis* (i.e. expressing the fact that death is universal, the wise and the fool perish, the king and the beggar) or as nominative with *agnitio* (i.e. that all human beings realize that they must die, and yet they each respond to that truth differently in the means they use to distort it).

¹³ As will become apparent by the end of the second portion of this work, alcoholism (and the association of drinking with death) is present as a theme throughout.

¹⁴ The opening poem of Rimbaud’s *Une saison en enfer* featured him being coronated with poppies by demons.

¹⁵ “Woe to the lonely man,” a favorite Latin phrase of the French Symboliste, Jules Laforgue.

¹⁶ “A pestilence, no peace, be with thee!” a corruption of the *pax tibi* said at mass.

¹⁷ “Alas, wretch that I am, for hereafter I shall be often impeded!” Although Dante says that the spirit which dwells wherein the food is digested (the stomach for us) says this, he in fact means the liver.

¹⁸ A bibliomantic method in which one takes the works of Vergil and opens them to a random page, one’s “fortune” being the line which one’s eyes meet first.

“But swarthy night whirls round his head with doleful shade.” Indeed. The next was in my Freshman year at the University of Vermont, when I was wondering what my demise might be one drunken evening, and again I had everyone who was around smoking that night to attempt the *sortes*, and, the last in the circle to inquire, I received a verse from the *Georgics* this time, bleak as the first: *nequiquam seros exercet noctua cantus*—“All in vain the bird of night is busy at her late songs.” In this my final spring of college, with so many simulacra of this life dissolving about me and a sense of the doom to be a real, working citizen, I again consulted the pages of the master and received the following lot for my own: *poscit equos gaudetque tuens ante ora frementis*—“He seeks his horses and rejoices to behold them neighing before him.” Even such a goodly auspice is not without tragedy in its context; the man who is yoking his chariot is Turnus, and it is his final day. Like all oracles, I found a way to make them all true afterwards, except the last, which I have yet to do.

I am haunted by the idea of fate, though I do not at all believe in it, but still I long to gather the Sibyl’s leaves, both where they flutter out of Cumae and where we find they have been wafted by Dante, upward to the very Empyrean, bound there in a single volume of Love; and although it is a far less beautifully affirming and capacious conception, Vergil’s universe is the one that would square more with experience and the truth than his pupil’s visions—

Thither will you be conveyed, when at last you have made it to Cumae,
 Where are the awful bogs of Avernus that shrieks with its forests,
 And you will see there a prophetess, mad, in the bottommost cavern
 Singing of fate, and commending to leaves many names in her verses.
 Whatever scripture the virgin has left on the leaves she arranges
 In their order, and there in the dark of the cave she will leave them:
 Thus they remain in their places unmoved, nor depart from that order.
 But it is true at the turn of a hinge a slight breeze may bestir them,
 Scattering all of the light, fragile leaves when the door has been opened.
 She will not care to chase after them then in their flight from the sanctum,
 Nor to restore them at all to their places or join them together.
 Unenlightened leave all, and detest the shrine of the Sibyl.¹⁹

In other words,

There is a divinity that shapes our ends,
 Rough-hew them how we will.

¹⁹ Cf. *Aeneid* III.441-452

*huc ubi delatus Cumaeam accesseris urbem
 diuinosque lacus et Auerna sonantia siluis,
 insanam uatem aspicias, quae rupe sub ima
 fata canit foliisque notas et nomina mandat.
 quaecumque in foliis descripsit carmina uirgo
 digerit in numerum atque antro seclusa relinquit:
 illa manent immota locis neque ab ordine cedunt.
 uerum eadem, uerso tenuis cum cardine uentus
 impulit et teneras turbauit ianua frondes,
 numquam deinde cauo uolitantia prendere saxo
 nec reuocare situs aut iungere carmina curat:
 inconsulti abeunt sedemque odere Sibyllae.*

We cannot know a thing about the universe of darkness that envelops and effects its caprices through us, indifferent to our pretty notions of evil and good, whose hand we see in all and whose face never. The Greeks devised a beautiful formula in order to look upon it with more grateful eyes: τὸν πάθει μάθος.²⁰

I often think of how the gods outwitted Croesus,²¹ in the end before the rain shed by Apollo had hissed on the pyre, and he recalled in his tears what Solon said of Cleobis and Biton, that for their fervor the goddess bestowed on them the greatest boon to humankind, and thus slew them softly in the shade of her shrine with a sleep. And what about that other Lydian lord, who found Silenus dozing on his roses—where is it again, some fragment of Aristotle?²²—and begged him to tell what thing was the best that might befall a man: never to have been born at all, and second best, to die as soon as possible. When will they outwit me?

Illusion

I came to Vermont a bookish, garden-variety nihilist—I had done little work in high school that my teachers gave me, except in Latin, and turned instead toward my own (and, I thought, far older and better) canon of authors for my education. I did not get into as many schools as I would have liked, but the moment I came to Vermont and felt it, I knew that I had made fair haven.

I had only one moment of half-regret about choosing the *Universitas Viridis Montis*, before I had begun my first year, when I was at the Classical Association of New England's Summer Institute at Dartmouth, and saw the Ivy League everywhere gleefully encircling and accusing me of slackness, as I paced the August twilight and burning dew by the river nearby, I heard the knell of my future in the evening toll:

I

Vox Clamantis in Deserto²³

I hate this charming place, its towers,
That, as day's fevered head slumps low,
Tinkle class hymns above pruned flowers
With lyrics I don't want to know.

It's here though, strange, I can remember
The walks of lost, rose-clouded years,
Dreams scudding soft through youth's September,
Whipped on by cold, bruised dark with tears.

²⁰ Roughly, “wisdom comes through suffering.” Aeschylus *Agamemnon* 177.

²¹ His story is related in Herodotus I, *passim*.

²² It is a fragment of his *Eudemus*, quoted in Plutarch, *Moralia, Consolatio ad Apollonium*, sec. xxvii

²³ “The voice of one crying in the wilderness,” Isaiah 40:3, later taken by the evangelists as referring to John the Baptist; it is the motto of Dartmouth.

Still, I'm no fool, flesh mad at spirit:
I've known the luster of delight –
But as it dims, I stumble near it,
And my feet learn the length of night.

I did not regret it more since I moved in. After being Catholic for a long spell in my early youth, remaining so long after I had ceased to believe out of my love of Dante, God was sufficiently overthrown that I made my escape into the material, hedonic universe. As Plotinus says of such: “The soul or mind reaching towards the formless finds itself incompetent to grasp where nothing bounds it or to take impression where the impinging reality is diffuse; in sheer dread of holding to nothingness, it slips away. The state is painful; often it seeks relief by retreating from all this vagueness to the region of sense, there to rest as on solid ground, just as the sight distressed by the minute rests with pleasure on the bold.”²⁴

Seeing the bold alone, I dreamed that in the shadow of these violet mountains at dusk there would be walking some redeemer of my former life of fancied ennui, one who could bring me into the chthonic, Dionysian paradise of my most unutterable imaginings, and initiate me into the Mysteries of youth, which I had largely missed in the listlessness of *on n'est pas sérieux, quand on a dix-sept ans*.²⁵

Though intellectually I had settled for *vanitas vanitatum*²⁶ *qua summum bonum*, I nevertheless could not help but feel the Burlington sun warm with assurance when I first came: “The world is as young today, as when it was created; and this Vermont morning dew is as wet to my feet, as Eden's dew to Adam's. Nor has Nature been all over ransacked by our progenitors, so that no new charms and mysteries remain for this latter generation to find. Far from it. The trillionth part has not yet been said; and all that has been said, but multiplies the avenues to what remains to be said. It is not so much paucity, as superabundance of material that seems to incapacitate modern authors.”²⁷ Thus was I incapacitated by wonder for the happiest year of my life. At the present moment, most of the people whom I loved most have left or are otherwise vanished, and now it is only with great difficulty that I recall ever being as happy. But for a time I was, though it be only with the gaudium of a fool, truly enjoying for the first and only time the society of those my age, I who before had rather been among the old or alone, and thereafter was constantly chasing the rapture which my friends then stirred, *nequiquam*—I am often drawn back again by the breeze across them down those “primrose paths to the everlasting bonfire,” and now in the gloaming of these years together, it is a hardship to recall and record the vertiginous flow of bodies and faces that I called friendship. But if pressed to answer Nietzsche as to what I would reply to the little demon who proposes *der ewige wiederkunft*,²⁸ I would say ‘yes’ without hesitation, due in large part to those four seasons of ecstatic unease.

Most of the people whom I met, no doubt, will be quickly forgotten and stand merely as a mosaic of undifferentiated *revenants* that will come to haunt me at future social gatherings with regrets: “nameless in dark oblivion let them dwell,” and there are some whose beauty is not to be forgotten though their names be, and there are still more whom I would rather leave unnamed

²⁴ *Enneads* VI.vi.3

²⁵ “No one is serious when they're seventeen.” Cf. Rimbaud's early poem “Roman.”

²⁶ The famous refrain of Ecclesiastes, “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.”

²⁷ Herman Melville, “Hawthorne and His Mosses, By a Virginian Spending July in Vermont.”

²⁸ The eternal recurrence, first set down in *The Gay Science* (when an almost “Cartesian” demon poses the famous thought experiment to Nietzsche as to whether he would say yes or no to living his life over and over again in the exact same way; Nietzsche, of course, affirms life. Cf. *Also Sprach Zarathustra* IV

as Li Shangyin did in his 无题.²⁹ There are a few, though, that I would give a name—yet I hardly think that many of them would like to be recorded in this picaresque tale with their Christian names, so I will refer to them henceforth by pretty aliases which I culled from the *Eclogues*, both for their association with an idealized world of love and its attendant dissatisfactions, which is how I will always view Vermont, and for the melancholy that everywhere presses upon their attempts at creating an illusion of its absence. Vermont's own image of itself, one of hearty farmers in the heartland and erudite liberals on the lake, of fairness and reverence for the earth, of bohemian and vegetarian fringe groups abundant as the weed that everyone is smoking, is ironically a modern parallel to the artificiality of the Theocritan wonderland that so enamored the Romans and later civilizations; it is its perverse postpostmodern brood.

The first few moments of college in which we were separated from our practically Maoist “Orientation Leaders,” my two newest friends and I smoked a joint in a parking lot. As a result, we were separated from our orientation group, and simply followed another train of similar souls which walked as toward the Acheron; we were told that it would be about “sexual education,” and more in jest than zeal we went to one of the sex conferences which were being held around campus for edification of the new batch. I remember seeing a great many more attractive faces about the sprawl of chairs than hearing much of the lecture's banalities, such faces, some of which I recognized from high school or dreams. That evening I first walked through the moist dark of Burlington's streets, not knowing of the snow or the lag of spring, going through the flowery shadows of the campus paths, and eventually reached Champlain College somehow, wherein I found an array of hallucinators forever laughing at the weave of trite tapestries; after a single puff I was overwhelmed, led back to my dorm room by something not unlike Adam Smith's invisible hand.

On the second night of college I was nearly arrested. I remember all of my brethren in the humanities (our program, the IHP, was composed of those whose aspiration was to become scholars of the human predicament), arm in arm and flush with the cheapest vodka available, I recited Shakespeare to the trees and stars and my newfound kin as we stumbled towards a teepee that was hidden in the woods, and found a sort of coven already there passing about glowing bowls; I do not remember ever going home, but return to myself when, after my tragically inebriated suitemate, *hic nomine Daphnis*, went down to get a spare key (which he had already lost) from the RAs and was followed by them unaware. Shortly after they called the campus police on us (they being particularly malevolent on that first weekend so as to create a fear that lasts), who badgered us into being illegally searched, pilfered what they wanted, and left us crestfallen by one o'clock. The worst loss was my bottle of absinthe—pseudo-artistic, expensive, complex, extremely alcoholic—everything that I then desired. I corrected the policeman's pronunciation of certain accoutrements of the absinthe “ritual” as he dictated the report, and I asked whether it would be enjoyed by someone of appropriate culture and not wasted in vain, which remark was met by a surprising semblance of geniality when he said it would only be drunk by the drain.

²⁹ Literally, “Without a Title,” which was the name the Tang poet Li Shangyin gave to many of his most beguiling and accomplished poems; it does not have the same sense as our “Untitled,” i.e. it is left untitled due to the author not bothering to give one for vagueness or for carelessness's sake, or because the original title of an older work was lost; 无题 denotes that the information is secret, and cannot be written.

Thankfully we evaded them for a long while thereafter, and for once I had the youth that I liked to believe had been denied me in the life I'd lived before, though its toys were bongos and bottles and film noir and frightening music, I nonetheless played with them in innocence for a month or two. We would often spread a blanket in the spot we named "The Grove," clambering up maples and smoking in plain sight of those passing to and fro to class, lost in our Xanadu. My beautiful friend, *hic nomine Neaera*,³⁰ had gotten a few thousand dollars refunded to her by Financial Aid for some bureaucratic mix-up, and so was always walking about with a handle of vodka and a bag of weed quite conspicuous in her purse, *elle-même tres décolletée aussi*. On one night of particular delirium, after we had been thrown out of our original party by a dominatrix screaming, "you're in or you're out, you're in or you're out!" we wandered over to the Jakes', an infamous (frequently migrating due to eviction) locale, and drank the aptly appellationed "Red Death"—this, being one of the few Poe stories which I like, was irresistible, and after six cups of it I had taken off my pants and ended up spilling it all over Neaera's dress and, overwhelmed with inordinate guilt, wept that I had thwarted Beauty's self. That evening, before this outrage, she let me watch her as she got dressed; she had at that time a sort of dim, pink boudoir, the rest of the furniture all black, always smelling so deeply of whatever her perfume was (or of weed). The gratitude for this little kindness she did me by letting me watch her has never quite left me—people have gone to heaven for slighter things.

II

Neaera

Years, years ago, I watched her dress
Before the enraptured mirror,
Flush with a doubled loveliness
That made it that much clearer,
As with each skirt there came one pose
Which made her doubt the shade she chose,
Until we'd gone through all her clothes—
She's gone, and still grows dearer.

Not wishing that she take her place
Among things that are ended,
I fill the darkness with her face,
And see her smile suspended
Off in these northern crepuscules³¹
We gazed at when we were still fools,
Her eyes and heaven flecked with jewels³²
That danced as they descended.

³⁰ As well as her presence in the *Eclogues* III, in which Neaera is Aegon's girlfriend, also cf. Milton's "Lycidas"

*To sport with Amaryllis in the shade,
Or with the tangles of Neæra's hair?*

³¹ Latinate word for twilight

³² Snow

Now only memory keeps warm
The unforgiving ashes
Of that soft flame, her vanished form—
But sometimes there are flashes
Upon the hidden eye alone
Of sweetness that cannot be known
Save to the few whom she has shown
That world just past her lashes.³³

She was a near constant presence in my happiness then and long afterward, avid to learn all of the nonsense I was always talking about the Greeks, always praising and admiring me for more than I was ever worth: it is beautiful to be treated so by a beautiful woman. It left a grievous gap among us when she was forced later to transfer due to the problem she then shared with her boyfriend, and with others around me whom I knew, a few who later would indeed find ruin for it.

But one denizen of this nightworld (present at the aforementioned party and a thousand others) I remember more fondly than the rest of that time; as Dante says the daughter of Portinari did him,

Just so do I recall in memory
Having done, gazing in the lovely eyes
Which Love had made the snare to capture me.³⁴

He was almost absurdly skinny, with green eyes full of questions and troubles, that made you think Diotima's staircase of beauty³⁵ could be scaled just by talking to him, and that if you only gazed long enough, you could believe in something beyond the flux and flesh of ordinary things. But then again, everything looks like that when you're drunk.

It felt like something infinitely lovely, but cruel somehow, was communicating with me from those chapped lips, and my soul was frightened of sending a reply into the ears of everything, so I always just said the stupid things everyone seemed to like instead. What can you say when interrogated by God?

³³ By that, I mean the world behind the outward form, a look that passes beyond the eyes and into the other. The stanzaic form utilized here comes from Edwin Arlington Robinson's "Eros Turannos."

³⁴ *Paradiso* XXVIII.10-12:

*così la mia memoria si ricorda
ch'io feci riguardando ne' belli occhi
onde a pigliarmi fece Amor la corda.*

³⁵ Cf. Socrates' famous encomium of her in the *Symposium*.

III

Agape³⁶ with ἀγάπη

Chained in the Cave,³⁷ but glad to be indoors,
I still can glimpse the winding staircase rise³⁸
Up the infinity of mortal eyes
When we talk, shyly, and mine rise through yours.
And no, I never could keep passion's horse
In rein with reason's,³⁹ but to my surprise,
And though your beauty's part of all that dies,
I wish I'd kept my chariot more on course.

I know that you are shallow, so am I,
But if the both of us must age and die
Why not believe your eyes, unsearchable,⁴⁰
Along with the loved body as it warms
Could somehow wing us sunward to The Forms—⁴¹
Sure, I'll agree with Plato—if *you* will.

³⁶ To clarify, this is not a transliteration of the Greek which follows, meaning the most sacrosanct and ideal form of love, but “agape” in the sense of “with open mouth and wondering.”

³⁷ This alludes, of course, to the famed allegory of the cave located in Plato's *Republic*.

³⁸ In addition to nodding to Yeats's *The Winding Stair* and his theory of gyres, this refers to the passage in the *Symposium* wherein the reputed lover of Socrates, Diotima, explains how one might gain a perception of the Good and Beauty itself by ascending in contemplation from one's beloved, to beautiful forms, to beautiful notions and customs, until finally achieving a transcendent understanding of Beauty Ultimate.

³⁹ This makes reference to the famous trope of the soul as a charioteer ruling over reason and passion (i.e. the horses) in the *Phaedrus*.

⁴⁰ Cf. Hart Crane's “Voyages, VI”:

*Creation's blithe and petalled word
To the lounged goddess when she rose
Conceding dialogue with eyes
That smile unsearchable repose—*

⁴¹ Of course, the Platonic Forms or Ideal Existences, mentioned *passim* by the philosopher. The sun is the major symbol of that transcendence, as is well known from the aforementioned allegory of the cave.

IV

To One Unnamed

The evening glow was dim on half your face,
Dimmer now in a memory. The wine
Stole all your words, but left the bliss untouched.⁴²

The dusk was young again, reminding us
As every color died without complaint
That one youth is all mortal hearts deserve.

Now I go stumbling alone through the past,⁴³
And step on vanished flowers we never noticed,⁴⁴
Still drunk on what I snored off years ago.⁴⁵

What will your eyes look at when they are flowers,
And what will I say, my mouth stopped with mold?
Will we be proud then that we knew the rose,
Or brag to ghosts that we too felt the sun once?

Now twilight reds the roofs. Where are you, watching?

Dante in the *Vita Nuova* is from the start at pains to conceal the secret of his love, though written on his paled face, and her identity because of the sacred emotion her mere being stirs within him, lest the *mobile vulgus* make him a byword and a fool for what he considers to be the very incarnation, a proof of God's limitless love for mankind. There were days when, my head full of the poets, I would pretend to believe in it all, as in the rules of a puerile game, and willed those around me into forms more beautiful than they were. I stumbled on the first step of Diotima's staircase. I experienced no incarnation, but carnality. My problem is more in line with Shakespeare's: "two loves I have, of comfort and despair." It must be said that even though the respective *grandes passions* of these, our two loftiest poets, dwarf and laugh my own and those of every other out of countenance, their mention here is ever only testament to their glory, that I and so many others over so many centuries have been able to interpret our own peculiar experiences in their unfailingly human and capacious light. If they can ever add some tint of nobleness to the way we view our own lives, I think we have read aright.

⁴² I.e. the feeling of happiness is still remembered, though the words spoken are forgotten.

⁴³ This line is meant to sound metrically clumsy to further illustrate what it means.

⁴⁴ Maeterlinck, *Serres Chaudes*, "Aquarium":

*Ses mains impuissantes,
Et lasses enfin de cueillir
Ces fleurs absentes.*

"Her powerless hands, tired at last of gathering those absent flowers."

⁴⁵ Suggested by Persius III.3-4

*stertimus, indomitum quod despumare Falernum
sufficiat.*

"We snored until it was enough to work off the unconquerable Falernian wine."

V

Walking Home

Whatever in your eyes made that walk lonely,
Some silent promise to me, so commanding
For one whose life is slave to dreams, dreams only,⁴⁶
Still haunts me out of sleep and understanding.
I can't tell from your jokes what smiled unspoken,
Or what your hands meant on my back and shoulder;
But you passed out and could not be awoken:
I shut your door, and suddenly felt older.
I know there'll be more drunken nights to talk through,
More hopes that weakly murmur you could love me;
I bet there will be grayer dawns I'll walk through,
Back to wherever, a sick moon above me,
But don't forget, someday we're dead and rotten,
Less than last night's slurred words, and as forgotten.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ I intend two uses of only, "merely" and "alone."

⁴⁷ This is a sonnet composed using exclusively feminine rhymes; examples of it are few but striking in Shakespeare, such as "Farewell, thou art too dear for my possessing" and "A woman's face with nature's own hand painted," etc. The final line is intended to be onomatopoeic of what it describes.

Disillusion

Carpemus flores was the call. Thereafter I sought the unnumbered vistas of hallucination. It was a season of rash, lovely days, and nights of such raucous passion as I will never see again, and probably ought not. To record one tenth were impossible: “*J'ai seul la clef de cette parade sauvage.*”⁴⁸

But, like almost everyone, I got bored of drugs rather quickly, in the spirit of “trying everything once.” I won’t ever try acid again. Although the tabs we had were admittedly not all that great, it gave me the opposite feeling that it bestows upon most who undertake the initiation; I had no rapturous epiphany of joy and fellow-feeling, of connection with the source of the universe, of the refashioning of the world before my passive eyes. I felt rather an attenuation of the artificiality of human interactions, the incommunicability of every stir of the inner life to anyone else I would ever meet, the sham hollowness at the heart of matter, the banal horror of the world as it is. I prize that night nevertheless, for I felt as if I were being given an opportunity to look at the world with the eyes of a madman, but that it was a gentle madness and would not remain forever.

VI

And Thus We are Deceived by Butterflies⁴⁹

I know that you are tired, Melpomene,⁵⁰
Of mortal cries in your eternal ears,
And that our petty, boisterous tragedy

Has bothered you enough throughout the years;
But listen if you like to what occurred
On nights that I once thought were worth the tears.

Could you recall it for me, every word?
I am as distant from these memories
As I am from the banqueters who heard

The hiccupping of Aristophanes
Dying before it reached a marble roof
To echo through the brain of Socrates.⁵¹

⁴⁸ “I alone have the key to this savage parade.” Cf. Rimbaud, *Illuminations*, “Parade”

⁴⁹ This title, really just a nonsense phrase from the trip, became to me an unconscious evocation of the famous passage of 庄子 (*Zhuangzi*) in which the philosopher dreams of being a butterfly and, upon awakening, wonders whether he really is Zhuangzi dreaming that he was a butterfly, or if instead he is still a butterfly dreaming now that he is Zhuangzi. The point of the sage’s discourse, *la vida es sueño*, is particularly applicable to the following poem. It will be apparent to anyone who reads it that almost all of it is a fabrication, especially the concluding vision of Plotinus, and its imitation of Dante will be equally obvious.

⁵⁰ The muse of tragedy

⁵¹ This alludes to Aristophanes famous “hiccup” which allows him to think about his encomium in praise of love for a little longer in the *Symposium*. It is also a sort of allusion to the type of thought in *Paradiso* XXX.94-96.

Yes, I will try to be forgetful, and aloof
From my hallucinations and regrets,
(Besides, the cops must bear the burden of proof),

But you, who know things the whole world forgets,
Are burdened with a heavier task: recall
What visions came as we smoked cigarettes.

It was the fall, the flowerless middle fall,
When the skies still are living, yet a placid
Emptying of the boughs makes life seem small.

It was the fall, the bushes bowed and flaccid
From the surprising yet familiar rain,
And everything agreed: we should drop acid.

I thought it might help somehow to explain
The heart of life to me before I'm dead,
Or paint the world without depicting pain.

We took the mattresses off every bed
And in the living room heaped a divan
To lie on till it finally hit the head.

The madness came as beautifully as dawn,
And laughter with a cause deep and unknown
Followed each thought that as it came was gone.

Neaera⁵² and myself were soon alone,
Together dreamed the other was portraying
Some tragic figure with a comic tone,

But when I looked at her—Pink Floyd was playing—
I chose to shut my burning eyes and settle
On her bed frame—the mattress was gone—saying:

“Are *these* springs? But there's not a single petal!
We give that magic name to many things:
The gush of water, twisted tails of metal,

The time when everything is birth and wings,
And dreams change for the better for awhile.
If we just let them, all things could be springs!”

⁵² Cf. poem ii.

I waited for her sister laugh and smile,
Then started to unbutton shirt and pants
More out of Learlike madness than from guile.

Then, lo! Plotinus stands THERE⁵³ in my trance,
Sent from his spot among the Choir of Love
Where Plato *et al.* round the Center dance,

And spoke to me, “Descending from above,
I come to teach you how to mock the grave,
And warn you what you should be dreaming of.

You make yourself mad for the truth you crave,
And seek in chemical delirium
Some answer to the sorrows matter gave.

Out of a melting face no truths will come,
In burning hues, each pupil an abyss,
Although its blindness might seem Light to some,

Fools such as they know but a shadow’s bliss,⁵⁴
And cannot tell that part of them extends
Even to the Fountainhead of all that is.

Withdraw into yourself till wisdom tends
Your thoughts like needy children that they rise
Up to the One in whom all longing ends.

No longer seek to learn things with the eyes,
He does well in this world who keeps them closed,
And knows it for a hideous disguise.

If in the Good each least thought lays reposed,
You will not be a man—a god instead.”
Thus, in my fantasies, his spirit glozed.
Nine hours later, I was safe in bed.

After awhile, the pursuit of experience through drugs had entirely cloyed me, and left me in a state of yearning for what they vaguely intimated, but I hardly knew a thing of what that might be, only that it was profound, and difficult, yet at the same the secret heart of everything.

⁵³ As Yeats says in his mystical little fragment, “There,”

*There all the barrel-hoops are knit,
There all the serpent-tails are bit,
There all the gyres converge in one.*

⁵⁴ Cf. *The Merchant of Venice* II.ix.66-67

One night of winter, I looked out the window at the lake, I saw the far shore become suddenly golden in the low moonlight, overflowing across the undescryable⁵⁵ darkness of the waters. I asked my Amaryllis, whom I already intimated would be with ever with me long before this night, to come with me and look at the apparition and chase the moon that made it. She agreed, to her boyfriend's chagrin, and we found ourselves under the docks on the thick ice with no moon left, and only each other to contemplate.

VII

*The Waterfront at Two*⁵⁶

We went alone that night, just to be reckless,
When only mannequins were still awake,
To catch the wavering sparks strung on the necklace
The low moon laid across the darkened lake.

When we sat down the moon and mood had set.
Agreeing on another cigarette,
We sat where all the city's broad shine dips
And thins to fingers trembling for the ships,

Then left, bored, passing broken bands of ducks
That squawked across the wet void to the others,
Both lonely, as they flapped to join their brothers,
Away from the dark yachts and the parked trucks.

Some of these moments of lonesomeness together will always remain in me. But that is not to say that I was not without beautiful friendships and beautiful friends during my time in Vermont. One of the reasons I came to the mountains was the desire to be among those whose liberal ideas and habits would accept my own proclivities and unorthodox views and personality, and I was not mistaken in believing that I would find such here, for almost universally, I have felt this a safer, more welcoming, and brotherly place than New Hampshire. And in my time here, I indeed have known "many young men more beautiful than Guido's archangel."⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Unable to be described.

⁵⁶ The images of the poem are all largely centered around a longing without real possession, a vague yearning for the return of something one has never truly had except in fantasy, a separation that cannot find words to set a bridge between the separated. Also Nature, in the end, with her easiness, mocks at men.

⁵⁷ Cf. Walter Pater *The Renaissance* "Winckelmann," wherein he quotes the above as being a phrase of Winckelmann's, one of which Pater himself was obviously fond.

VIII

Inimica Silentia Lunae⁵⁸

*O sovereign mistress of true melancholy*⁵⁹

I'd rather that the final trumpet shriek
This hour than forfeit one tick⁶⁰ of that smile,
Unless it slackened as we kissed awhile,
Or if it broke so I could hear you speak.
But there is small time in the working week
For hearts to sort their joy up in the head,
And so we slink back, each to his own bed;
Alone, no jokes lure dimples to your cheek.

So seconds of a star distract the eye
But cloud before they burn into a thought,
Or the moon, almost clasped by a dead tree,
Steps out in a dark hood without goodbye,
And leaves more loneliness for such as me,
Who dull with words the ache of what is not.

⁵⁸ “The unfriendly silence of the moon,” a play on Vergil’s famous phrase *per amica silentia lunae*, “through the friendly silence of the moon” describing the conditions under which Agamemnon and the rest of the till-then-hidden Greek army break into unsuspecting Troy. The title is more a play on words than a direct allusion to the Trojan cycle, however—I use them as jocularly as Laforgue did in the dedication of his *L'Imitation de Notre Dame de la Lune*.

⁵⁹ The first words of Enobarbus’s death lament in *Antony and Cleopatra*, addressed to the moon.

⁶⁰ I.e., an instant

Despite “what serves mortal beauty,” one cannot always be toying with beauty and listening to music and eating the bread of idleness. It is most painful when reading heroic literature to then look at the enfeebled, drugged, pathetic, electronic creature of modernity which one has become.

IX

Dissimile⁶¹

Unlike him, speechless in the mystic Rose⁶²
With her⁶³ who smiled at him past space and time,⁶⁴
As she defeated all his thought and rhyme
In her last, perfect beauty⁶⁵ among those
Whose endless dancing yields more vast repose,
Where every blithe, swift footfall of the saved
Skips printless on the burning ether paved
With joy and radiant love that ever grows,⁶⁶

I caught your face between the song-swayed heads
When, aureoled⁶⁷ by restless greens and reds,
You grazed me in the dark, never said “hi,”
And joined the grinding⁶⁸ shadows nervously
As if you never woke up next to me—
So I went home and fucked some random guy.

One by one my friends left for one reason or another. My best transferred to B.C., and still regrets it somewhat; another went to G.W.; still a few more dropped out. *Les neiges d'antan*.

⁶¹ This sonnet, all one run-on sentence (the same as Frost’s “The Silken Tent,” although his sonnet is infinitely better), is a kind of extended or “epic” *dissimile*, contrasting the distance between the final vision of Beatrice surrounded by the dance of the beatified cosmos and being ignored by someone I once had a relationship with at a sordid college party.

⁶² The Empyrean or *Rosa Mystica*, the true form of the universe and all of the beatified souls which inhabit it arranged in perfection around God in the shape of a white rose, shown to Dante at *Paradiso XXX*.

⁶³ Beatrice

⁶⁴ There is no space or time in the Empyrean, only ideal existence.

⁶⁵ Dante admits defeat in his art and no longer describes the beauty of Beatrice, because it has reached such heights that human intellect cannot fully comprehend or express it; “only its Maker may enjoy it all.”

⁶⁶ Describing the cosmic dance of the saved around God at the center which, paradoxically, increases their sense of repose and satisfaction.

⁶⁷ Haloed, but here not by angelic rays, but the frenetic unnatural lights of a basement party.

⁶⁸ The only way people know how to dance these days.

X

Little Nocturne

*Aux uns portant la paix, aux autres le souci.*⁶⁹

I'll walk to the lake, if it's still frozen,
In love with everyone, and sad
As God begins to tuck in all his chosen,
Smoking, counting the springs I've had.

I'll scuff soaked streets back with no friends
But hissing sewers,⁷⁰ neon light,
And, jagging a frown that never ends,
The mountains somewhere in the night.

⁶⁹ This line from Baudelaire's masterful sonnet "Recueillement" describes the evening which the author's Sorrow, personified and spoken to as if it were a bad child, is whining for: "To some she brings peace, to others she brings care."

⁷⁰ Hissing because the vast trickle from quickly-melting snow is pouring into them.

XI

Narcissus Hungover⁷¹

*Invenies alium, si te hic fastidit, Alexin.*⁷²

*For if anyone follow what is like a beautiful shape playing over water—is there not a myth telling in symbol of such a dupe, how he sank into the depths of the current and was swept away to nothingness? So too, one that is held by material beauty and will not break free shall be precipitated, not in body but in Soul, down to the dark depths loathed of the Intellectual-Being, where, blind even in the Lower-World, he shall have commerce only with shadows, there as here.*⁷³

PLOTINUS.

Awake again?

Fuck...

All the same!

The bed

Cold on one side, bile bound for the anguished head,
As the heart drums its slow dirge for each moment dead.
I'd prayed my eyes would meet a world remade,
Elysium and supine love in shade,
Before I stirred here in this tangled sheet,
To stretch, yawn, work, and suffer what I meet.

I dreamed...

Leaves falling on the flesh of love,

Bathing –

My shadow kissed me in a grove.

(I hope I vomit.)

The world's stiff now, still,

Tile, bottles, drains...

(Is this door locked?)

No will

To change a thing except my wine-stained clothing,

⁷¹ This longish poem, intended to be a modernization of the myth (as it is found in Ovid and elsewhere) of Narcissus, is also an investigation of the self. I here attempt to highlight the difficulty of accepting and embracing my sexual orientation, my desire to exist in a mythic age or at least another era and yet being confined to this one, as well as the general and childish frustration of things not being as they should. It also means to present the act of poetry—and really of all writing, especially creative writing—as masturbatory and narcissistic by its very nature.

⁷² Vergil, *Eclogues* II.73—"You shall find another Alexis, if this one spurns you." I mean for the line to pun both upon my own name (i.e. should this "version" of myself disappoints me, I can change to a different self, as I will indeed do in the sections that follow), and the Bucolic pseudonym I have chosen for my great friend, *hic nomine Alexis*. *Vide infra*.

⁷³ *Enneads* I.vi.8

All that I can change in a universe of loathing –
Schooling myself in loss through crawling years,
When all I have to give is talk's dull noise, vague tears.

But will I ever view that vale my hope arranged,
Where present, past, and future aren't estranged,
And all the breezes soft with unrequited love:
A mirror that sees souls was in the grove.

I found you there, but hadn't seen your face at first;
I kissed it when I tried to slake immortal thirst,
And as I saw your dark eyes in the yielding cool,
I knew some god or other had made me his fool.

You rose out of the azured mud,⁷⁴ soaked curls
Cleft to your forehead like the hands of girls;
My soul asked who you were, then answered low
That it was I who stared there, dripping slow,
As wordlessly we each stepped forward, with
The same smooth leg, into our sudden myth,
Until a kiss's breadth was all that stretched between us.
I wished all ages and all worlds had seen us
There on the wave that barred our lips from touch;
Wet fingers furrowed skin they'd watched so much.
The trees around became the tight-fleshed, tan
Shapes my eyes only loved, each girl and man
Stretched, splashed, bathed, or looked on from all directions,
Laved in the longing sweat of their reflections,
Like white, twinned petals clasping on one flower.⁷⁵
I kissed down napes, backs, for one dream, one hour,
And thrust my fingers through warm ghosts of hair,
I stroked wraiths' breasts, as soft as evening air,
Then turned to you, my soul,⁷⁶ and pressed the spine
Rubbed by those wild palms that were strangely mine,
And forced your hand across each hair and bone,
Although you sighed and shuddered from your own,
Tasting each other's mouths, unending fruit,
Until a dry leaf fell, the grove grew mute,
Its boughs afire with autumn: the harsh powers
That drove the clouds, those footprints of the hours,

⁷⁴ I mean for the tale to be reversed, in a way, and for "Narcissus" to get himself, but only in a dreamed, false fashion, and then to pine that he cannot "be" with himself with the same rapture as he could in the world of art and fantasy.

⁷⁵ Cf. Whitman "Song of Myself," the famous "bathers" passage.

⁷⁶ Though the language here is primarily erotic (even autoerotic), it is meant to be rather a metaphor for self-acceptance, for viewing oneself and one's orientation with love and respect.

Made chill truth fall onto this phantom lust of ours.
I groped the mirror for some kiss you left;
As rain and ripples wearied, in the weft
And woof of water, no reflection even,
But the blank copy of an angry heaven,
The bathers gone, as I awoke to thunder.

I will not meet with such another wonder,
Or if, I will pass by it in a rush
When all the city is a flower ablush
With sunset, never to bloom quite the same;
Will they half-notice, in that rose of flame
As all my dreams stand ready, the world warm
And waiting to surprise me with some lovely form,
As all the shadows close its petals, hopeless, tired,
Will their eyes know what mine have long desired?

No, there is no face to meet mine in the vast,
Nor can I wait for wisdom from the past,
A set of ripples broadening out and thinned
To nothingness, a word upon the wind.

But could it be that there are countless pools,
Billions of crying, lonely, useless fools?

I don't know what I am—but I am him!
Crowded with memories that are so dim
My heart can hardly tell that they are dwindling—
Lust's flint and tinder rubbed together, kindling
Nothingness! Married with a college degree,
I will die in my sleep! No, give me Me!
All that I was and felt, just this past hour,
Or turn me into an unthinking flower!

*Nymphs found the pool he'd dreamed of, and one, weeping,
Kneeling by the only lily that was sleeping,
Its petals tired of reaching toward its brother.
A choked song came from her, and Echo sang another:*

*“Why do the gods send flowers
To mock a world of ills?
For blossoms age embracing
The breast of wind or bee
Until the hoarfrost kills,
Then leave the littered hills
For mortal eyes to see.*

*More springs means but more dead:
What fool invented dancing?
Don't use your eyes for glancing,
O let them weep instead!*

*For only we remember
Narcissus at the lake,
Hyacinth and Adonis:
The gods have few regrets.
A rose masks each mistake –
More for the cold to take;
Love yawns, and Time forgets.*

*All loveliness is dead:
What are you doing dancing?
No time for smiles and glancing,
O let us weep instead!"*

*Giving them time to learn the whole refrain,
Time for their hearts to catch their sister's pain,
They left his dream in song, but could not brook the urge
(Could one blame nymphs?) of dancing to their dirge.*

II

L'automne déjà dans le bois obscure⁷⁷

*nequiquam seros exercet noctua cantus*⁷⁸

I had a vision in sleep of a glowing tree in my path, almost like a peach in blossom but with petals fierier than their pales and pinks, tongues of flame on every bough and every leaf a dawn. They began to fall the moment that I saw them, and I tried to catch them all before they were blown sere into the void. Soon every flower was gone, and so I hugged the naked bark till I was wounded by it. This poem, to which I do not assign much aesthetic merit, is nonetheless the words that came to me with equal mystery when I was sitting in the garden of my best friend's best friend's mansion at the back of the house, and I took down dictation which the quiet had given me.

XII

The Tree Aflame

Catch moments falling, if you choose:
Autumn has come across your dreams,
And you've returned too late, it seems,
To the world you're about to lose.

Try, catch them in their downward dance,
Or kneel and hug the steadfast bark,
The rough that will last through this dark,
And moan prayers to the deaf god, Chance.

Do something, though—the stars won't eavesdrop,
The deathbed moon's too tired to care,
And earth can hardly tell you're there,
As youth's last promises and leaves drop.

The effect of this vision upon me, and its importance when regarded with Epimethean gaze, warrant its inclusion on mystical if not artistic grounds. For after this vision the end began.

⁷⁷ The title of this portion of the work is drawn from two sources; *L'automne déjà!* ("Autumn already!") are the first words in the final poem of Rimbaud's *Une saison en enfer*, and relate to the opening poem and dream narrative; the latter phrase, though in French, is the *selva oscura* of *Inferno* I. The two sections, "Alexis" and "Everything is Beautiful," contain four and six poems respectively, with the "extra" poem hanging off as a coda (cf. note in preface for more on organization), four in the first place representing the cardinal directions and thus a sense of being lost, whereas the next group of poems are six in number, symbolizing the agony of death while bound in the world of matter (for, according to medieval numerological fancy, all matter was created in six days).

⁷⁸ *Georgics* I.403; cf. third paragraph of section I, "Budding Before Spring"

Alexis⁷⁹

*In sooth, I know not why I am so sad:
It wearies me; you say it wearies you;
But how I caught it, found it, or came by it,
What stuff 'tis made of, whereof it is born,
I am to learn;
And such a want-wit sadness makes of me,
That I have much ado to know myself.*⁸⁰

One night in my first year when we were smoking cigarettes and discussing nihilism a *neanias*⁸¹ crashed into the picnic bench we were sitting or standing on, his bike covered with the words of Socrates in silver. He spoke to us like one of Shakespeare's uncanny clowns, and left as quickly and pleasantly as he had come. I do not recall the intervals between that strange original contact and the fullness of our friendship, so little time elapsed before it ripened. He composed weighty symphonies, wrote lofty and lugubrious verse about apocalypses in Venice, and haunted the basement of Slade on nights when songs were needed—perhaps there, in the darkness while sitting cross-legged on the floor, when I watched him perform more freely because of how drunk we had both gotten beforehand, was where my feelings mellowed into friendship and admiration. What words the wine leant us to describe what mates our spirits were! He would often come to the Honors College and wail on the piano and sing in Finnish at the witching hour, I his only audience. When winter came, he would reel about the piled snow, whacking it with his antiquated cane which, only when he was drunk, became a jolly weapon rather than an affectation. I am never to forget the glimpses of him “open”⁸² that were given me on a night or two, and to have found two or three hours of true quietness of heart with him in an age of rushing and riot. But thereafter I was cursed by the god of the vine, and wandered a Pentheus over the dark earth, for the lovelornness that laid about Alexis was not to be lifted by me, and our attempts at ascending the Beautiful stair were but the libidinous dreams of drunkards.

⁷⁹ Cf. *Eclogues* II; also compare with the preceding poem, “Narcissus Hungover.”

⁸⁰ *The Merchant of Venice* I.i.1-7

⁸¹ Ancient Greek for “lad” or “young man.”

⁸² Referring to Alcibiades' praise of Socrates, that he is like an image of Silenus which the herm sellers in Athens would often sell, which when seen “opened” contains miniature golden images of the gods.

XIII

A Room without a View⁸³

He rents out an aged mansion's pantry,
And garnished it with gold,
Columns and tomes with gilded pages,
But still the room felt cold.

A deep divan with lamps and pillows
Under the lofted bed
Was there for any old acquaintance
To lay his learned head.

Chopin was playing in the background,
Haunting the little nook
As his pale bust upon the lintel
Gave a lugubrious look.

He loved me when wine made him honest:
We've withered into friends.
It's pain to be there in that bedroom,
So dim and full of ends.

With my shadow ever more persistently following my wandering, I withdrew into myself and asked, "what should such fellows as I do, crawling between earth and heaven?"⁸⁴ It was not long after that when Dionysos said the same to me, "*Ego dominus tuus*" and "*vide cor tuum.*"⁸⁵ How many darkened stairs and beds, how many arms around me till I could feel normal?

Per exemplum, one evening in a particularly careless mood, in the habiliments of the god Dionysos, I walked the streets drunk while the sun was almost touching the mountains, and was told that I might come to a party "whenever I wanted to start drinking." Since that time was now, they were still getting the place ready for wassail when I arrived, and I ended up falling asleep on their couch before the party even began.

XIV

I woke in dark and noisy places,
And through the throbbing air
Amid the daze of shadowed faces
You stood and smiled there.

Less than a hundred words were spoken

⁸³ Of course making fun of Forster.

⁸⁴ Cf. Hamlet's "Get thee to a nunnery" speech.

⁸⁵ The same words, that is, which were spoken to Dante by the god of Love in his first vision.

Before I was in love:⁸⁶
We were alone, our hearts were broken,
And isn't that enough?⁸⁷

We kissed each other—two times only,
There in the loitering dawn.
I didn't know that I was lonely
Till you and night were gone.

Find me, when all the stars are dying,
I'll be where stray dreams go:
They say that there's no harm in trying,
And no one has to know.

He was one whom I cared not a little for, penetrating, cynical, dark in heart and hair. After blurred hours of vapid rambling had led us to Vergil, I read him the lament for Pallas⁸⁸ in Latin off my phone, and that was sufficient for him to kiss me. He left suddenly (or so I thought—perhaps we even said farewell) and I went groping through the house after it had long been dark, hushed and mocked at by the sleepers, then wandered back through forgetfulness. I haven't seen him since, nor have I crowned myself in ivy and gone around drunk wearing a tapestry in broad daylight shouting Shakespeare at the crowds, since I intimated here, and would soon know full well, why the Greeks had sent the Lenaeans⁸⁹ down through the undergloom and back.⁹⁰

It would be no surprise to me should anyone who has read up until this point might suggest that, instead of merely writing to sublimate my confusions, frustrations, and emotions, I seek counseling or help in order to deal with either my pessimistic outlook or my addiction to alcohol. I believe that the latter problem is fundamentally my own, and that no one but myself can truly hope to change it. I believe that I have changed it for the better. As to the former issue, I would reply that instead of taking anti-depressants and pills that rob one of all personality, one should take Homer, Lucretius, and Aeschylus as their toughest medicine. They teach us that suffering and confusion are what later give rise to wisdom, or at least a love of it. Would the great authors whom we revere have written what they did had they access to the drugs we do?

⁸⁶ Cf. *Romeo and Juliet* II.ii

*My ears have not yet drunk a hundred words
Of that tongue's utterance, yet I know the sound:
Art thou not Romeo and a Montague?*

⁸⁷ Cf. *Inferno* V.129

soli eravamo e senza alcun sospetto; "we were alone and without any suspicion."

⁸⁸ At the beginning of *Aeneid* XI

⁸⁹ Lenaeus is an epithet given to Bacchus by both Vergil and Horace.

⁹⁰ Cf. Aristophanes *The Frogs*.

XV

Ψυχομαχία ἀμείνων⁹¹

Should I just pay some nodding⁹² shrink
To guide me through my wastes of ink,⁹³
Until I find out why I drink?
I'd rather fall down stairs, be sad,
Still having what so few have had,
The privilege⁹⁴ of going mad.

I indeed came close to madness; it were better to call it a callous carelessness towards everything, especially myself. I was always being helloed and hugged by people I didn't remember meeting, walking down yet another set of stairs to nothingness, not listening to any protestations, not even my own, drunk night and day, and I was drunk when I met him smoking a cigarette outside the dance with my friends, wild and charming and without a shirt even in the snow, dark skinned and tall and warm. After *that* night, I only spoke to him on the phone for awhile or saw him dancing, but even from such a comparatively brief correspondence I felt the intimation of a lovelier life with his presence growing upon me. One cold evening, in the haunts of my old friend *hic nomine Galatea*, whose houses of respective years were the sites of some of the more hilarious and memorable *soirées perdues*, I invited him to come along and see me, as it had been quite awhile since we had met or spoken to one another. He told me he would be over soon, and I remember laughing at some excuses he made on the phone, but he failed to arrive and I went home in a sour state at around four.

A few days later I learned that he had died that night. More sorrow than surprise that he died of a heroin overdose, which I learned from another friend, the threat of which glowered over my roommate and two of my best friends already that year. I did not mourn him because I truly knew him, but rather because I had so wanted the chance to know him, who so suddenly had become nothing.

⁹¹ "A battle within the soul is better."

⁹² Both in the sense of being a "yes-man" and unconditionally assenting, but also nodding off to sleep because of how bored he would be listening to my confessions.

⁹³ That is, my poems. 'Wastes' means both needless time and energy spent on their creation and to the wasteland that they attempt to represent.

⁹⁴ To anyone who would recalcitrate against calling madness a privilege, I would refer them to *King Lear* IV.vi, and after reading that greatest passage of all literature to reconsider.

Everything is Beautiful⁹⁵

For Nick Booth
obiit Jan. 2012

*Alas for mortal doings! All our joys
One likens unto shadow. When all's lost,
A few strokes of a moistened sponge destroys
The picture—and that breaks my heart the most.*⁹⁶

XVI

*Quomodo sedet sola civitas*⁹⁷

Without you, the whole city seems alone
As I am now, and as I long will be.
I can't remember your last words to me,
Drunk and impatient with you on the phone.
Such guilt, to not know for eternity,
What pains of yours, now nothing but mute bone,
Might I have learned of, tried to make my own?
They are Death's⁹⁸ secrets now, his property.

What can I do but drink through this your last
And my worst winter—worst at least so far—
That proved a life is less than falling snow,
Your voice no louder now—because I know
Since you are one whose winters are all past,
That it is even colder where you are.

There were months when I did the absolute minimum of work required of me, even had one dark week where I didn't go to anything or see anyone, or if, was so drunk that I did not remember whom I had been with or had done or said or thought. I could almost hear the Furies on the wind pursuing,

*Mother who bore me, O my mother night,
To punish both the blind and those with sight,
Great mother, O for vengeance hear me now.*⁹⁹

⁹⁵ This is the script of a tattoo which he had across his chest; I feel that it is nevertheless appropriate, however banal it might sound.

⁹⁶ *Agamemnon* 1327-1330; Cassandra is speaking about her own imminent death, but the statement is beautiful and universal, like so much of Aeschylus.

⁹⁷ "How doth the city sit solitary," Lamentations 1:1; also used by Dante to describe Florence following the death of Beatrice (cf. *Vita Nuova* XXX)

⁹⁸ Throughout this triad of sonnets, Death refers primarily to Thanatos or Mors or Letum if you prefer; in keeping with something of Dante's usage of Love as a personage in the *Vita Nuova*, I want the brother of sleep to occupy a similar role and place in this work.

It is easier (and I think this is why the ancients were so fond—though fond is not so kind a word here—of attributing everything to “inexorable fate” and laying the blame of human events “upon the knees of the gods”) to imagine that things are wrought upon us for vengeance’s sake than for no reason at all. *Tantum religio potuit suadere malorum.*¹⁰⁰ There were no Furies then but my own thoughts; I enjoyed naming them Tisiphone, Megaera, Alecto. Sometimes, though, a cruel respite in sleep was given me, to see what would not come to pass.

*But mournful visions come upon our dreams,
And bring an empty grace, vain joy that only seems,
For vain and empty is the good one sees,
As gliding from our hands, each specter flees,
Is gone within a moment on the sweep
Of wings to fare the winding paths of sleep.*¹⁰¹

XVII

Sometimes I feel them, nights we might have now,
Warm instants we’re borne on the selfsame wave
That glides as gently under us to lave
Our argosy of love with painted prow.
But Death, with poppies torn from his crowned brow,
Each an unspoken word, has strewn your grave,
And leaves me nothing to lay down there save
The dreams his savagery would not allow.

Lie to me, Death. When your accustomed violence
Had torn him from one more thought and the light,
The mystery surrounding, harsh and deep,
And drowned him in your lonely, secret sleep,
Did he, if anything, recall the silence
Of being held and near me in the night?

⁹⁹ Aeschylus *Eumenides* 321-323

¹⁰⁰ This famous *sententia* from Lucretius “will last as long as the world” according to Voltaire, so why bother citing it?

¹⁰¹ Aeschylus *Agamemnon* 420 et seq.

The winter was long and cold, as it always is in Vermont, but colder and longer than all others I have known. By the time it was spring, I was not ready for such tenderness, and so accused the goddess as she began to fleck the earth with joy:

XVIII

Why try to thaw this sorrow, vicious Spring,
When winter taught me resignation late?
I beg you, if frost's still an option, wait
Awhile before you lie to everything
And bid all sentience couple, hope, and sing,
Because I'm still so starved from feeding hate
That love had not lain down to hibernate
Before you rushed here, mad and giggling.

I know it is your wicked, ancient power
To mock at and begrime the drowsy earth
And force all of that pain¹⁰² to burst in flower
For your delirious pageant of rebirth.
How could you not be cruel, when all you do
Recalls most what cannot come back with you?

*But when before him sees the dying man
His dark blood spilled upon the earth, who can
Summon it back with song or soothing charm?
Not he even he¹⁰³ who knew full well the way
To lead the waned and vanished back toward day
Did so without Zeus bringing him to harm!¹⁰⁴*

¹⁰² Cf. Paradise Lost IV.260-272

*Proserpin gathering flours
Her self a fairer Floure by gloomie Dis
Was gatherd, which cost Ceres **all that pain**
To seek her through the world*

¹⁰³ Aesculapius, god of healing.

¹⁰⁴ Agamemnon 1019-1024

XIX

Orpheus

There is no song for this,
But sing I must:
The unforgotten kiss
Of lips, now dust;
The silence of my days
That had been laughter;
The savage, sunless ways
I walk hereafter.

Of no use, words and tears
To those who sleep;
Who cares if someone hears
Me whine and weep,
As if by being heard,
The pang might die
In some bewildered word
Or muffled cry?

It was not long after this that I learned from my doctor that my liver was not doing so well, and that if I did not drastically reduce my drinking I could do permanent damage to it. Surrounded by death, I was now forced to seriously contemplate my own, not as a fancied future event in the golden offering of the rest of my life, but as a possibility very near to me, *en avançant*.

XX

*Since no man knows aught of aught he leaves, what is 't to leave betimes? Let be.*¹⁰⁵

Death, walk a different road
Than the soles of summer tread
When you come to take my load,
The weight of one more dead.

Do not come in the fall
When every inch proclaims you,
Nor when spring disburdens all
And no one ever names you.

Rather come with woe and winter,
When life is little more
Than an infected splinter
That long has made one sore.

But should you arrive in summer,
I will end cold as he
Who in dark days grew number¹⁰⁶
Until he ceased to be.

I did not drink at all for two months, and then went to Italy, where I thought that, after being so cleansed by the sight of antiquity, I would no longer needed to distort and destroy my life with drink, and so said adieu to the god, and to the world: *quod me nutruit me destruit*.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ Cf. *Hamlet* V.ii, the quotation here is something of an amalgam of the folio and quarto texts.

¹⁰⁶ The comparative form of numb, not a number as in one or two. This can be inferred from the rhyme.

¹⁰⁷ “What nourished me destroyed me (also).” Famously inscribed on a portrait of what is believed to be Christopher Marlowe.

XXI

Mad Ballade¹⁰⁸

I will depart the narrow house,
Out with my lover, the slow sun,
And underneath the sudden boughs
I will be naked and will run
Far from all ended or begun,
Far from the nations, pain and power:
If you have held a loaded gun,
You don't know how to hold a flower.

I will not rest till dusk arrives,
Out with my lover, the low moon,
And the hushed terror of our lives
Will be washed off my senses soon,
Lying down on the chest of June,
Asleep and safe from them an hour:
Until the shouts and wars are done,
You don't know how to hold a flower.

And I won't think of them until
My prompt destroyer, maudlin dawn,
Has swept the shadows off the hill
And wept her angry fill upon
Another day, another lawn,
Another time the world is sour
With all the dreams and secrets gone:
I don't know how to hold a flower.

O Prince, I never went outside,¹⁰⁹
But song makes a cold bed a bower:
Until you realize why I'd hide,
You don't know how to hold a flower.

¹⁰⁸ Although not a proper ballade (in which the rhymes for each stanza are the very same, almost impossible in English without syntactic suicide), it is mostly inspired by Villon's, especially his persona as "*ung bon folastre*" or good-natured zany. It is customary to address the prince or patron at the end of a ballade, but it had devolved into just a convention even during Villon's period.

¹⁰⁹ The desire for escape from the inauthentic world of others into communion with oneself and nature are here admitted to be really impossible, or at least exceptionally difficult, to achieve in a time deluged with mass media, but the abilities of poetry to exercise a momentary, if futile, rebellion against those constraints is nonetheless potent still.

XXII
Adieu to Dionysos¹¹⁰

ἔδόκει δὲ τοῖς ἀναλογιζομένοις τὸ σημεῖον ἀπολείπειν ὁ θεὸς Ἀντώνιον, ᾧ μάλιστα συνεξομοιῶν
καὶ συνοικειῶν ἑαυτὸν διετέλεσεν.¹¹¹

Where have you gone, full of madness and danger and tears, Dionysos?
All of the satyrs ran too: I am alone in the wood.
Now when the tinkling of bottles is heard in the ears of the winegod,
I am not found in the dance; none of the laughter is mine.
Solemn I sit in the corners of parties and bedrooms and classrooms:
Death now revels with me, older and stronger than wine.¹¹²

Quoth *The Book of the Dead*, “What manner of land is this into which I have come? It hath not water, it hath not air; it is deep unfathomable, it is black as the blackest night, and men wander helplessly therein. In it a man may not live in quietness of heart; nor may the longings of love be satisfied therein. But let the state of the shining ones be given unto me for water and for air and for the longings of love, and let quietness of heart be given unto me for bread and ale.”¹¹³ *Sic, sic esto.*¹¹⁴

¹¹⁰ This is an epigram in elegiac couplets, although the meter is accentual rather than quantitative. There are two farewells, one to the world and one to Dionysus here, the number two especially signifying, as has been mentioned elsewhere, division and separation.

¹¹¹ Plutarch, “Life of Antony”; “It seemed to those interpreting the omen that the god was leaving Antony, and that the one to whom he most likened and attached himself was bringing him to an end.”

¹¹² Cf. *La Vita Nuova* II

Ecce deus fortior me, qui veniens dominabitur michi. “Behold a god stronger than I, who in his coming will be lord over me.”

¹¹³ *The Papyrus of Ani*, Plates XXIX & XXX, “The Chapter of Not Dying a Second Time,” 10-13, translated by Budge

¹¹⁴ Thus, let it be thus.

III

*A God Who Could Dance or, Tolle Lege*¹¹⁵

*poscit equos gaudetque tuens ante ora frementis*¹¹⁶

*Sir, in my heart there was a kind of fighting
That would not let me sleep; methought I lay
Worse than the mutines in the bilboes. Rashly,
And prais'd be rashness for it, let us know
Our indiscretion sometime serves us well
When our deep plots do pall; and let that learn us
There's a divinity that shapes our ends,
Rough-hew them how we will.*¹¹⁷

*Fili mi, tempus est pretermictantur simulacra nostra.*¹¹⁸

*Though a man may be wicked, yet if he adjust his thoughts, fast, and bathe, he may sacrifice to
God.*¹¹⁹

“But what must we do? How lies the path? How come to vision of the inaccessible Beauty, dwelling as if in consecrated precincts, apart from the common ways where all may see, even the profane?”

“He that has the strength, let him arise and withdraw into himself, foregoing all that is known by the eyes, turning away for ever from the material beauty that once made his joy. When he perceives those shapes of grace that show in body, let him not pursue: he must know them for copies, vestiges, shadows, and hasten away towards That they tell of.”¹²⁰

Why should I yield to that *niaiserie*¹²¹ of postpostmodern multiculturalism, when so much that the ancients say councils me against it?

“I have heard of birds leaving dark valleys to remove to lofty trees,” writes Mencius, “but I have not heard of their descending from lofty trees to enter into dark valleys.”¹²²

¹¹⁵ The twin titles of this third and final section, allusions to Nietzsche (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra* “On Reading and Writing”) and Augustine respectively, both state its themes as primarily contemplative and mystical. The ten poems in the section are not divided, but all of a piece, ten in sequence, signifying completeness, with another poem looking forward to the rest of life. The first poem of the ten is about the death of Homer, the last in the decad about Vergil’s tomb.

¹¹⁶ *Aeneid* XII.82. cf. second paragraph of “Budding Before Spring.”

¹¹⁷ *Hamlet* V.ii

¹¹⁸ *Vita Nuova*, spoken by the god of Love; “My son, it is time to [do away] with our illusions.”

¹¹⁹ *Mencius* IV.ii.xxv

¹²⁰ Plotinus *Enneads* I.vi.8

¹²¹ One of Nietzsche’s favorite French words, “nonsense,” “silliness”

¹²² 孟子 III.i.iv 15

Should we not lift him up against the more enfeebling and pernicious currents of liberalism, those that smilingly seek to demolish everything into a politically correct homogenous mediocrity?

“It is of the nature of things to be of unequal quality. Some are twice, some five times, some ten times, some a hundred times, some a thousand times, some ten thousand times as valuable as others. If you reduce them all to the same standard, that must throw the kingdom into confusion. If large shoes and small shoes were of the same price, who would make them?”¹²³

Far more than the kingdom has been thrown into confusion.

Why do we then still cough at dusty tomes and learn extinct tongues and strange symbols, poring over the words of the dead who were as lost as we, building our sandcastles out of the ashes of the perished? When I went to the ancient land, I learned well, and I had to go there to understand. *Je dus voyager, distraire les enchantements assemblés sur mon cerveau. Sur la mer, que j'aimais comme si elle eût dû me laver d'une souillure, je voyais se lever la croix consolatrice. J'avais été damné par l'arc-en-ciel.*¹²⁴ I know now how to wave at death.¹²⁵

XXIII

The Death of Homer

Ὅσσ' ἔλομεν λιπόμεσθ', ὄσα δ' οὐχ ἔλομεν φερόμεσθα.¹²⁶

The Pythia shrieked, “*Bard, Ios isle beware!
And most of all, the riddles of young men!*”¹²⁷
Forgetting, bent for Athens,¹²⁸ blind eyes stare
Then draw down their lids’ tired veils once again
To pace in the soul’s shade—you feel what sea
Your faint joints must survive, and with them, song.
The Muses may be nine, the Fates but three:
Your sails were blown toward Ios before long.

¹²³ Ibid., caput 18

¹²⁴ “I had to journey, to distract all of the enchantments assembled in my brain. Over the sea, which I loved as if it would lave me of stain, I saw the compassionate cross arise. I had been damned by the rainbow.” Cf. Rimbaud *Une saison en enfer*, “Délires II, Alchimie du Verbe.”

¹²⁵ Cf. *ibid.*: *Cela s'est passé. Je sais aujourd'hui saluer la beauté.* “All that is over. I know today how to greet (or bid farewell) to beauty.”

¹²⁶ This riddle, appearing in variant but practically identical forms within the spurious “Lives of Homer,” is as follows: “The ones we caught we left behind, but the ones we did not catch we carry.” As it is a young fisherman who asks Homer the riddle, at the start one takes “ὄ(σ)σα” to be fish; the answer, however, is their lice, which they still carry about with them even after they had a bad go at fishing. Homer was unable to answer this riddle, and died while cogitating as to its answer. One night on the Redstone Green while we were sitting around smoking in a circle and listening to people play music, I asked if anyone could answer the riddle, and I was incredulous when one of the kids about me answered it correctly, but who was not even aware of Homer’s identity or importance. Strange are the workings of fate!

¹²⁷ It is related in the aforementioned “Lives” that Homer visited Delphi in his wanderings as he “begged his bread” throughout Greece, and the Pythia told him in great anguish to beware the island of Ios and the riddles of a young man there, for the hour he was told it was to be the hour of his death.

¹²⁸ We are told that Homer took up with a group of sailors who were bound for Athens, but they encountered storms and were blown off course to, where else, the island of Ios.

There, riddles of a laughing fisher boy
 Bait you with death, a blinder, final wandering
 There on the unknown shore, your deep heart pondering
 The answer, the answer—just an algaed stone
 To slip on, and swoon as oblivion
 Blew out the last of all the flames at Troy.¹²⁹

The poet's task is sacred indeed—and before I describe what I saw in Italy (notwithstanding the fact that it has all been described before at length and by better authors than I), it would be beneficial to cite Lucan to express some of what I felt among the ruins, of simultaneously being a lover of the ancients and at the same time an interloper, wandering in a time and place not my own and trampling hallowed things unknowingly. I mean the passage of *Pharsalia* IX in which, Pompey having been recently done away with, Caesar goes to the Troad to see the sights of perished heroic antiquity:

Now the wonderer¹³⁰ sought out the fame of the sands of Sigeum,¹³¹
 Sought out the waters of Simoïs,¹³² then the great tomb of the Grecian
 Rhœteum boasts,¹³³ and the shades of the dead that owe much to the poets.
 Walking about in the moldering ruins of what was called Troy once,
 He made a search for some trace of the wall that was built by Apollo.¹³⁴
 Now all the forests are empty, the oaks now rotting and fallen
 Over Assaracus' palace¹³⁵ and clutching the gods in their temples
 With weary roots; now all the heights of Pergamus¹³⁶ are hidden,
 Lost in the thickets: even the ruins themselves have all perished.
 He saw Hesione's cliffs,¹³⁷ and the woods where Anchises¹³⁸ in secret
 Lay with the goddess, the cave where the judge¹³⁹ had been sitting,
 Where that boy¹⁴⁰ was snatched up into heaven, on what crag the naiad
 Lovely Oenone¹⁴¹ had mourned: no rock there is lacking a legend.
 Thoughtless he crossed the dry dust and a few meandering trickles,
 This had been Xanthus; when careless he stepped through the overgrown grasses
 Phrygian natives forbade him to trample the ashes of Hector.

¹²⁹ I.e. as it remained in (and could only have been communicated by) the mind of Homer.

¹³⁰ Caesar *qua* tourist.

¹³¹ A town in Asia Minor; Lucan here speaks of the Troad generally.

¹³² One of the rivers (the other being the Xanthus or Scamander) that ran beside Troy.

¹³³ That of Ajax.

¹³⁴ The walls of Troy were supposedly built by Apollo and Poseidon, but Laomedon, father of Priam and king of Troy at the time, refused to pay them upon the completion of their labors, and so they cursed him and his line.

¹³⁵ The Trojan palace complex, which bears the name of one of the sons of the founders of their race and namesake, Tros.

¹³⁶ The *arx* or citadel upon which the Trojan palace was seated.

¹³⁷ Daughter of Laomedon, she was chained to the cliffs (similarly to Andromeda) to be devoured by a sea monster in recompense for her father's treachery, mentioned in the footnote above. She was rescued by Hercules.

¹³⁸ Father of Aeneas, with whom Aphrodite made love at the royal stables in the woods, later giving birth to the hero.

¹³⁹ Paris

¹⁴⁰ Ganymede

¹⁴¹ A nymph and lover of the young Paris, before the whole Helen affair. She despaired of her immortality when he scorned her love; see Tennyson's lovely poem on the subject.

Scattered stones lay about, with no semblance of once being hallowed:
“Do you not see,” said the guide, “that you tread on Zeus Herceos’ altar?”
O how sacred and mighty the task of the poets! Who rescue
All from the fates and bestow an unending life upon mortals.¹⁴²

It is for this reason that my journey to the Latian earth was so haunted and humbling, because I sought the graves of the poets themselves. Before, death had been an abstraction for me, merely an excuse to live with abandon; then it had taken a friend and threatened to take myself; now it was a kind of awe, keeping the ancients in its glory and mystery while at the same time revealing the fragility of all human accomplishments in the face of it. So much was shown to me there of the world which lay beneath the gilt of epic imaginings also, the everyday human travail which affected the ancients as much as it does ourselves, and I was comforted by the continuity of our desires, strivings, and problems over countless millennia.

XXIV

Lament for Pholoë;
or, On Becoming a Footnote

After the races, when triremes were moored on the sands of Acestes,¹⁴³
Till the rest of the ships had set sail that were touched not of Juno,¹⁴⁴
There was this woman, this weaver Sergestus had won there,¹⁴⁵
Following him with her children, to share in the Phrygians’ trouble.
How she had shaken tent-bound, penned in by Turnus the taunter,¹⁴⁶

¹⁴² Lucan, *De Bello Civile vel Pharsalia*, IX.961-981

¹⁴³ The allied King of Sicily at Eryx, who shelters his friends the Trojans when they are blown afield of Italy after fleeing the suicide of Dido, and “sponsors” the funeral games of Anchises, with Aeneas acting as religious and political “master of ceremonies” and symbolic *pater* of the race.

¹⁴⁴ Cf. *Aeneid* V in toto.

¹⁴⁵ Pholoë, an enslaved Cretan girl whom Sergestus, a minor captain of the Trojan exiles, won as a consolation prize after his disastrous performance in the boat race at the games. Her twin children, still infants at the breast, show that her husband was probably killed in war and she, a young wife, has just recently delivered the children in the midst of the turmoil and wandering which has plagued the Trojans since the fall of their city. Such a miniscule figure, merely a prize in a formulaic catalogue of prizes, all carefully modeled on Homer and responding to him, Vergil nonetheless lifts figures such as her, when considered more closely, to a pathos which is almost more human than the admittedly great and grand sufferings of Aeneas. Whereas I have been quoting epic to illustrate my own rather paltry and adolescent problems and feelings, there is a substratum of epic, present in all of the greatest poets, of the sympathy for each name in the catalogue which, although we sometimes skip or skim over the passages as gratuitous, it is in them that the note of truest humanity is heard; although we do not notice them as much, we perhaps can find even more of ourselves in them than in the heroes. The rather slight passage which this poem is based upon follows:

*Sergestum Aeneas promisso munere donat
seruatam ob nauem laetus sociosque reductos.
olli serua datur operum haud ignara Mineruae,
Cressa genus, Pholoe, geminique sub ubere nati.* (V.281-285)

Then to Sergestus Aeneas gave over the gift he had promised,
For the ship that was saved and his friends’ safe return he was gladdened.
Thus he was given a slave girl, skilled in the arts of Minerva,
Cretan by birth, and Pholoe her name, twins under her bosom.

Husband who knows where, a cry in the folly of spearshafts and dying.
They were the ones who were willing to follow the omens and losses
Though the sighs of the great have crowded out deeds of the lesser.
Even the great ones who sighed there are often no more than a footnote:
But to find her or him, you'll have to consult with the index.

But enough about epics. When I had overleapt the Alps and set foot on ground that had been holy to me long before my eyes were filled with it, we left Milan immediately (my only regret was not seeing the *Rondanini Pietà*) for Benacus¹⁴⁷ and Sirmio. The lake itself, which would make Champlain blush, is surrounded on all sides by mountains and fog, the waters a “heavenly mingle” of glaucous shades, while the gem of all islands and peninsulas,¹⁴⁸ even without considering the beauty of the ruins of “Catullus’s” villa,¹⁴⁹ contains a moated castle wherein the main town is now bustling. After trying the famous hot springs that are there, we had eels from the lake and drank Lugarno wine on the pier our first night there, and the *sol occidens* we saw cannot be fixed in words, not even in Latin. There were fireworks in the night from Desenzano, and as I watched the strands of flame fall from the formless sky to the quiet of the waters, I felt strangely as if this were jubilation at my own homecoming to the *animae patria meae*, that I had been deprived of this place of peace and its loveliness for my entire life, somehow having known it all long ago before my spirit passed through the gates of ivory.¹⁵⁰

XXV

O Venusta Sirmio!¹⁵¹

If I should swim among your swans again,¹⁵²
Or stroll the shade of your sun-silvered leaves,
By then will I know words, sweet Sirmio,
To make the waves that lap your beauty laugh?¹⁵³
From you at last I learned what home could mean,
And was as if in exile for a lifetime
Until I'd watched the day die in your arms.
I've had to lock those visions dark within me:
Such secrets I would not now leave to silence
If I could speak like wind across the olives.

¹⁴⁶ Referring to Turnus' aristeia in *Aeneid* IX

¹⁴⁷ The Roman name for Lago di Garda.

¹⁴⁸ Catullus praises it as such in his thirty-first poem.

¹⁴⁹ The site of the villa was rather built up since late Republican times, and perhaps it originally was his home; the impressive ruins which are now there, overgrown with groves of olive, are of early Imperial manufacture, so the site was probably built up by later owners to its current size and magnificence.

¹⁵⁰ Cf. the concluding lines of *Aeneid* VI

¹⁵¹ The Latin name for the small, beautiful promontory (now called Sirmione) in which Catullus had his family's ancestral home on the banks of Lake Garda, which he describes in poem XXXI. *Venusta*—charming, beautiful, elegant, pleasant, literally “like Venus,” is the aptest word imaginable to describe the place. I tried to write the poem in scazons or “limping iambs” to mimic the form of Catullus, but the resultant poem was quite horrible, and so I merely stuck to the same number of lines.

¹⁵² I speak of hopefully returning when I am wise enough to better express the beauties of the place.

¹⁵³ Catullus exhorts the “Lydian waves of the lake to laugh with whatever laughter they have with them at home.” His *venustas* and persuasion poetically succeeds, while mine falters.

I left looking backward long, but we were off to the lagoon. I only scheduled a day for Venice, solely because my mother and friend said they wanted to see it for at least a day—I said that it was nothing but a tourist trap, a sinking, stinking bog that had had its day, not even of nearly great enough antiquity to merit too much interest. After we left the dirty station, we saw at last the gold of the sky and the jade of the sea against the domes and numberless bridges, hailed a boat, and the world was altered forever. Now when I smell the sea or see blinding gilded roofs or hear the lap of water or watch waves darkened over by night, I do not notice the scene before me, but only find an echo of the twenty-four hours I spent with the Empress of the Seas.

I finally knew why Titian and Giorgione painted with such boldness and passion; colors are different in Venice. When I wandered the labyrinth, never gladder to be lost, or watched the gondolieri bickering, or looked out the palace window at the Grand Canal,¹⁵⁴ I heard (as I had often heard) Whitman in my ears accusing me:

Long enough have you dreamed contemptible dreams,
Now I wash the gum from your eyes,
You must habit yourself to the dazzle of the light and of every moment
of your life.

Long have you timidly waded, holding a plank by the shore,
Now I will you to be a bold swimmer,
To jump off in the midst of the sea, and rise again and nod to me and
shout, and laughingly dash with your hair.¹⁵⁵

XXVI

Barcarolle¹⁵⁶

*'It is their custom to sit on the seashore while their husbands are sea-fishing, and sing these songs in penetrating tones until, from far out over the sea, their men reply, and in this way they converse with each other.' Is this not a beautiful custom? I dare say that, to someone close by, the sound of such voices, competing with the thunder of the waves, might not be so very agreeable, but the motive behind such singing is so human and genuine that it makes the mere notes of the melody, over which scholars have racked their brains in vain, come to life. It is the cry of some lonely human being sent out into the wide world until it reaches the ears of another human being who is moved to answer it.*¹⁵⁷

—GOETHE.

You, on the Grand Canal!
Moor here awhile with me:
This was a Doge's hall
When they still scoffed the sea.

¹⁵⁴ We were fortunate to get a room in the Palazetto Pisani, directly on the Grand Canal close to its mouth and the Accademia Bridge, figuring that we could afford to live in elegance if we were only staying there for such a short time.

¹⁵⁵ Whitman "Song of Myself" (1855)

¹⁵⁶ This poem, meant to be somewhat jocular, is an adaptation of the form which Gautier uses for his own "Barcarolle," a type of song sung by gondoliers, with a refrain.

¹⁵⁷ Taken from his *Italian Journey*, "Venice."

Tom Mann...no, Gautier?¹⁵⁸
Did one of them not say
When this town starts to sing
As Venus takes the West
Each dome's a lover's breast,¹⁵⁹
And death a lovely thing?

You, on the Grand Canal!
Moor here awhile with me:
This was a Doge's hall
When they still scoffed the sea.

I have less wingèd words¹⁶⁰
To soar like Marco's birds¹⁶¹
Than Mann¹⁶² or other men did,
But joys like sunsparks quaking
On waves that oars are breaking,
Golden and swiftly ended.

You, on the Grand Canal!
Moor here awhile with me:
This was a Doge's hall
When they still scoffed the sea.

Better,¹⁶³ the wordless lips
Of two on different ships
Parting¹⁶⁴ as they glide by,
Who for a moment reach
A place too warm for speech
Within a stranger's eye.

We left from the palace the next noon by gondola, and went on a train through the Etruscan hills until we reached Florence. Its low, sunburnt buildings were beautiful against the blue of noon or

¹⁵⁸ Thomas Mann, author of *Death in Venice*; Théophile Gautier was a Parnassian poet and later a founder of Aestheticism, noted for his painterly precision in diction and sculptor-like respect for and command of form.

¹⁵⁹ This alludes to the following verses from Gautier's poem "Variations sur le Carnaval de Venise," II, in his magnum opus, *Émaux et camées (Enamels and Cameos)*:

Les dômes, sur l'azur des ondes...

S'enflent comme des gorges rondes

Que soulève un soupir d'amour.

"The domes, upon the azure of the waves, swell like breasts rising in a sigh of love."

¹⁶⁰ An obvious dig at Homer's *ἔπεα πτερόεντα*

¹⁶¹ By this I refer both to the ubiquitous pigeons in the piazza, and also, somehow more jokingly, to the winged lion which is the city's symbol.

¹⁶² I realize that it is not pronounced as our "man," but could not resist the visual pun.

¹⁶³ Better, that is, than attempting to express Venice or what it makes one feel in words.

¹⁶⁴ I meant for this word to be taken to refer both to the lips parting and to the people who are parting as they proceed in different directions down the canal.

edged with dusk, so much more austere and hardy than the lonely canals and alleys of moribund Venice. We stayed in the piazza di Santa Croce, with a beautiful view of the church itself, and visited the many great men who are there interred, but I paid the most homage to the tomb which was empty:

XXVII

Parvi Florentia Mater Amoris¹⁶⁵

She¹⁶⁶ fed you¹⁶⁷ bread of angels¹⁶⁸ when the salt
Of others' was your fare in long exile,¹⁶⁹
Untangling your proud soul from flesh and fault,
And tempering her harangues with that loved smile.
What do you care that all these Tuscan sighs
Have raised your empty tomb, engraved a verse,¹⁷⁰
Then left the next off, lest your deathless eyes
Should scan it and fulfill it like a curse?
Could you care, in the sempiternal rose,¹⁷¹
With gaze forever upward toward her, God,
Among the few whom you, His judgment, chose,¹⁷²
And fewer readers who reach stars you trod?¹⁷³
If now you smell the Flower¹⁷⁴ that ever blooms,
What should you care, were there a thousand tombs!¹⁷⁵

¹⁶⁵ This chiastic appellation, "Florence, mother of little love," inscribed on the poet's tomb by Bernardo Canaccio, execrates the Florentines after their exiling and maltreatment of Dante.

¹⁶⁶ Beatrice

¹⁶⁷ Dante

¹⁶⁸ Cf. *Paradiso* II.11

¹⁶⁹ Referring to Dante's famous "prediction" of the sufferings of his exile, given to him by his great-great grandfather, Cacciaguیدا at *Paradiso* XVII.58-60:

*Tu proverai sì come sa di sale
lo pane altrui, e come è duro calle
lo scendere e 'l salir per l'altrui scale*

You then shall learn how bitter, in despair,
The bread of other men tastes, and how hard
The going down and up another's stair.

¹⁷⁰ The Florentines, in their regret, later built Dante a cenotaph, which is located in Santa Croce, and it bears, among other inscriptions, the words with which the poets of Limbo in unison speak to acknowledge Vergil's return to their company: *Onorate l'altissimo poeta*, "Honor the loftiest poet." The following line *l'ombra sua torna, ch'era dipartita*, "his shade returns, that had departed from us," is poignantly left unengraved on the cenotaph, because Dante's body (and, as I argue at least in the fiction of the sonnet above, some of his spirit also) will not return to Florence, but would only do so (and here I joke a bit) as a malignant spirit.

¹⁷¹ The *Rosa Mystica* of the Empyrean.

¹⁷² These semi-parenthetical phrases, calling Beatrice "God" and Dante "His Judgment," toy a bit with the idea which Dante professes as his *credo*, that the beauty of Beatrice is what led him up to God and she, in a real sense, is Christ for Dante, or at least a means of seeing and understanding Him; Dante, in his great but justified pride, indeed takes upon himself the work of dispensing God's justice.

¹⁷³ Referring to the difficulties of the scholastic and dense theological stretches of *Paradiso*.

¹⁷⁴ God, with yet another passing reference to the *Rosa Mystica*.

XXVIII
Santa Croce¹⁷⁶

Only a cloud of swallows darkened heaven
As on the church's spires the sun grew fainter,
And without brushes Time, that tireless painter,
Made masterpieces in the sky at seven.
Today I felt you in a marble stare,¹⁷⁷
Soon, Rome, to view triumphs without number—¹⁷⁸
Lain with the great, here take your ample slumber,
Greater than all but one, who is not there.¹⁷⁹

Sleep still, beneath the cupids of Vasari,¹⁸⁰
While I read you and smoke and sip Campari¹⁸¹
Until the evening's limbs have sweated starry.
Tonight in the loud square I'll gaze and tarry
To find out if some tan, Italian fairy
Will be my own Tomasso Cavilieri.¹⁸²

Utterly bewildered by the Uffizi and the wild, raucous city at night, I would have to say that Florence was the most exciting and alive of all the places which I visited, but one which was so haunted by Dante and the anguish that he sometimes deigns to reveal us in his works: the pain that he should have to leave such a place and never return!

¹⁷⁵ This line is meant to highlight the ascetic and mystical core of *Paradiso*, scorning the world, its honors, and its pursuits as ultimately petty and momentary in comparison to the beatitude experienced by souls in bliss.

¹⁷⁶ This sonnet is addressed to Michelangelo, whose works we had seen at the Accademia earlier that day; his tomb and remains are in Santa Croce. I here mean to contrast the grandeur and deadness of the past with the comparatively paltry, but nonetheless living and breathing, desires of a modern being, both so similar and yet wholly removed from one another, the gap bridged only by reverence and that only on one side.

¹⁷⁷ That of David, naturally.

¹⁷⁸ I had not yet seen the Vatican, where the true "triumphs" of Michelangelo are housed.

¹⁷⁹ I.e. Dante, who is buried in Ravenna; cf. immediately preceding poem.

¹⁸⁰ The famous biographer of the Renaissance painters, something of a sculptor and painter himself, designed Michelangelo's tomb, and somewhat garish putti adorn the top of it—many point out that the man is far greater than his tomb, but one could say that of almost anyone dead!

¹⁸¹ The twilight was so intoxicating that night that I allowed myself a negroni.

¹⁸² The young, attractive nobleman to whom Michelangelo wrote much of his poetry, much of it in a Platonic vein, and with whom he may have been romantically involved.

We went thence *in Urbem*,¹⁸³ but of all the wonders there, the only ground in Italy that can claim to have seen my tears is “the holiest spot in Rome,”¹⁸⁴ two graves in the Cimitero Acattolico:

XXIX

Cor Cordium¹⁸⁵

The cypresses¹⁸⁶ depart,
And swells of lavender¹⁸⁷
Burst wild from the heart
Of Love’s last worshipper.¹⁸⁸
His soft-winged shade’s asleep,
His ashes unaware,
Drowned in a wiser deep
Than when he drank the air.¹⁸⁹

Bold angel, brief thanksgiving:¹⁹⁰
This garden yet remembers
The Golden Age’s¹⁹¹ embers—

¹⁸³ “To the city,” which in Latin almost always refers to Rome.

¹⁸⁴ According to Oscar Wilde

¹⁸⁵ “Heart of Hearts,” Percy Bysshe Shelley’s epitaph. Although his body had to be burned when it was found on the riverbank, a piece of his heart was saved and buried here in the Protestant Cemetery in Rome.

¹⁸⁶ Symbols, of course, of death and mourning. When one ascends the stairs up to Shelley’s grave, the cypresses really do fan out and away from it, encircling but never shadowing him.

¹⁸⁷ Some sweet-smelling purple flower, anyway, grows in vast profusion from the gravesite.

¹⁸⁸ Shelley was the last person to seriously believe in and systematically express a universal vision predicated on love, especially as he does in the *Epipsychidion*. With Dante Gabriel Rossetti and almost all later authors, the poets anyway, have used it as a pose or as a mock.

¹⁸⁹ Shelley famously drowned in a boating accident when he was only twenty-nine years old. These lines were suggested to me by the following passage from *Moby Dick* (“The Castaway”), describing the reaction of the cabin boy Pip, who has just been knocked into the sea because of his incompetence: “The sea had jeeringly kept his finite body up, but drowned the infinite of his soul. Not drowned entirely, though. Rather carried down alive to wondrous depths, where strange shapes of the unwarped primal world glided to and fro before his passive eyes; and the miser-merman, Wisdom, revealed his hoarded heaps; and among the joyous, heartless, ever-juvenile eternities, Pip saw the multitudinous, God-omnipresent, coral insects, that out of the firmament of waters heaved the colossal orbs. He saw God’s foot upon the treadle of the loom, and spoke it; and therefore his shipmates called him mad. So man’s insanity is heaven’s sense; and wandering from all mortal reason, man comes at last to that celestial thought, which, to reason, is absurd and frantic; and weal or woe, feels then uncompromised, indifferent as his God.”

¹⁹⁰ Swinburne’s famously somnolent stanza lurks behind this line (from “The Garden of Proserpine”):

*From too much love of living,
From hope and fear set free,
We thank with brief thanksgiving
Whatever gods may be
That no life lives for ever;
That dead men rise up never;
That even the weariest river
Winds somewhere safe to sea.*

¹⁹¹ This alludes to the deep and informing classicism of both Shelley and Keats’s work, often overlooked, and its desire for romantic escape into the world of myth. The place itself also suggested to me more than almost any other

Here to have lain one's head
Is lovely for the dead,
And for the lonely living.

XXX

The Unstrung Lyre¹⁹²

I too have found your unfrequented corner,
Cicadas unseen shrilling everywhere¹⁹³;
Unfelt, unknown to you, another mourner
Has left another rose to blacken there.
Four strings are songless on the lyre of stone,
The birds are none¹⁹⁴ or few for those who listen,
Lost in the grass, one violet alone.
But tears that have made glisten
This haunt of fallen gods¹⁹⁵ are numberless;
Mine¹⁹⁶ left me nothing mortal to express.¹⁹⁷

Fungar inani munere,¹⁹⁸ and then depart.

Our days by the sea were fitting end to such a pomp of wonders, snaking along Amalfi until we reached the postcard of Positano. When the locals pointed out “Le Sirenuse”¹⁹⁹ to me in the rich gloam, I almost believed that Poseidon had founded the village. One seems to give more credence to the outrageous but charming etiologies of the ancients for places’ names when one

the sense of a *nemus* or sacred grove; the fallen gods refers to the tragic early deaths of these two idols, like gods to many.

¹⁹² Referring to the unstrung lyre sculpted on the grave of John Keats. Written in the stanzaic form which Keats uses for his odes, although it is only one stanza long and more of an epigram, I have attempted to use paradox as Keats does to express something of the “negative capability” which he famously described. His corner in the cemetery is “unfrequented” and lonely, yet famous; the cicadas are everywhere but unseen; I am performing the *munera mortis* without being felt or known to the poet whom I have so loved; the lyre is made of stone and songless, etc.

¹⁹³ In retrospect, I probably unconsciously modeled this on Vergil’s *sole sub ardenti resonant arbusta cicadis*, “Under the burning sun all the vineyard resounds with cicadas.”

¹⁹⁴ Cf. both Keats’s “La belle dame sans merci”:

*The sedge is withered from the lake,
And no birds sing!*

and Shakespeare’s Sonnet LXXIII,

*When yellow leaves, or none, or few do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold*

¹⁹⁵ Cf. both Keats’s *The Fall of Hyperion* in general, and *Paradise Lost* XI.270-271:

*These happie Walks and Shades,
Fit haunt of Gods?*

¹⁹⁶ That is, my tears—along with those of so many others before me.

¹⁹⁷ Cf. Horace’s “*nil mortale loquar*,” *Carmina* III.xxv.18

¹⁹⁸ “I perform a rite of no avail (sc. for the dead),” *Aeneid* VI.885-886.

¹⁹⁹ The islands off the coast of Positano which, according to legend, was the abode of the sirens whom Odysseus heard and survived.

sees how gorgeous they are in person. We went to Capri on the second day we were there, but did not make the climb, wasting too much time on seeing the Blue Grotto. When we returned on the ship through a glowing violet sea, we saw that the mountains above the town were on fire, and that helicopters were bringing water from the ocean to douse the conflagration. I was worried for our lives, but was assured by the concierge that it was just due to dry weather and pretty common. And the blaze was largely extinguished by the time we left the next day, but I could not get the resemblance out of my mind, seeing Positano paradissally sweet carved into the cliffs and on fire at its summit; through a glass darkly, in the tall town I could see the mountain of Purgatory, crowned with fire, the heights walked by those refined in the flames.

XXXI

Written in the Color of the Sea²⁰⁰

*J'ai rêvé dans la Grotte où nage la sirène...*²⁰¹

From the town on the coast that environs
A bay where of old none dared steer,
One can pick out the rocks of the sirens,
And at twilight almost hear

*O mariner,
Behind's the vengeful billow,
Wake your faint hopes, and moor the brine-dulled skiff;
Here spread your soul on our song's pillow,
And dash the storm's tears off salt, knotted hair;
Come, join your ears' joy with your eyes',
Here, where the trembling harp chord dies
Above the ancient cliff.*

*Love, come! We sing
Of things the Fates' web darkens,
Here in the windless, humming calm of noon;
And he is wise who turns and hearkens,
For we unfold all by our honeyed spring,
Wading in amaranth and rose:
Put down the oar, let tired lids close,
Sleep and no dream come soon.*

²⁰⁰ Two styles, one being that of the blasé modern tourist, the other of the romantic seduced to his destruction by his own chimeras, exist in this poem, and their contrast is its main point. To be perfectly clear, the lines italicized are spoken by the sirens themselves, or at least by one imagining them speaking out of myth across its borders and impinging upon the far more droll realities of life. Their song is modeled largely upon the speech which Homer gives them in the *Odyssey*, but the arch-romantic tone and the sensuousness come from Milton, because the stanzaic form used is taken from his song "Sabrina Fair" in *Comus*.

²⁰¹ Cf. Gérard de Nerval's sonnet "El Desdichado," the vatic line meaning, "I have dreamed in the grotto where the siren swims..."

*Closer, come rest,
Where lyres²⁰² lull who listen,
Hear our notes shiver down the meads,
Off every crag where foam-ghosts glisten:
Soon, clasped to soft Ligeia's²⁰³ feathered breast,
Your flesh pecked, curtained with her locks,
She'll croon your tale among the rocks,
And through the sighing reeds.*

We foamed past them with modern bravura
To do the whole Capri thing,
And were dragged into la Grott' Azzura
By a man who couldn't sing.

When we sailed back, the peaks were on fire:
Though the locals did not gaze,
All the tourists and children looked higher
At the mountain of bliss ablaze.

At last we walked passed through the dark-walled and defaced alleys of Naples until we found the tomb of the poet whom I most revere. It and the garden that leads up to it, terraced into the sides of Mount Posilippo, was locked on our first day in the city, and I almost despaired in the golden afternoon, it being over 100 degrees and having gone so far out of the way for nothing. We looked at Vesuvius across the bay and glowered back. The next morning, in the dew and shade we climbed and read the words carven on every wall, and marveled at the gaping crypt which yawns beside the overgrown, modest tumulus of "the noblest Roman of them all." His ashes long gone, a tripod full of good wishes, poems in many tongues, and wilted flowers stands in the middle of a small chamber, floored with dust, with ivy hanging down from the rough eaves and curling about the windows in the heat which dares not enter the tomb. I thought much about the poet, his own words, *multa putans sortemque animo miseratus iniquam*,²⁰⁴ and slowly animadverted to the figure whom Dante creates for himself and for us, and said, in spite of myself, a prayer for *his* salvation:

²⁰² Sc. "liars"

²⁰³ One of the sirens.

²⁰⁴ "Thinking of much, he was sad in his soul that men's fates are unequal." *Aeneid* VI.332

XXXIII

Questions in the Tomb

*Vespero è già colà dov' è sepolto
lo corpo dentro al quale io facea ombra;
Napoli l'ha, e da Brandizio è tolto.*²⁰⁵

*Rends-moi le Pausilippe et la mer d'Italie.*²⁰⁶

What did you hope for when that bright one²⁰⁷ came
Down toward you through the dark and spoke her name,
Begging with prayers and holy tears that fell
For one²⁰⁸ you never knew, bound for that hell?
His guide, his comfort, master, mother,²⁰⁹
To Satan's heels you climbed²¹⁰ with one another
And upward till too much light left you blind.²¹¹
You saw her eyes again, now not so kind.²¹²

²⁰⁵ *Purgatorio* III.25-27

“The Evening Star is there where now lies buried
The flesh whereby I cast a shadow then,
Now Naples has it, from Brundisium carried.”

²⁰⁶ “Give me back Posilippo and the sea of Italy,” also from Gérard de Nerval’s sonnet “El Desdichado.” Nerval considered Vergil’s tomb, and Mount Posilipo as a result, holy places in his personal mythology; he speaks these lines in the throes of madness, which, when compared to the *requies aeterna* of this place, and its view of the Bay of Naples, are made all the more poignant by contrast.

²⁰⁷ Beatrice, who seeks out Vergil at the behest of St. Lucia and the Virgin Mary to be Dante’s guide throughout the first and second realms, and save him from his imminent perdition, “leaving her footprints in hell” for his sake.

²⁰⁸ Dante, of course—Vergil very touchingly says of this moment, hardly knowing his pupil at all except for the extremity of his case and his need for guidance, that it was *nel primo punto che di te mi dolve*, “the first time that I felt pain for you,” at *Inferno* II.51

²⁰⁹ All roles and epithets applied to Vergil throughout *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*.

²¹⁰ A passage in Dante that we might regard as especially quaint is in *Inferno* XXXIV, in which the pilgrim is perplexed by the fact that “gravity” (or something like it) has reversed and that Satan, whose body they were climbing downwards on, is now beneath them. Hence, one “climbs” to his heels. The allegorical point it makes is obvious, however silly the “science” behind it might seem.

²¹¹ As he ascends upward through Purgatory, a realm which Vergil, as a damned soul, does not hope to enjoy, he becomes increasingly (and tragically) obsolete as a guide the higher he conducts Dante to the mountain’s peak. In the blinding light that precedes the advent of Beatrice in canto XXX of *Purgatorio*, Vergil vanishes, and we are unsure of his fate. The poet (as Dante portrays him) certainly does not possess the virtue of hope himself, but the intercession of Beatrice, who says she will praise Vergil’s actions often to God, and the virtue of his pilgrimage to guide another soul to salvation, may be enough to warrant his own salvation. Such is the debate, and such is the wellspring of this sonnet as well.

²¹² Beatrice’s stern and harsh rebukes to Dante, her first words, and immediately following and commenting upon Vergil’s disappearance, tell the pilgrim to “not weep yet,” for he will need all his tears for what she has to say. I imagine that Vergil vanished at the moment he saw her, perhaps willingly departing then, perhaps compelled by divine law.

Where did you fade to from that glowing shore?
The yonder bank of the old hopelessness,
Wandering in silence under cypresses?²¹³
Or were you one who sees the mount and sings
Behind a pilot scornful of the oar,
Your hair blown by the beat of deathless wings?²¹⁴

When I wonder what my own fate will be, Vergil's notwithstanding, especially in this market, I have only to read Thoreau to become bold again: "The heroic books, even if printed in the character of our mother tongue, will always be in a language dead to degenerate times; and we must laboriously seek the meaning of each word and line, conjecturing a larger sense than common use permits out of what wisdom and valor and generosity we have. The modern cheap and fertile press, with all its translations, has done little to bring us nearer to the heroic writers of antiquity. They seem as solitary, and the letter in which they are printed as rare and curious, as ever. It is worth the expense of youthful days and costly hours, if you learn only some words of an ancient language, which are raised out of the trivialness of the street, to be perpetual suggestions and provocations. It is not in vain that the farmer remembers and repeats the few Latin words which he has heard. Men sometimes speak as if the study of the classics would at length make way for more modern and practical studies; but the adventurous student will always study classics, in whatever language they may be written and however ancient they may be. For what are the classics but the noblest recorded thoughts of man? They are the only oracles which are not decayed, and there are such answers to the most modern inquiry in them as Delphi and Dodona never gave. We might as well omit to study Nature because she is old. To read well, that is, to read true books in a true spirit, is a noble exercise, and one that will task the reader more than any exercise which the customs of the day esteem. It requires a training such as the athletes underwent, the steady intention almost of the whole life to this object. Books must be read as deliberately and reservedly as they were written. It is not enough even to be able to speak the language of that nation by which they are written, for there is a memorable interval between the spoken and the written language, the language heard and the language read. The one is commonly transitory, a sound, a tongue, a dialect merely, almost brutish, and we learn it unconsciously, like the brutes, of our mothers. The other is the maturity and experience of that; if that is our mother tongue, this is our father tongue, a reserved and select expression, too significant to be heard by the ear, which we must be born again in order to speak."²¹⁵

"No wonder that Alexander carried the *Iliad* with him on his expeditions in a precious casket. A written word is the choicest of relics. It is something at once more intimate with us and more universal than any other work of art. It is the work of art nearest to life itself. It may be translated into every language, and not only be read but actually breathed from all human lips; —

²¹³ I.e. a return across Acheron to Limbo and an endless existence of dissatisfaction in an inferior copy of heaven—though it does very closely resemble the afterlife which the historical Vergil (and Greco-Roman pagans in general) believed in.

²¹⁴ Is it possible that he is taken away to the mouth of the Tiber, where Dante says the souls of those who will eventually be saved after undergoing purgation are "staying for waftage," and waiting for the angelic helmsman to come across the sea for them? In the first canto of *Purgatorio*, Vergil exhorts Dante to bow before this divine boatman, and to note how he scorns oars and uses only his wings "with their deathless plumage" to propel the ferry at majestic speed, all of the passengers singing a hymn of deliverance, "*In exitu Israel de Aegypto.*"

²¹⁵ Thoreau, *Walden* III.iii

not be represented on canvas or in marble only, but be carved out of the breath of life itself. The symbol of an ancient man's thought becomes a modern man's speech."²¹⁶

It is my hope that this work is nothing but that. But it is too hard to look squarely upon life through the lens of ancient fancy as liberally as Thoreau does to suit his own purposes; we may now only do so, perhaps, as an affectation. The view of the gods, in the Maeonian²¹⁷ especially, and the resulting attitude of the Greeks in general toward the operations of divinity, is still profound, though: rarely do we view the gods as they are seen amongst themselves in loveliness, but coming rather in the forms and faces of those we know and hold daily communion with—the actions of the ordinary people whom we encounter here are often so fateful that it seems appropriate to attribute to them the *dernière main* of the gods. It is so beautiful a notion that I sometimes will myself against hope into believing it, as is often the case as well with the beatific cosmos of Dante, peopled with the greats of old and the new: when such harmony is felt merely from his account of it in words, how it feels to repose in “the sweetness that cannot be known, if never tasted,” perhaps only Dante himself has ever understood. We are shown it in glimpses, in the wilderness of quotidian things, a shiver at the sudden touch of “immortal longings.”

I cannot bring myself, try though I might, to feign that the people about me, even at certain moments when a light bursts forth, sometimes are a god visiting me and speaking words that I can understand, however beautifully the blind eyes of the Ionian harper looked on the world. Were the gods to be praised that Odysseus was saved from doom because it was laundry day in Phaiakia, or because Priam was led by a cowherd safely to the mournful tent of Achilles?²¹⁸ But to invest our relationships with the possibility of this sanctity and wonder, and regard each member of mankind as a manifestation of divinity, is perhaps behind Homer's veil of “vowelled Greek” and ought to be a lesson to us.

But though nothing be “on the knees of the gods,” the tearful embrace of Troy's king and the fairest of the Achaeans, in which their sorrow becomes shared and they recognize the sufferings of each other in themselves, forever teaches us. The apocalypse of *Lear* has not yet gone by; our strongest hope in what Hamlet calls a prison is to “sing like birds i' the cage” and suffer together, not caring a whit for all the ugliness, nonsense, and violence of the world as long as we can forgive and be forgiven by each other:

Come, let's away to prison:
We two alone will sing like birds i' the cage:
When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down,
And ask of thee forgiveness: so we'll live,
And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh
At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues
Talk of court news; and we'll talk with them too,
Who loses and who wins; who's in, who's out;
And take upon's the mystery of things,

²¹⁶ *Ibid.* III.v

²¹⁷ A pretentious epithet for Homer, whose birthplace will never be truly known. It is favored by Ovid, especially in his exilic works.

²¹⁸ I.e. When Odysseus is saved because Athena tells the princess Nausikaa to do her laundry so that she might find the hero and save him, and when Priam is led by Hermes, disguised as a rustic young man, to Achilles' tent safely to beg for the body of Hector.

As if we were God's spies: and we'll wear out,
In a wall'd prison, packs and sects of great ones,
That ebb and flow by the moon.

We would be nobler, though we lose ourselves in madness and embrace at last in shackles, to live thus.

Can that save us, though? I chose Augustine to be my patron saint and namesake when I was confirmed, after my dad and I joked about choosing Pontius Pilate at first, as he was a saint in some church or other. I was amused at this drunken, dissipated holy wastrel, acquainted with the night²¹⁹ and the flesh, a Platonist turned Turk who was haloed ever after: and *Augustino volente*, I thought it would be a good bet to spend the freshest interstices of my being in debauch and art and iniquity, till after a million-uttered *cras* I would then cry my own *quamdius* to hollow heaven,²²⁰ and perhaps of a sudden find my eyes tempered to bear noon in eternity, accused and saved by a phrase from a book which I had read all my life and yet never understood until I too sat weeping under the fig.²²¹ Dante was my Saint Paul;²²² when I first read and intimated the wisdom and justice, even joy, within these lines in the Pilgrim's heart *coram* Cacciaguida:

Justly, in pain and without end he sighs
Who, for the love of things that do not last
Eternally, spurns Love that never dies.²²³

It was he most of all who convinced me to go through with the ceremony of confirmation, and so I saved my *quid est veritas*²²⁴ for later and took the *quia*,²²⁵ unsatisfied and unbelieving. These lines, which trouble one with their semblance of simplicity and the terrible possibility that they are true, took me more with the beauty of their place in the poem—thoughts the Pilgrim has without speaking them, but which are nonetheless heard and affirmed and reflected by the sempiternal flames about him in billions, silencing their eternal harmony for a moment so that a creature of earth may ask his question to them, the cosmos hushed as once only hell was at the Orphic lay,²²⁶ but here it is not the inhabitants of the otherworld who are charmed by mortal music, but a mortal charmed at how immortal music should cease for his sake alone.

For the duration of a shiver I saw those radiant forms surrounding me, and in that breath I *was* Dante; all was just as he had intended. When he speaks of *nostra vita, nostra effige*, keeping his name hidden from the poem until it finds itself to be the first word on the lips of Beatrice, he is not simply being modest (we are acquainted with his pride far earlier than we learn his name), nor is he using the “poetic plural,” but including his reader and indeed the rest of humanity in his

²¹⁹ Cf. Frost's sonnet of the same name.

²²⁰ *Cras* and *quamdiu* are words repeated by Augustine in his pleas to God for understanding, meaning “tomorrow” and “how long” respectively.

²²¹ The tree under which Augustine says he was converted.

²²² Whose epistles converted Augustine when he bibliomantically consulted them.

²²³ *Paradiso* XV.10-12:

*Bene è che sanza termine si doglia
chi, per amor di cosa che non duri
etternalmente, quello amor si spoglia.*

²²⁴ The last (and conspicuously unanswered) words of Pontius Pilate to Christ during their interview.

²²⁵ “Just because;” also cf. *Purgatorio* III

²²⁶ The famed Orpheus passage in the fourth *Georgic*.

Vision. We are meant to be saved by this work; it is Dante's proudest and yet most benevolent aim in writing the *Commedia*. These lines, although quite unable to save me as yet, nevertheless shocked me into a desire to believe them—that they could be somehow true even without heaven.

There seems to be a poetry that arises only in the mightiest spirits to so startle us out of our cacophonous existences that we feel forever changed for its having been heard but once.

*This is the law unshaking he has laid
On mortals and the hard paths he has made,
That we grow wise by suffering. Old pain
Falls drop by drop upon the heart again
When we try hard to sleep—the grief comes still,
But slowly, by degrees, against our will,
A harsh gift is bestowed us from above,
And we grow wise through the gods' violent love.*²²⁷

A snow began to fall at 3:33 in the afternoon on the Ides of March, and I felt suddenly loose of some fetter that had been gnashing at heel for many months, freed to my peril it may be, for even the snow was promising spring, and in the gathering cold I waited with the flowers: why should I delay to be happy?

XXXIII

Croci²²⁸

Man has not learned a thing
From looking at the spring,
Or questioned the first flowers
What their blithe secrets are,
Their hopes²²⁹ all flung afar
As desperately as ours.

And though they die today,
Though die with them we may,
How lovely in their fall
Are these brief, vibrant teachers,
Gold-tiared²³⁰ and purpled preachers,
Their silent sermon known to all.

²²⁷ Aeschylus *Agamemnon* 176-183

²²⁸ This poem is in relationship to the former one, except my own view of death, and not my view of Vergil's afterlife, is on display. As the former poem ends with questions about the possibilities, so this poem gestures towards my own two possibilities—the "sermon" given me by the croci could either be one of resurrection (hence the religious images) or of mutability. The main themes of the work are present in this naïve little song, appropriate for a *vita nova*.

²²⁹ Their hope for the future being the pollen which they cast to the wind or entrust to the bees.

²³⁰ Meaning, wearing golden diadem or tiara, such as the Pope does (tiar being an old poetic spelling of tiara).

How many springs must end,
How many an absent friend,
 Before I live like them?
To wither without pain,
To thank the pelting rain,
 And bloom from the bowed stem.

My sleep has finally revolved back from spending the nights awake and waking at sunset back to the gold and freshness of diurnal things. After a long privation I saw the dawn again,²³¹ not after a drunk and troublous vigil, but as a thousand airy fingers drew back the curtains of her bed, warily, and I beheld Vesper now in Phosphor.²³²

²³¹ “I have been as sincere a worshipper of Aurora as the Greeks...Morning brings back the heroic ages... a higher life than we fell asleep from; and thus the darkness bear its fruit, and prove itself to be good, no less than the light...”
Thoreau, *Walden* II.xiv

²³² Cf. Tennyson *In Memoriam* CXXI.

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