

What Fresh Hell?

Containing Matters which will surprise the Reader.



The Barque of Dante by Eugène Delacroix, 1822

by [Robert Gear](#) (February 2022)

Now he has departed from this strange world a little ahead of me. That signifies nothing. For those of us who believe in physics, the distinction between past, present and future is only a stubbornly persistent illusion. (Albert Einstein in a letter to a close friend, Michele Besso, who had recently lost a family member. 1955)

Virgil and yours truly, Dan T. headed downwards. My ancient guide wobbled uneasily and gripped my arm to steady himself.

The steps were slippery and covered with specks of a white substance which looked suspiciously like chicken droppings. The last thing either of us wanted was to end up with a fractured skull in this rancid swamp. Just then I nearly jumped out of my skin as they used to say before it became impolitic to use the word 'skin' without appending a word designating color and a whole world of entanglements, none of which I could fathom.

Anyway, we reached the lower step and beheld several whimpering dog heads attached to the body of a large dog. This, no doubt was the mythical canine that was supposed to guard the entrance to the underworld. What was curious was that a couple of heads appeared to be missing; and the bits that remained were bloody stumps oozing a dark liquid.

"Easy, boy, easy." said Virgil as though sweet-talking a horse. But the beast was pretty much under the weather, and probably would not regain his barking powers for some time (if by 'time' is meant what it used to mean before Einstein muddied the waters).

And so we passed on beneath a sign which in Italian said "abbandonate ogni speranza," but in English was something I didn't understand, since the translation was from a form of English which hadn't evolved yet. Underneath this sign, in smaller print, a clever scribe had informed visitors which pronouns were acceptable to use.

"What fresh hell is this?" I asked, using words that will belong to a 20th Century humorist.

"There are those here below who bewail the treachery of time," answered Virgil, cryptically.

We crossed a stream and I glanced back at the sprawling canine. I saw more clearly now that it wore across its back an adhesive label which stated boldly, in bright blue lettering, 'My Dog is a Democrat.' Clearly someone had peeled

the label from the bumper of a future fuel-powered Subaru, which only existed in imagination as yet.

And so we beat on, down and down and passed through many wailing crowds. Some among them were holding wriggling earworms, which according to my guide were as common here as up above. I heard the terrible thud of a broken-world ghetto blaster. And there we encountered several ninth wave feminists (I knew this by the delicately coiffed rainbow-colored tonsures) who quarreled bitterly with eighth wavers. I had the distinct impression that they bickered in the forlorn hope of filling a bottomless cavity. I asked them why they noisily prattled so.

“Ah, Dan T,” answered an eighth waver. “Could you but know the hysteria provoked in me. This new feminist has rainbow-stained her tonsure on the front side rather than in the middle! And her pronouns are all wrong. She called me a ‘he’ rather than a ‘she.’ I am neither a he nor a she, nor anything in between. My pronouns no longer exist. And let me tell you that I obtained a Doctorate degree from Princesston University. So I know what I’m talking about.”

The ninth waver was about to throw her yuan’s worth into the trough, but Virgil wisely tugged me away, and I never discovered who got the better of whom in their eternal dance to the rap music of time.

We soon came to multiple and diverse forks in the path. A hundred ways led down. “Look down and shiver ye timbers, Dan T. That way lies madness. Down there are legions of celebs who have faded from all memory. They float around in perpetual bubbles of silliness. I cannot name them since they have been erased from all memory banks.”

Then appeared some fictional folk. I felt more at home with these sorts, since I am fictional myself. I could talk books like someone who was really into them, so to speak.

Grendel the monster, a descendent of Cain, appeared roaring blasphemies. Someone it seems had wrenched off his right arm, which he carried still, a trophy of his anger. He attempted vainly to sock Virgil across the face with the soggy end, but ended up twisted in a pile of chicken droppings which littered the soil on which we stood.

Next from the gloom appeared Uriah Heep, who had put on much weight since his last fleeting appearance in a story published at [New English Review](#) in Anno Domini 2021. He admitted to me that he had been sent to this place because he was oleaginous and a bit of an all around creep. Virgil assumed I didn't know the meaning of 'creep,' and referred me to the best-selling *Dictionary of Tropical Diseases of Darkest Africa*.

A variety of characters created by 'The Bard' staggered about our path. All of these I had met in my real fictional life. According to my guide, some of these were real people from a time several centuries hence who will try to cancel the works of the playwright who created these villains. But it seems that the famous wordsmith had already foreseen their mental deficiencies.

"Yes, it takes all sorts," said my guide somberly, perhaps anticipating the cancellation of his own literary output.

We hurried on, lest affliction touch us to the quick, and Virgil mumbled, seemingly out of sorts. I think he said, "There exist much worse villains down further, and they are and will be real ones, responsible for mass slaughter, not just a few people lying around a Wooden O spurting out fake blood and so on. On this trip, we dare not venture so far down. True, most of them have not yet lived. That is for a far century. But according to Albert Einstein, they already exist. And they have already been hurled into this fresh hell, as you call it."

Down further we shuffled, and there I spied one I knew. So I

hailed him, crying "Brandon! You were with me at the kiddies' paddling pool with Corn Pop." But his eyes looked on vacantly, like the corpse I buried last year. I called to him as though across a mist enshrouded lake. "Don't let the dog with two missing heads dig you up again, for pity's sake." He mouthed something unintelligible about corn popping.

Then we beheld, slinking in the mud, a bedraggled and possibly transmutant, laughing hyena. I knew this one too; it was none other than Kampala Haggis. I wondered at the pitiable expression on the snout of this person of mixed Ugandan-Scottish ancestry who, as I recall from later times, professed attachment *only* to the former blood line. I left it at that, and Virgil drew me away into the deep silence of another unreal city.

I stood gazing upon the throng. "And who are those pigs?," I enquired of my guide.

"They are just some slovenly farm animals with socialist tendencies. They supervised a farm near Willingdon in Sussex. The one sporting a rainbow wig under a nifty fedora is known as 'Malarky.' The one groveling in the mire is K B Harris, sometimes confused with Kampala Haggis whose shade perhaps will remind you of times to come."

"And why is that long extra-nose projection attempting to wriggle back into the brain cavity?"

"It is an indication that this pig may not be trusted. That is all."

Nearby, at the intersection of dialectical route markers, appeared the head of a man with an unkempt white beard and overgrown wiry hair. "Why do you not possess a torso or any limbs?" I queried. "You look less imposing than the bust that will one day be erected in your honor in Highgate Cemetery."

"Alas," said the mouth in the face, "this is my appropriate

punishment. I theorized only, and did not practice true work or even true truth. My brain continues pushing out ideas which fail, and fail again. I must have got something muddled. I read again the entire contents of the British Museum Library hoping I could trick my way out of here. When I had finished, something made me start over again from the beginning. And then again and again, and a voice sings perpetually in my ears, saying that this was all folly. Perhaps it is an earworm, or something that I failed to scribble about. It is written that I have been gulagged here for eternity. My one consolation is that those who followed my advice are in a deeper level of despair."

"And how do you eat, your arms being not affixed?"

"I am spoon fed by the son of a Mancunian textile magnate. He comes once a day from a higher level, bringing a bowl of filthy gruel. I howl gigantic curses at my fate."

I have to tell you that I felt like giving this disembodied head a shove in his face. But my guide advised against doing this, since it might all be historically determined, and I would just create ill feeling.

And he added that getting revenge on these phantoms might put me at risk of ending up here myself. I was not so sure, but obeyed his injunction.

And next appeared two strange figures, seemingly attached at the hip. Virgil was keen to describe them. "This is Golum, a fictional whiner, and this here is algore who traveled to one of the moons of Malacandra. You must ignore the pomposity of his sermonizing."

I thought I recognized algore. I said, "I met him once. A most strange being. He wanted to change the climate of Arcturus."

But my guide corrected me. He could never have visited the

Arcturus system since the means of traveling there have not been invented, and will never be. I think you must have read the novel and imagined that it is a real voyage.”

“Well, perhaps it was on Malacandra, then,” I correct myself.

“You spend too much time confusing fiction and reality, my friend.”

That last utterance almost stopped me in my tracks, since I was myself fictional. But downward still we strode, following a hidden path to a most unpleasant region of bubbling nonsense.

Here was truly an awe-inspiring sight. A huge carnivorous poultry-like bird with red comb and wattles and dangerously flapping wings blocked our way. “Mo, Mo,” he announced in medieval Italian, calling for his mother, I thought. “Was this the eighth level then?” I asked, remembering a poem I’d once read.

“You better believe it, Dan T. This one will hack off your head, creating bodily schismatics, as soon as eat a casket full of Kalergi Cornflakes. You know, the cereal in a box displaying the happy icon of the crowing rooster.”

I looked on, stupified. There, under its wings I saw several bloodied heads of the canine greeter labelled, ‘My Dog is a Democrat.’ Mo, for that appeared to be the cockerel’s name, lunged at us almost piteously, but then stopped as though suddenly turned to stone. And then he started at us again and mysteriously froze again.

“He is doomed to try to repeat over and over again his deepest wish but never to achieve consummation.”

“So it’s a kind of bad habit, is it?”

“Exactly, Dan T. Habits form character.”

“And now we must ascend quickly,” he advised, glancing at his wristwatch. “The time went very fast indeed. If you ever dare to come with me again, I will show you many wonders, including an angry Swedish actress, a scrawny collection of lizard men, a fear-pandering childrens’ puppet named ‘Jaws’ (which means something else in Italian) and a variety of uncouth tattoo-adorned toadstools who pop up mercilessly along the rivers of time. But beware! You could become one yourself.”

We flew up rapidly, and I saw far beneath us the dark River of the Nine Bends and far, far below the waving paws of an injured dog. We passed over the scene, and I peeped back over my shoulder at those gone forever on the spring-flood of memory. And we returned to the wilderness of a higher, broken world.

I could compose about thirty-two more chapters about this marvelous adventure, I thought.

[TABLE OF CONTENTS](#)

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