

Ecce viator : Behold the Traveler

by Ed Higgins

The snake glides unhurriedly through the garden one warm July afternoon looking for a schmoose. Or barring such pleasant daytime passage, a shady snoozing spot. He twines himself about the gravid apple tree's trunk caduceus-like, slithering his handsome head up into the canopy's gray-green leaves. He nuzzles down on a lower branch awaiting passing adventure. A brown and gold stippled boa in a Bo Tree. He smiles, musing languidly at the thought. Still life: *Ficus religiosa* with serpent. He almost chuckles aloud, the image amuses him so greatly, as he itches his smooth chin against a bit of rough bark on the limb.

The wry serpent reposes himself firmly upon a steadfast branch of the Tree of Knowledge. He often journeys to this particular tree. The fruit of chance encounter along the path below and the occasionally discerning conversation with some passerby often draw him from other pleasures in the garden.

Barely settled, phallic and cunning, he smiles warily--although benevolently enough--for he has dined satisfactorily lately. On a weanling shoat he'd earlier noticed rooting among the fallen apples beneath this favorite of all his trees. Oh yes, he considers it his tree. The Tree of Lunch and Conversation, as he likes to tell his friends. Although he never invites others here; nor do they dare ask.

Ah, but look, someone's coming along already.

He smiles readily at young Alice whose wind-brushed hair and golden innocence happen to chance by at this very moment. She hurries along the well-worn path unawares, passing under his particular tree. Her only curiosity quite obviously for the White Rabbit who has passed by earlier, comically dressed like a nineteenth century Oxford don. The hare himself curiously harried by the bedeviling mathematics of time and a pressing tardiness for

his own strange underground business. Shy and stammering, the harried hare perhaps just didn't cotton to a pre-pubescent girl curiously chasing after him. So thought the serpent. He himself had been slack-jawed and swallowing a squealing young pig when the wide-eyed White Rabbit happened along, which didn't much tell for the possibility of amused or friendly conversation either.

Oh well.

Seizing this new opportunity the boa clears his now unobstructed throat loudly enough to catch young Alice's hurrying eye and innocent ear.

"Hah, hah-hummp."

"Oh, hello!" says this pretty and entirely unflappable daughter of Eve.

Eyeball-to-earful the arrested Alice and the reclining boa quickly enough turn to chatting up the nice day; my, what very pleasant scenery; and, incidentally, the curious journey she's obviously embarked upon. The serpent's keen as a prophet to enlighten her on a certain mushroom's dangerous pharmacology, odd tea parties to come, strange behaved people she's liable to meet here and there given the fantastical nature of the universe. He speaks knowingly about what a curiousier and curiousier world this becomes the deeper you look into the nature, or the non-nature, of just about everything.

"Hell, take reality as a prime example," he offers, overlooking the Victorian gentility of his young companion.

"Metaphysically speaking, you wouldn't believe the stuff I've tried to wrap this thick skull around! Or worse, tried to swallow! Hee-Hee! He enjoys these little puns, thinks of them as harmless conversational affectation. Wit really.

"Thinking can crush the life out of you!" he adds, warming to his own rhetorical excesses. "And it's certainly a bitch to happiness in anyone's Maslovian hierarchy of needs."

He pauses for rhetorical effect, smiling like a used car salesman.

“Well, Hell's bells,” he says, totally forgetting himself, his moist serpent tongue pensively flicking the afternoon air, tasting random pheromones but not yet realizing he's lost any chance of recovering polite conversation, let alone friendship, with this starched and pinafores traveler. His words fall from his dark tongue to her ears like offending worms assaulting the nearby apples. “Shit,” he almost says again, but then recovering his tongue somewhat, corrects himself. “Goodness,” he offers, “You know, sometimes a tree is just a fig tree--or at least an apple tree! *Ficus religiosa* transformed, so to speak, into *Malus religiosa*. Latin joke, you know?”

Alice doesn't.

“You do know Latin?” the boa asks, becoming suspicious she's missing some of his best lines.

“Well, no,” says pretty Alice. “But I'm beginning to learn!” Truthfully, Alice finds her Latin lessons tiresome. And her mind begins to wander further now as she senses tediousness about to come her way.

Where might all this be going she thinks with the impatience of the young for abstract thought. Especially in Latin, and with the threat of *religiosa* hanging in the theological air like a horsehair hammock. But one mustn't be impolite.

“Oh, you don't then?” says the snake having stalled in mid-oration, wondering if he should now translate the Latin thus simply ruining all the cleverness.

“Well, to tell you the truth,” he tries to backpedal, “Latin's not that much help unraveling things anyway.” He fears the finer rhetorical moment has already been lost on her. Like retelling the punch line of a missed joke. He'll try another tact.

“Sometimes even a cigar's just a cigar, eh?” He winks, paternally.

Alice doesn't know this either. Her father smokes a pipe, she says, and he disapproves of cigars. She's never even heard of Mr. Freud. Chronology is sometimes a problem for the snake.

For young Alice, shifting her weight from one black patent shoe to the other, being polite is turning increasingly boring. But Alice finds the serpent's sad, richly light grey-green-to-gold eyes nearly hypnotic. She notices too the boa's enormous, vividly patterned bulk wrapped around and around the Tree of Knowledge's brown trunk, ending with his smooth head resting on the scuffed lower branch. The snake's brow is draped aslant in the tree's glossy leaves, suggesting a comic green beret. He is smiling, contentedly, despite the pleading sadness in his eyes. He is clearly, but sweetly, befuddled she concludes. As inexperienced adults often are around curious, intelligent adolescents. Which she considers herself to be, of course.

The boa's branch is only a few inches above Alice's honey-gold tresses. She could reach up easily and pet the snake, offer it a bit of comfort maybe, or at least the acknowledgment of touch.

But such intimacy would scare the bejesus out of her. The snake probably too, she speculates.

Neither herpetology or other of life's more studied reflections for this hurried pilgrim, not yet anyway. Much too young. "She's polite though," thinks the serpent warmly, "And pretty. Seemingly, even an Enlightenment admirer of all God's creatures."

He's mistaken, of course.

"After all," he thinks, "hadn't her aroused curiosity regarding another of God's puzzling creatures, the pink-eyed white donish rabbit, brought her on this journey in the first place?"

Alice snaps out of her near hypnotic reverie. She's seriously bored now and the thought of the vanished, frock-coated rabbit she'd been trailing catches at her wandering mind. The white rabbit's image bumps along somewhere in her mind's dim distraction until alongside a bit of casually stored information about the Maslovian interest of hungry snakes in the order *Lagomorpha*. These two ill met thoughts synapse explosively through the cortex of her suddenly fully alert frontal lobe. The brain's mysterious chemistry

sounds its hormonal alarm. Like a village fire brigade, adrenalin rushes madly about her previously quiescent body.

The boa can smell the fear. He feels like a bastard for forgetting himself. At least for using bad language anyway.

"Dumb shit," he chastises himself, but inaudibly so as not to add further insult. "Just as I was winning her over with my most winsome smile and honest, exploring intellect," he thinks, actually speaking aloud but absently.

Alice doesn't hear him in any event. Her ears are ringing with fearful chemistry.

"You dumb shit!" she thinks to herself, scolding herself with the practiced vehemence of an adolescent's private vocabulary and a fair assessment for appropriate language situations.

"This bastard's as dangerous as they come," she thinks. "That creep's wrapped around a tree trunk three times my girth. The boa has now slid down the branch above Alice's head and curled himself around the tree's trunk in an attempt to seem more friendly, more upright, as he smiles reassuringly. "He's going to crush and swallow all sixty-seven pounds of me whole!" Alice calculates this instantly from the ease with which the snake has embraced the tree girth.

"He's probably already eaten the strange white rabbit before I popped along as the main course."

"Well, I suspect you must be on your way," offers the boa politely, breaking their uncomfortable silence. He realizes further conversation will not recoup Alice's lost interest. If ever he had it in the first place. His tongue flicks reflexively, acrid with the taste of her fear. He's embarrassed and a bit ashamed he's the cause of this turn in her natural friendliness. He's always had a soft spot for innocence.

"Look, don't be a stranger," he finally says, with forced cheerfulness, offering her as clear an exit line as possible under the circumstances.

"I've enjoyed meeting you," Alice says self-consciously, hiding her fear badly. They both knowing she's lying through her bright young teeth.

But Alice has been quick to catch the situational shift of things. Understanding more from less is always be a valued trait in any serious discourse.

"Help yourself to some fruit before you go," offers the serpent, as if the tree were his private patrimony. "Never know when you might develop a touch of hunger along the way, eh?"

Alice eager to depart, yet not wanting to appear hurried, or worse, ungrateful, reaches up among the glossy leaves snatching a particularly handsome apple from near the branch that had earlier held the serpent's mordant countenance.

She holds the plucked fruit in her left hand, raising her right with a slight parting wave.

"Well, goodbye!" she says, walking steadily away, while keeping her most winsome smile fixed on the snake's own ambivalent gaze.

"And thanks again for everything," she calls back from a little distance beyond the tree's umbrella canopy.

She waves again. "With more vigor than either convention or gratitude demand," observes the snake to no one in particular. Alice is far out of hearing now.

Alice, of course, is thanking her damn lucky stars to be on her way again, unscathed.

"I hope to Hell I never run into that creep again!" she says aloud also to no one in particular, since she's well away down the path from the disconcerting boa and his imposing tree.

Alice polishes a side of the apple on her dress, feeling its solid bulk against the dress's soft cotton pressed against her ribs; she bites into the sweet golden-green fruit.

"Pippin," she thinks, "Newtown Pippin. No, too sweet, it must be Garden Delicious," she finally decides.

"Yes, Garden Delicious."

Alice laughs happily, skipping down the opening path toward the rest of her journey.

