

1.

I was born on 15 October in the first consulship of Pompey the Great and Marcus Licinius Crassus in a ditch near Mantua.

I don't think Mother ever forgave my father that ditch. She certainly would not have forgiven me, if I had not gratified her social ambitions by showing an academic bent.

Why a ditch at all, you ask? Was Virgil's mother a drab, a no one? Did he even have a father for his mother to forgive?

This was precisely my mother's point. Such stories tend to stick.

The truth is less dramatic. My father and mother were visiting friends in the village of Andes, just outside Mantua. Mother had wanted to put it off, for obvious reasons, but my father insisted (why I do not know), compromising only over the hire of a litter. The shaking may have had something to do with it, or it may simply have been my proper hour. Whatever the reason, my mother's waters broke on the way back; and my father, being more at home with delivering ewes than women, hustled her out into the most convenient place away from prying eyes and performed his office of midwife.

At least the ditch was dry. At that time of year, that was a miracle in itself.

Perhaps here I should discount one story of my birth which says more about my mother than about me. Later she was to claim (probably to counteract the ditch story) that in her last month of pregnancy she had a dream of giving birth to a sprig of bay. The sprig took root, flourished and produced all kinds of berries and flowers. This, although flattering to my poetry, is false. Apart from a passionate craving for pickled cucumbers (so my father told me) her pregnancy was a perfectly normal one. In any event, she did not 'remember' the dream until long afterwards.

My parents did not get on well together. Take a cup of Rhodian wine, of no distinction apart from its name. Prink and perfume it with Arabian spices - pepper, saffron and cinnamon. That was my mother. Now take a cup of plain, honest domestic oil from the second pressing, such as a peasant soaks his bread in. That was my father. Mix them. That was my parents' marriage.

Physically they were completely unlike. My mother was fair-skinned and straight-nosed; my father, brown as a nut, tall but stocky as a Slav. I take after both - my father in build (apart from his broad nose) and my mother in character. Which explains why I look like a countryman but have not the countryman's self-confidence. Even today I have a genuine horror of being recognised, and the prospect of giving a public reading brings me out in a cold sweat for hours beforehand.

I was the second son of three. My elder brother Marcus...

My elder brother. Long dead now, his death a knife in my side. Marcus is the pale ghost that grins at me from the shadows, his hair green with weed. He is my Remus, a reminder of the ancient Roman curse that goes too deep for expiation. I cannot tell you yet about Marcus.

The third son was Gaius. He is dead now, too, but his death brought no guilt, only grief. There were nine years between us, as if he owed his life to the other's death. I can quite well believe this of my father: although I have no sons myself I understand the desire to see oneself in one's children. It was his sorrow to lose his own image and be left with a milksop for an heir.

Death. Guilt. Sorrow. You see the dark path that mention of that drowned ghost leads me down? These are no thoughts for a dying man. Away with them.

He is poisoning me.

I saw it in his eyes before we sailed, despite the smile on his lips.

'It's only a fever, Virgil.' (Why are hypochondriacs so dismissive of other men's illnesses?) 'And you deserve it for traipsing off to Greece without telling me. What made you think the poem needed three years' editing, you beetroot?'

It is as artificial as it sounds, this bluff heartiness and rustic eccentricity of language. Like so many of his amiable qualities - his republicanism, his dislike of flattery and, not least, his reverence for the old Roman ways - it serves a very practical purpose. Octavian is nothing if not a pragmatist.

Literally nothing.

Strip the layers from an onion. The bit that is left, that is Octavian.

You are shocked. I am committing *lèse majesté*. Warlord Octavian is dead, surely; he died eight years ago, by order of the Senate, and First Citizen Augustus rose phoenix-like from his ashes, to grace the Republic he had restored. But Augustus has had many names: Octavius, Octavian, Caesar. The man shifts shape like a Proteus. I have learned. I shall hang on to his reality, and call him Octavian.

Need I make my opinion of him any plainer? The august ruler of the Roman world is a calculating, ruthless, cowardly, hypocritical opportunist with as much moral firmness as a weathercock.

He is also the greatest man Rome has ever produced, and the saviour of his country. Divine honours are no more than his due.

I have surprised you again, this time by my inconsistency; but I am not inconsistent. Consider.

Marius and Sulla. Caesar and Pompey. The Tyrannicides. Antony. Fifty-seven terrible years from the stoning of the Senate's envoys by the troops at Nola to the victory of Actium. The whole of Italy rolled in blood for almost three generations before we had peace.

Peace.

That is the one great word that straddles all others like a Colossus. Wherever you stand, you have merely to raise your eyes to see its huge hand stretched over you. Peace is the ultimate blessing, and we owe it to Octavian and Octavian alone. If by my poetry I have helped him establish Plato's Mighty Lie, then the Roman in me has no regrets. He condones even his own death.

Not so the poet. He condones nothing, pardons nothing. If he had done, then I would not be dying now.

Plato was right to exclude us from his perfect state. Our poetry is like a poorly broken horse. We may harness it to the public good, but we cannot curb its rogue desire for truth; and when it shies in spite of us and leaves the highway the charioteer - who is the poet - is smashed to atoms.

I tried. Not for myself, least of all for Octavian, but for Rome and the memory of these fifty-seven years. But I could not, when all was said and done, send my *Aeneid* down the centuries with a lie in its mouth. I compromised, as far as was safe - as far as I thought was safe; and my scruples destroyed me.

So I ran from them. Ran to Greece - where else would a frightened, confused poet run but to his mother? - intending a three-year absence. Three years, to regain my soul and destroy myself as a Roman. Three years to burn the golden lie from the poem and give it back its integrity.

The news reached Octavian at Pergamon before I set out. He was in Athens before I was. Then a convenient chill at Megara, an unexpected fever and a boat waiting to carry me back to Italy...

I have caught my death. The poem still lies, with its tongue if not its heart, and if I am given the chance I will burn it.

I will not be given the chance.

Consider the lowly dung-beetle that the Egyptian calls a scarab.

Its world is the manure-heap. It cuts out a portion of manure larger than itself, which it rolls into a ball. Then it stands on its head and begins to push the ball of manure with its back legs. Over stones and rocks it goes, labouring behind its huge burden, through thorns and mud, pushing and struggling until at last it finds the perfect place. There it digs a hole for the manure-ball and burrows inside, to feast on dung and lay its eggs.

The scarab is motivated purely by self-interest.

You understand the parable, of course. The manure-heap (O perfect symbol!) is the Roman state, the scarab Warlord Octavian, who let nothing stand between him and absolute power. But wait, that is not the end.

Along comes the Egyptian. He looks at the scarab and sees the hand of God. To him it is divine, its efforts divinely inspired. Manure-heap becomes universe, dung, fire, and lo! the sun is rolled across the sky, giving light to the world, and a divine scarab pushes it.

What if the Egyptian is right? I mean, literally right. Then the scarab, born in dung, living in and on dung, becomes an instrument of the gods, and its self-interested labour is exalted and transmogrified far beyond its own conception. Scarab Octavian, with all his imperfections, becomes Divine Augustus. Is this not matter for the poet?

However, let us follow the parable further, and give the scarab a voice.

'Clearly, poet,' it says, 'from the beginning my destiny was a high one, and of inestimable benefit to mankind. Sing it, then, justify the ways of God to Man. But let's have no mention of the manure-heap or the dung-ball. They are inappropriate to your theme. And - oh, you should also stress my complete altruism, high-mindedness and lack of mortal frailty. That will be more morally instructive to your listeners.'

What is the poet to say? To him the struggling, the backsliding, the dung and the mud are essentials. How can he leave them out, even when they detract from the dignity of his theme? He temporises.

'Perhaps,' he says, 'someone else could do it better.'

'I don't want someone else,' says the scarab. 'I want you.'

'But what about the truth? These things - the manure-heap, the dung-ball - they happened. I can't just ignore them.'

The scarab frowns.

'Listen,' it says. 'Which is more important? The past or the future? You and I have a chance to build a perfect world. People unborn will listen to your poem and say, Yes, that's right, that's how things should be, fine and noble and clean and pure. That's how we want to live. Who are you, poet, to set doubts in their minds? I need you, Virgil. I have the present, but I need you to give me the future. Forget my past. Help me, not for my own sake, but for the sake of Rome.'

What could I say? You see my problem? You see, also, how important my *Aeneid* is to him, and why he cannot allow me to live?

He is quite right. As am I.

That is our tragedy.

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