

Characters

Vivian Ezra: a scholar
Randall Wellington, Jr.: a publisher
Gordias Carbuncle: a writer
Pauline Newberry: a writer
Gwendolyn Jackson: a scholar
Selma Thomas: a writer
Randall Wellington, Sr.: a publisher
Narrator: a shoemaker
Léon LaBas: a shop owner
Henry Warmoth: a carpetbagger
Sarah Briggs: a socialite

There are four actors, cast as follows:

Vivian Ezra/Gwendolyn Jackson/Sarah Briggs
Wellington Jr./Wellington Sr./Léon LaBas
Gordias Carbuncle/Henry Warmoth
Pauline Newberry/Selma Thomas/Narrator

Act One

(Vivian Ezra stands alone, holding a large manuscript. She directly addresses the audience.)

EZRA: Genius is dead, I said. There's no godlike, authorial figure behind the writing of a book. The great modernist writer doesn't always 'write' in the classical sense at all. Often he relies on extensive source materials. That's why every important author needs a definitive editor. A professional scholar is best. I am that editor and scholar for Gordias Carbuncle.

(A wealthy publisher, Randall Wellington, sits behind his desk. He leans back in his chair, intrigued.)

Randall Wellington didn't need my introduction. But I wanted to make a good impression on this intelligent and tasteful publisher. A man who knows the meaning of art. I mean, look, here, at his office.

(Ezra indicates a coffee table with an African statue on it.) A Kasai-Sankuru figure from the Eastern Pende peoples. Warm. Unpretentious.

(She indicates two paintings: a Picasso, an Arika.) Two oil paintings in understated frames. The Picasso, bought at auction from the collection of a late baroness. The Arika portrait of Samuel Beckett was a gift from the artist.

(She indicates a bookshelf, filled with volumes.) Bookshelf: handmade, oak. All first editions. Hemingway, Woolf, Faulkner. Most are signed by their respective authors.

(She indicates a Persian rug.) A Persian pile, Sehna knots, perhaps one thousand per square inch. An arabesque design almost entirely done in silk. I suspect it's from Kashan.

(*She indicates a window.*) His view of Central Park. That copper roof in the distance is a slice of the Plaza.

Here, in this office, I made my declaration: I am Vivian Ezra, Gordias Carbuncle's representative. And I'm here to entwine my name forever with his. Forever, because of this ...

(*She holds the manuscript.*) Clutching the manuscript, I stood before Wellington.

WELLINGTON: Let's cut to the chase.

EZRA: (*out*) He said.

WELLINGTON: You've got *Eternal Hydra*?

EZRA: I do.

WELLINGTON: That's not possible. It's gone, lost, kaput.

EZRA: Not anymore, it's not.

(*out*) Then he looked at his watch.

(*Wellington is looking at his watch.*)

I'm sorry, it's clearly not a good time ...

WELLINGTON: No, no ...

EZRA: I'll come back ... I should come back.

WELLINGTON: It's fine! It's nothing!

EZRA: I can come back.

WELLINGTON: Please. Relax.

(*Ezra sits.*)

Eternal Hydra ...

EZRA: You've heard of it, I'm sure.

WELLINGTON: Yes. My father's project.

EZRA: There are ninety-nine distinct chapters. He intended one hundred, but it seems the final chapter was never written. The novel's composed of a series of first-person monologues. Different voices, from every corner of the world.

WELLINGTON: Like Carbuncle's Moroccan stories?

EZRA: Similar, but with greater unity. There's a hidden protagonist. A different character in each chapter who –

WELLINGTON: Yes.

EZRA: (*out*) He interrupted.

WELLINGTON: Must be long.

EZRA: Almost a thousand pages.

WELLINGTON: I'd like to see it.

EZRA: No. (*Pause.*) I mean ... that depends ...

(Wellington growls in thought.)

(out) He made a sound that couldn't be good.

WELLINGTON: My father used to say that Gordias Carbuncle could've been one of the twentieth century's greatest writers.

EZRA: Did he really?

WELLINGTON: 'If only his book wasn't lost!'

EZRA: Well, I don't think you'll be disappointed.

(Wellington looks at his watch.)

(out) The watch, again. Bad sign. He wants to get to the point.

The name Carbuncle's a pseudonym, of course. His parents were Irish Jews. Born and raised in Dublin. He drank too much, died of liver failure on the day the Germans invaded Paris. Tragic. He was an exceptional man. A biting wit, great probity, genuine kindness and charm.

WELLINGTON: You've taken a liking to him.

EZRA: Well, yes, I suppose I have.

(out) What I didn't tell him, then, was that the late Gordias Carbuncle lives with me at home. He first appeared in my dreams over five years ago, then extracted from my dreamscape and materialized in my life. Now, we walk together, talk together, jest and work and play, all our waking hours. Here he is, just now.

(*Gordias Carbuncle appears.*)

CARBUNCLE: Vivian Ezra!

EZRA: Ah, Gordias. Those ridiculous suits, that fabulous smile. Sometimes we huddle all night together while he whispers poetry in my ear. Sweet lines from *Eternal Hydra*. We take our long autumnal walks on the train tracks outside Providence. I will never get bored of this man.

CARBUNCLE: I don't like the way he sits.

(*Wellington looks at his watch.*)

The way he always checks his watch. Why's he checking his watch?

EZRA: He runs this whole place. He's very strapped for time.

CARBUNCLE: Do we bore him? Am I a bore? You're certain he's the best?

EZRA: Wellington and Company's the smartest publisher around. As it was with his father.

CARBUNCLE: It's one of our nomenclature's nasty truths that the namesake son of a great man remains a 'junior' all his life. For the borrowing of a name is like the borrowing of a soul; there is tainting in transaction. That ineffable mysterium within the original man is somehow lost in transit, leaving the second man inferior, a mere copy, a golem of sorts. I think we should leave.

EZRA: (*out*) Carbuncle had me worried. Perhaps I'd misjudged Randall Jr.

(*Wellington looks at his watch.*)

WELLINGTON: You were saying ...

EZRA: Yes.

(*She takes a deep breath, looks to Carbuncle.*) I'm interested in publishing the first edition of *Eternal Hydra*. I've been working on it, now, for almost six years. I've written a lengthy introduction, with notes and commentary.

WELLINGTON: You've had his book for six years?

EZRA: I'd like to discuss terms. I have a letter of permission from Carbuncle's sole remaining relative.

WELLINGTON: Great.

EZRA: I can't go below twenty percent. And I need a reasonable advance to compensate my labour.

CARBUNCLE: The budget! The budget!

EZRA: Oh, and a high-priority promotions budget. These terms are non-negotiable.

WELLINGTON: Miss Ezra ...

EZRA: You can call me Vivian.

WELLINGTON: Vivian, I don't think anybody in the history of this firm has ever gotten twenty percent.

EZRA: It's not for me, you understand. I have in mind a foundation for the further study of Carbuncle's –

WELLINGTON: Okay, wait.

EZRA: (*out*) He interrupted.

WELLINGTON: I'm sure you know that Wellington and Company's no longer a family-run business. We have a parent company –

CARBUNCLE: Mother of a still-born martyr!

EZRA: What are you saying?

WELLINGTON: – and we're under certain pressures ...

CARBUNCLE: Draw and quarter the cur! Pluck off the bastard's toes!

EZRA: Look, if your parent company needs a sensational headline of some sort, there's plenty of intrigue here. A genuine mystery around how the novel was lost in the first place. I believe it was a wilful act of deceit –

WELLINGTON: Vivian ...

EZRA: You see, in 1940, the manuscript was entrusted to Gwendolyn Jackson, an expatriate British scholar –

WELLINGTON: Jackson.

EZRA: Who already had a quite complicated relationship to –

WELLINGTON: I've heard of her.

EZRA: Which I think implies some malicious –

WELLINGTON: She just died.

EZRA: That's right. I was worried about approaching until –

WELLINGTON: My father was in her will.

EZRA: He was?

WELLINGTON: She wrote it thirty years ago. Willed him a box of papers. We just got it last week.

EZRA: (*out*) I was beyond thrilled.
Do you think that we might –

WELLINGTON: Sure, I'll call Jenna.

CARBUNCLE: That Jackson woman was an unbelievable bore.

EZRA: It's possible she had something else that you wrote.

CARBUNCLE: But I'm here to answer all your queries.

WELLINGTON: (*into the speaker phone*) Jenna, could you send in my one-thirty? Oh, and please bring in that box from the Jackson estate.

EZRA: I have to look.

WELLINGTON: (*into the speaker*) It's in overstock. In the back.

EZRA: Who knows what other treasures she had in her possession?

WELLINGTON: I assume *Eternal Hydra* needs to be read with a stack of references. Encyclopedia, the OED.

CARBUNCLE: You mean it's the type of book that made this firm famous.

EZRA: *Eternal Hydra* can be studied or simply enjoyed.

CARBUNCLE: Or worshipped, if one were inclined.

WELLINGTON: The modern reader's online, in the car, on the beach, picking the kids up from school. Not quite as interested in conjuring pantheons with every word.

EZRA: But for the small, avid audience. And the historical importance, you must admit –

WELLINGTON: My father's old commissions, that's not what I'm doing for this company.

CARBUNCLE: Traitor! Unnatural rebel!

EZRA: You clearly don't want it.

WELLINGTON: No, I never said –

EZRA: Thanks for your time, Mr. Wellington.

(She stands and starts to exit.)

CARBUNCLE: Vivian!

EZRA: We're negotiating, Gordias. We have to be ready to walk.

WELLINGTON: Hang on a minute. I want you to meet someone.

CARBUNCLE: You won't get your foundation! I'll never amount to anything!

EZRA: We can't be in any kind of rush.

(Carbuncle tries to calm down. Ezra takes his hand.)

CARBUNCLE: My sweet, sweet Juno, I can't wait any longer ...

(He kisses Ezra's hand.)

EZRA: Don't say that.

CARBUNCLE: It's been decades. What if my novel's worthless?

EZRA: It's a masterpiece, my Jove. Every bit as good as –

CARBUNCLE: Toilet tissue for a diarrheic hippopotamus in the middle of the mud-soaked upper Nile.

(Ezra laughs.)

WELLINGTON: What's funny?

EZRA: I'm sorry?

WELLINGTON: You were laughing.

EZRA: I was thinking of *Eternal Hydra*. One of the novel's ninety-nine voices is from ancient Egypt. A slave serving young king Tutankhamen. He's being put to death, to accompany King Tut in the underworld. As he's dying – it's a very funny bit – he has this perverted obsession with a little cat ...

WELLINGTON: Uh-huh. (*Pause.*) Listen, I want you to meet Pauline Newberry. She's one of my favourite writers.

EZRA: The novelist?

WELLINGTON: When I heard you'd something new on Carbundle I arranged your meetings back to back.

EZRA: What's her book? A few years ago?

WELLINGTON: *Major Street*.

EZRA: That's right.

WELLINGTON: Shortlisted for the Pulitzer. You two share some common ground.

NEWBERRY: Hello?

(*Newberry enters, carrying the box.*) Randall ...

WELLINGTON: Pauline ...

NEWBERRY: Where should I put this thing?

WELLINGTON: Why the hell didn't Jenna bring it in herself?

NEWBERRY: I told her I'd do it.

EZRA: (*out*) I couldn't wait to open that box.

(*Newberry puts the box down.*)

WELLINGTON: You look great.

NEWBERRY: No, I'm frazzled. Nathaniel decides, this morning, to see if his animals can swim. In the toilet. Just as I'm leaving.

WELLINGTON: Of course.

EZRA: Nathaniel?

(*Newberry looks at Ezra.*)

NEWBERRY: My son. He's two.

EZRA: Oh.

NEWBERRY: Hello.

WELLINGTON: Pauline Newberry, Vivian Ezra.

NEWBERRY: Nice to meet you.