IDENTITY CRISIS: A STATE OF THE UNION ADDRESS BY NORMAN MAILER AND KURT VONNEGUT

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NO TWO CONTEMPORARY WRITERS HAVE LOOKED HARDER or with greater analytical intelligence at the forces undermining the American Dream than Norman Mailer and Kurt Vonnegut. Whatever individual differences of vision or temperament may separate these brooding seers, Mailer, the mystic Existentialist, and Kurt Vonnegut, the comic Absurdist, serve as shamans, spiritual medicine men whose function is to expose various forms of societal madness—dispelling the evil spirits of greed, irresponsible mechanization, and aggression while encouraging reflection and the will to positive change. It is this almost mystical vision of the writer as spiritual medium and healer that Vonnegut intends by calling himself a "canary bird in the coal mine"—one who provides spiritual illumination, offering us warnings about the dehumanized future not as it must necessarily be, but as it surely would become if based on the materialism, government corruption, and promiscuous technology of the present (*Wampeters, Foma, and Granfalloons* 238). In books Mailer might call existential errands, like *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, *The Armies of the Night, Of a Fire on the Moon*, and *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*, Mailer's particular genius has been to penetrate the facade of contemporary events to show us who we are, where we are, and where we are likely to go, pointing up the significant in the most trivial of events, and conversely placing in perspective the truly momentous acts of our time.

THE MAILER REVIEW, VOL. 2, NO. 1, FALL 2008. Copyright © 2008. The Norman Mailer Society. Published by The Norman Mailer Society.

Canary birds notwithstanding, of course, Mailer and Vonnegut have been as painfully conscious of the fundamental absurdities of their age as any of their contemporaries: the stockpiling of doomsday weapons to keep the world safe, the brutalities of World Wars, the quest for God through material acquisitions and technological advance, uncritical patriotism—the list goes on. Both see the atrocities of the death camps and those that followed Auschwitz as symbolizing the spiritual devastation of our age. In his essay "The White Negro," Mailer describes the Holocaust as a mirror to the human condition that "blinded anyone who looked into it." "Probably," Mailer says, "we will never be able to determine the psychic havoc of the concentration camps and the atom bomb upon the unconscious mind of almost everyone alive in these years. For the first time in civilized history, perhaps for the first time in all of history, we have been forced to live with the suppressed knowledge … that we might … be doomed to die as a cipher in some vast statistical operation in which our teeth would be counted, and our hair would be saved, but our death itself would be unknown, unhonored, and unremarked, a death which could not follow with dignity as a possible consequence to serious actions we had chosen, but rather a death by *deus ex machina* in a gas chamber or a radioactive city" (338). In an address at Bennington College in 1970, Vonnegut said, "I thought scientists were going to find out exactly how everything worked and then make it work better. I fully expected that by the time I was twenty-one, some scientists, maybe my brother, would have taken a color photograph of God Almighty and sold it to *Popular Mechanics* magazine. What actually happened when I was twenty-one was that we dropped scientific truth on Hiroshima" (*Wampeters* 161). Vonnegut acknowledges that in the wake of Hiroshima and the death camps, faith in human improvement has not come easily, pointing out that he and his fellow canary-bird artists chirped and chirped and keeled over in protest of the war in Vietnam, but it made no difference whatsoever. "Nobody cared." But, he says, "I continue to think that artists—all artists—should be treasured as alarm systems" (*Wampeters* 239). That's what our minds were designed to do.

In their latest analyses of America's ills, Mailer's *Why Are We at War?* (2003) and Vonnegut's *A Man without a Country* (2005), Mailer and Vonnegut reaffirm their love of democracy and the U.S. Constitution as civilization's best hopes for a more orderly and saner world. As always, both labor hard on behalf of a society, as Vonnegut writes, "dedicated to the

proposition that all men, women and children are created equal and should not starve" (*Man* 11). "It so happens," Vonnegut says, "that idealism enough for anyone is not made of perfumed clouds. It is the law. It is the U.S. Constitution" (*Man* 98). He praises his two favorite spokesmen for democratic freedoms, Carl Sandburg and Eugene Victor Debs: "I would have been tongue-tied," he says, "in the presence of such national treasures" (*Man* 13). He encourages us all to read Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* as the best book ever written on the strengths and vulnerabilities inherent in American democracy. Vonnegut asks, "Want a taste of that great book?" Tocqueville says, "and he said it 169 years ago, that in no country other than ours has love of money taken a stronger hold on the affections of men. Okay?" (*Man* 8). Mailer hails democracy as God's most noble and beautiful experiment, but always "in peril" (*War?* 16), an existential venture whose delicacy makes it dangerously vulnerable, a "state of grace" attained only by those ready to suffer and even to perish for its freedoms (*War?* 71). We'll see later how at the end of *Why Are We at War?* this forewarning takes a complex and troubling turn.

But, for the moment, troubling enough is Mailer's admonition that ("[freedom] has to be kept alive every day of our existence,") because we can all "be swallowed by our miseries … become weary, give up" (*War?* 110, 16–17). The note of futility present in the reference to "giving up" runs throughout *Why Are We at War?* and *A Man without a Country*, a foreboding, deeply personal sense on the part of both writers that because of the tragic events of 9/11 and what Mailer calls the inestimable "spiritual wreckage" (*War?* 23) that has followed, the state of the union is in terrible and perhaps irremediable trouble. "The notion," Mailer reports, "that we have an active democracy that controls our fate is not true" (*War?* 104). "Nobody," he says, "ever said … that a democracy should be a place where the richest people in the country earn a thousand times more than the poorest." (*War?* 103) The problem is, he adds, that "[t]he people who feel this lack of balance probably make up two thirds of the country, but they don't want to think about it. They can't, after all, do a damn thing about it" (*War?* 104). Vonnegut feels that his own personal democratic dream of a community with kindness, fairness, mercy, and mutual respect at its core has been so betrayed by the forces of selfishness and greed that he is now, as his title suggests, a man without a country. "I myself," he says "feel that our country, for whose constitution I fought in a just war, might as well have been invaded by Martians

and body snatchers. Sometimes I wish it was. What has happened is that it was taken over by means of the sleaziest, low-comedy, Keystone Cops-style coup d'etat imaginable" (*Man* 98–99), which "disconnected all the burglar alarms prescribed by the Constitution, which is to say The House and Senate and the Supreme Court." Vonnegut observes that "our daily news sources, newspapers and TV are now so craven, so unvigilant on behalf of the American people, so uninformative, that only in books do we learn what's really going on" (*Man* 103). Mailer decries the same lack of courage and will on the part of the liberal media and prominent liberal senators (*War?* 65).

Like Mailer, Vonnegut also despairs that "I don't think people give a damn whether the planet goes or not … I know of very few people who are dreaming of a world for their grandchildren" (*Man* 70–71). What he says is probably making him "unfunny" now for the rest of his life is that he knows that "there is not a chance in hell" of America becoming the humane and reasonable place of which so many of his generation used to dream (*Man* 71–72).

Quoting a remark by John le Carré that "America has entered one of its periods of historic madness, but [that] this is the worst I can remember" (*War?* 43). Mailer suggests that too many shocks and too many disappointments have caused him and Vonnegut to conclude that this time there may be no solution to democracy's ills, that America has embarked on a course of madness Mailer calls "an international cancer we cannot cure" (*War?* 29). "Here's the truth," Vonnegut says, "We have squandered our planet's resources, including air and water, as though there were no tomorrow, so now there isn't going to be one. So there goes the Junior Prom" (*Man* 45). Vonnegut concludes, "Like my distant betters, Einstein and Twain, I now give up on people, too" (*Man* 130). He proposes that the planet's epitaph should read: "The Good Earth—We could have saved it, but we were too damn cheap and lazy" (*Man* 122). The question I eventually try to answer in this paper is whether such despair has not tipped for the worse that delicate balance between optimism and pessimism in these shamans who have for so long not only critiqued our missteps but also shaped us a more benign and creative future and, if it has, whether such a diminution of faith in democracy's viability has compromised their determination to serve as healers and agents of change at a time when our morale is lowest and we need them most.

For Mailer, the phantasmagoric events of 9/11 bear comparison to the nightmare of Hiroshima and the death camps, if not in magnitude, in terms

of the equivalent shock to the American psyche and shattering of our national identity, creating spiritual wounds of infinite proportions, fragmenting Americans inwardly and dividing them against one another and against the world. "9/11," Mailer says, "is one of those events that will never fade out of our history, for it was not only a cataclysmic disaster but a symbol, gargantuan and mysterious, of we know not what, an obsession that will return through decades to come" (*War?* 4). The visual impact of the planes striking the twin towers and the hellish devastation at Ground Zero raises for Mailer the specter of Yeats's rough beast slouching toward Bethlehem to be born, or is it Washington? Where we are now, Mailer feels, is the world Yeats was describing: "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world, / The blood-dimmed tide is loosed and everywhere / (talk about propensity) The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity." The momentous question, Mailer says, is who exactly was the "beast"? Were we not who we thought we were? To be capable of wrongdoing would be un-American, but how could anyone hate us so much, the bastions of justice and liberty for all, so as to be ready to immolate themselves to destroy us? Now, says Mailer, there was still less chance that Americans would come to understand the contradictions that had always split the good Christian psyche—the half that saw itself as charitable and the other half that was ruthlessly competitive—"Jesus and Evel Knievel … in one psyche" (*War?* 46). This war, Mailer says, could prove worse than any we have yet experienced because "we will never know just what we are fighting for" (*War?* 81–82). Muslim and Christian fundamentalism seemed mirror reflections. Whatever good these religions might possess, Mailer argues, "[their] present exercise, in the world seems to be a study in military power and greed" (*War?* 27). "We are speaking," he says, "of a war then between two essentially … inauthentic theologies.… A vast conflict of powers is at the core, and the motives of both sides do not bear close examination. At bottom, the potential for ill is so great that we can wonder if we will get through this century. We could come apart—piece by piece, disaster after disaster, small and large, *long* before a final conflagration" (*War?* 82). Mailer concludes that "[t]he wars we have known until this era, no matter how horrible, could offer at least the knowledge that they would come to an end. Terrorism, however, is not attracted to negotiation." Only victory is acceptable (*War?* 66), and people who were ready to kill themselves for their beliefs were also

ready to destroy the world (*War?* 18). For Mailer, the randomness of terrorism augurs a deeply personal spiritual wound, the prospect of life as ultimately meaningless. "Nightmares," he says, "tell us that life is absurd, unreasonable, unjust, warped, [and] crazy" (*War?* 18). If life could be erased so suddenly and gratuitously by such a pointless death, then our ability to find meaning in our lives is lost. The prospect of an absurd death is still more terrifying for Mailer than Vonnegut. For Vonnegut, death is the end to what is primarily an absurd existence to begin with—an existence only made purposeful by the humanity of our actions. For Mailer, however, who professes to believe in reincarnation in a "next existence" where was there to be the "comprehension of our death" that would provide the logical spiritual connection between this life and the next that "we have worked to obtain" (*War?* 20)

For Vonnegut, Bernard Shaw's bemused observation that some alien planet must be using the earth for its insane asylum has become a disturbingly literal explanation of the insanity of our post-9/11 world (*Man* 121). Vonnegut sees America—its government, its corporations, and, perhaps most unsettling, its media—run by psychopathic personalities he calls "PPs," persons "without consciences, without senses of pity or shame," who "have taken all the money in the treasuries of our government and made it their own" (*Man* 88–89). "To say somebody is a PP," Vonnegut explains, "is to make a perfectly respectable diagnosis, like saying he or she has appendicitis or athlete's foot" (*Man* 99). Apropos of Mailer's assertion that Evil means having "a pretty good idea of the irreparable damage you're going to do and then proceed to do it" (*War?* 22), Vonnegut explains that PPs are "fully aware of how much suffering their actions will inflict on others but do not care. They cannot care.… An American PP at the head of a corporation, for example, could enrich himself by ruining his employees and investors and still feel pure as the driven snow. A PP, should he attain a post near the top of our federal government, might feel that taking the country into an endless war with casualties in the millions was simply something decisive to do today" ("Vonnegut at 80"). "Unlike normal people," Vonnegut says, "PPs are never filled with doubts for the simple reason that they cannot care what happens next.… Mobilize the reserves! Privatize the public schools! Attack Iraq! Cut health care! Tap everybody's telephone! Cut taxes to the rich! Build a trillion-dollar missile shield! Fuck habeas corpus and the Sierra Club … and kiss my ass" ("Kurt Vonnegut vs. the !&#*!@"). Faced

with the daunting prospect that his country was now headed by C− students from Yale whom Vonnegut calls "boisterous guessers," "haters of information" (*Man* 86) who knew no history or geography and, worse, who were "pitiless war-lovers" (*Man* 87) with appallingly powerful weaponry, Vonnegut declares: "I am now eighty-two. Thanks a lot, you dirty rats. The last thing I ever wanted was to be alive when the three most powerful people on the planet would be named Bush, Dick, and Colon" (*Man* 40). "Do you know why Bush is so pissed off at Arabs?" Vonnegut asks. "They brought us Algebra" (*Man* 77).

Vonnegut's diagnosis of our leaders as pathological personalities coincides perfectly with Doctor Mailer's description of the warped skills Republicans seemed to possess for dirty legal fighting, that which Mailer and Vonnegut both view as accounting for, as Vonnegut puts it, the "shamelessly rigged election in Florida which disenfranchised thousands of African Americans" (*Man* 86). Such "Republicans," Mailer says, "[were] descended from 125 years of lawyers and bankers with the cold nerve and fired-up greed to foreclose on many a widow's house or farm. Nor did these lawyers and bankers walk about suffused with guilt. They had the moral equivalent of Teflon on their souls. Church on Sunday, foreclosure on Monday" (*War?* 44). Mailer explains, "The Democrats still believed there were cherished rules to the game. They did not understand that rules no longer apply when the stakes are [so] immense" (*War?* 45).

The following paradigm reminds me of an old Greek proverb passed to me by a retired federal judge in Tarpon Springs, Florida, that "the fish always rots from the head." Mailer and Vonnegut show that the insanity of greed and cruelty at the top is part of an all-inclusive national sickness, what Mailer calls a "cognitive stew," composed of a corrupt Corporate America, aggressive Christian militants Mailer calls "flag conservatives," and a military Mailer says is, of course, composed of crazier than average people (*War?* 52–53). We know of course that Mailer and Vonnegut have never been fans of Corporate America, whose "polyglot oligarchs," as Vonnegut calls them, are our new ruling class (*Man* 51), and whose dehumanizing technologies and impersonal "electronic communities" (*Man* 61) are, in Mailer's words, our only real culture, a culture with tyrannical people in the seats of power, run for the wealthy with the poor getting less and less, and a culture that had succeeded only in making the world a more dangerous and uglier place to live (*War?* 48). "There were no new cathedrals being built for the poor,"

Mailer says, "only sixteen-story urban-renewal housing projects that sat on the soul like jail" (*War?* 49). And now we were exporting our "crud," this "all-pervasive aesthetic emptiness" (*War?* 49) all over the globe, reason enough, Mailer reasons, for the world of Islam, into whose own culture we had encroached, to hate us so. While Mailer clearly loathes terrorism, he falls just short of endorsing Islamic culture as a civilization superior to ours. Those who understand his cosmic view of a primitivistic God and a technological Devil struggling for possession of the soul of mankind cannot mistake where his sympathies lie when he writes, "I'll go so far as to say that this is a war between those who believe the advance of technology is the best solution for human ills and those who believe that we got off the track somewhere a century [or more] ago.... [T]he purpose of human beings on earth is not to obtain more and more technological power but to refine our souls" (*War?* 28).

Mailer sees that the same advertising mendacity and manipulative marketing strategies that frame the CEO scandals—and which he and Vonnegut feel now own the television industry—explain George W. Bush's capacity for "absolute lying" and his power over the "flag conservatives." Bush, Mailer says, knew never to speak to his political base in specifics but in mottos and platitudes, sprinkled with "an incomparably holy touch of mendacity" (*War?* 88). Bush knew they loved words like "evil," which the President would use like a "button" or a "narcotic" (*War?* 51). Fight evil, fight it to the death! Use the word fifteen times in every speech" (*War?* 53). Keep them thinking in generalities. "September 11 was evil, Saddam is evil, all evil is connected. Ergo, Iraq" (*War?* 55). Even, by the way, as I was writing this, Bush was in the news admonishing Muslims for exploiting religion for political purposes and for pursuing evil in the name of God.

The unifying dream of these "congenitally defective human beings," as Vonnegut calls them (*Man* 100)—the mega corporations, the flag conservatives, the military, and the Bushites—and what is in Mailer's view the "ever-denied subtext beneath the Iraqi project" was their long deferred desire for world domination (*War?* 53). Their purpose was, and the Hitleresque parallels were plain to see, to have a huge military presence in the Middle East as a stepping-stone to taking over the rest of the world (*War?* 5). The administration would seize the opportunity for global empire afforded by the fall of the Soviet Union, even if it meant becoming the " 'American imperialists' that our enemies always claimed we were" (*War?* 59). Never mind that using

violence to impose our will on others would encourage fascism at home, and that we no longer had an honest democratic product to transport abroad. The Bushites would rationalize their aggression as the best solution to terrorism at home, and the exportation of American democracy as the only hope for world peace through their police-keeping mission around the globe. If such moral certainty supported Mailer's contention that culturally and emotionally Americans were growing ever more arrogant and vain. George W. Bush's answer, when asked what if America's imposing its will winds up alienating the whole world in the process, was, "That's okay with me. We are American" (*War?* 73).

In the view of Mailer and Vonnegut, the more likely explanation for occupying Iraq—among a host of more subtle and speculative reasons, a reaffirmation of American machismo is my personal favorite—was that we were there less to oppose tyranny than to guarantee a chokehold on Saudi Arabia and the world's oil resources below the sands of the Persian Gulf. A World Empire would satisfy the avarice of Corporate America by safeguarding those "great and quickly acquired gains" of the obscenely wealthy upper class to which Bush catered (*War?* 64). "In the 1930s," Mailer says, "you could be respected if you earned a living. In the Nineties, you had to demonstrate that you were a promising figure in the ranks of greed" (*War?* 64). "[I]t can also be," he asks, "that the disproportionate wealth which collected through the Nineties [had] created an all but irresistible pressure at the top to move from democracy to Empire? … Can it be that George W. Bush knows what he's doing for the future of [the] Empire by awarding these huge tax credits to the rich?" (*War?* 64). This war, adds Vonnegut, "made billionaires out of millionaires, and trillionaires out of billionaires, and they own television, and they bankroll George Bush" (*Man* 100).

And of course, Mailer says, once we became a twentieth-century embodiment of the Old Roman Empire, fascism at home was a foregone conclusion. That totalitarian state against which he and Vonnegut had so long warned would quickly be a *fait accompli*. "Homeland Security," Mailer says, "has put the machinery in place" (*War?* 105). Reminding us that "power corrupts and absolute power corrupts us absolutely," Vonnegut views our leaders as "power drunk" chimpanzees (*Man* 71–72) with "an international military machine huge enough to conquer all adversaries," and assuring a stronger police presence at home that Mailer calls a "species of most powerful censor over civilian life" (*War?* 153).

What, then, does such a dire message about the precarious if not moribund state of our union bode for the ability of Mailer and Vonnegut to continue serving as healers and providers of spiritual direction when their own spiritual wound—their deepening pessimism, I mean—appears so grave? As we've seen, their prognosis for a national cure is not cheery. "There's just too much anger here," Mailer says, "… too much shock, too much identity crisis" (*War?* 105). He argues that to protect against fascism, we must hold freedom to be more important than security and thus learn to live with anxiety—a "tolerable level to terror" (*War?* 107) Yet, the people who are running the country, he believes, "simply do not have the character or wisdom to fight for the concept of freedom if we suffer horrors … not if we suffer dirty bombs, terrorist attacks on a huge scale, virulent diseases" (*War?* 105–106). Nevertheless, Mailer continues to affirm the existential principle that has informed his work from first to last—that at any time life can come together again and mankind can be regenerated. Mailer grants that 9/11 was clearly a day on which the Devil won a great battle, but sees the greater struggle between God and Satan for dominion over the earth and mankind's embattled soul as undetermined (*War?* 111). "There are pro-democratic forces in America," he says, "that assert themselves when you don't expect them to" (*War?* 105). On a more personal level, he asks, how he can hate a country that has given him the opportunities he's had, "the extraordinary freedom to be able to think the way I think" and not be hauled off in chains (*War?* 109).

Mailer's hopes rest mainly in prospects for a political turnaround in the 2008 election. In a recent essay entitled, "Empire Building: America and Its War with the Invisible Kingdom of Satan," Mailer proposes that what must happen is that candidates be found with sufficient zeal to convince the flag conservatives that "these much-derided liberals live much more closely than the Republicans in the real spirit of Jesus. Whether they believe every word of Scripture or not, it is still these liberals rather than the Republicans who worry about the fate of the poor, the afflicted, the needy, and the disturbed.… They are more ready to save the forests, refresh the air of the cities and clean up the rivers" (4). Such sentiments are of course Vonnegutian to the core. If Vonnegut's reckoning of America's future at this point is notably darker than Mailer's, Vonnegut's heroes are still Abraham Lincoln, Eugene V. Debs, and Jesus Christ, and Vonnegut still touts the message of mercy and pity in the Sermon on the Mount as the world's best hope for moral reform. He praises librarians all over the country for resisting the

"anti-democratic bullies" who tried to remove books from their shelves (*Man* 102). And however demoralized, he continued to speak out against the war in rallies and countless interviews. On his own personal note, he says that "no matter how corrupt, greedy, and heartless our government, our corporations, and our media … may become, the music will still be wonderful" (*Man* 66). He still finds creativity, practicing a work of art, as rewarding in itself, however sparse the audience.

On the one hand, it is clear to me that *Why Are We at War?* and *A Man without a Country* read more funereally than as prescriptions for a better world. Equally clear is that neither writer believes they had the power now either personally or artistically to repair or elevate the American soul, so vast, complex, and divided. "Let's not have a false notion of our possibilities," Mailer says. "We're not noble enough to fulfill that scheme. Let's live at the level we're at." Those are words said in an earlier interview about the country ("Mailer on Mailer"), but they apply dolefully for the role of shaman. So why with such scant reason to cheer was it not depression or remorse I heard in the canary bird's diminished voice but something curiously buoyant and relieved, as if the shaman had been freed from some great burden? Why, for instance, would Vonnegut speak not of personal hopelessness, but of a process of becoming—an existential condition to which Mailer would readily relate? Vonnegut declares, "I really don't know what I'm going to become from now on. I don't think I can control my life or my writing … I'm simply becoming" (*Man* 130). Why would Mailer declare almost unequivocally that he was not unhappy, a discouraged shaman, yes, but not an unhappy man? I found the answer in Mailer's self-interview called "Mailer on Mailer." He explains, "I've always felt that my relationship to America is analogous to a marriage. I love this country. I hate it. I get angry at it. I feel close to it. I'm charmed by it. I'm repelled by it. It's a marriage that has gone on for at least the fifty years of my writing life. And in the course of that marriage what's happened is the marriage has gotten worse. It is not what it used to be" ("Mailer on Mailer"). Mailer was a man without a country, too, at least the country he had loved, and *Why Are We at War?* and *A Man without a Country* are divorce proclamations. One thinks of Fitzgerald and his protagonist Dick Diver, men who must separate from hopelessly schizophrenic women to save their own sanity. If I am not taking the affirmation of *Why Are We at War?* and *A Man without a Country* too far, this severing from what D. H. Lawrence called the "bitch goddess success," whose seductive wiles are power

and material lusts, constitutes not only self-preservation, lest the healer become the patient, but an act of personal and artistic renewal. This is the classic resolution of identity in turmoil that rescues Stephen Dedalus at the end of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Repudiating a country whose ideals had been grotesquely betrayed by cultural philistinism, degraded religion, and wholly corrupt politics, Stephen achieves the necessary independence and self-possession to fulfill his destiny as artist. "So be it," Stephen says, "Welcome, O Life!" As for Mailer and Vonnegut, who knows what new thinking or new art might come from such self-possession and rededication to the muse within? Wasn't this what Vonnegut meant at the end of *Fates Worse Than Death* when he says, "Hopelessness is the mother of Originality" (237). "As you grow older," Mailer says, "you have other things in your life besides your country. I have my family and I have my work" ("Mailer on Mailer"). If his country is not as great or noble as he had hoped it is, it allowed him the freedom to think and write as he wished. If, as for Vonnnegut, that greatest of all human dreams were already behind him, it would be enough to serve as witness, if not to change the world—to meditate upon the perversities and wonders of his times.

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