

Cambridge, September 13, '96

Past or future, the same thing always seems to be going on — making a self, out of the intransigent givens of this particular life, out of resistant physical reality, out of the empty and formless. The job never seems to be finished. And why create a self at all? Even when I can't find an answer to that, I'm driven to do it; in the end I always rebel against being told by others who I am and who I ought to be. It would be less work to let the definition come from outside, but it would be impossible for some part of me to accept. This has always been true.

The answer I prefer is Keats's answer, that this world is "a vale of soul-making." Our mission, beyond culture or psychology. And I suppose I have to recognize that soul-making is the subject of *For Adam*, and has been from the beginning, from the now-abandoned prologue, in which I had the chutzpah to sketch in the story of the higher powers' struggle to supervise human life on Earth:

"The beings who oversee the game being played out on this planet, call them what you will — devas, angels, Powers and Principalities — had resolved from the start to play by certain rules, the first being to intervene as little as possible. Ideally never. The object of the game — one of the infinite number of games that the Creator was playing with Itself — was to see if human beings with their restlessly

moving legs and their opposable thumbs and their enormous ability to hoist themselves with their own petard, set down in a physical world of riveting and incomparable beauty, could become sentient and complete their learnings on the physical plane before they fucked themselves and the planet irreversibly up. The Creator had created them in Its own image in the most dangerous way: created them creative. Made them able to make a reality for themselves, and what would they do with this power they had, which most of the time they weren't even aware of having?

"It became clear early on that the Creator had bet on an unlikely proposition, that the immortals were going to have to make cracks in the world and pour doses of the impossible into it at pretty regular intervals or the game would not even get off the ground. They might have to forget the first rule altogether...

"What raised the stakes of this particular game to unprecedented levels was this: human beings were endowed with the ability to make themselves believe that they existed separate from the Creator. Even though they were infinitely the lesser power, they could block out the presence of the all-powerful. When they started playing 'Let's pretend we're alone in the universe,' maybe they didn't anticipate that one day it would become so convincing that some of them would completely forget it wasn't true. And now they could really fuck up, because here, turned loose on the earth, were a bunch of sentient, intelligent beings, capable of perceiving Presence yet living (as far as they could tell) in a universe of Absence — who were bound to be thrown into panic or despair by the situation — and some of them were so used to their panic or despair that they forgot they were even experiencing it...who knew what they might not do?

"It became clear that the circumstances would require a much greater incidence of the impossible to deal with the trouble that was loose in the world. The immortals still remembered the original goal — to see if the world could be kept going, the battle won, by humanity's unaided efforts — but the danger appeared too great, degradation and collapse appeared too imminent, and they could not bear, after all the emotion that had gone into creating this world and getting it to this point — they could not bear to let it go, and they resolved to throw out the first rule, now so often violated that it hardly constituted a rule; they became like solitaire players who cheat without conscience, moving cards at will to places where they're not allowed to go..."

But after a while I thought, Who am I to be writing stuff like this? The Nagual trying to create this through me is like Schopenhauer trying to spout philosophy through a goldfish.

And still more outrageous, who am I to think that I could end this story by writing the manifestation on earth of the Infinite Soul?

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September 14, '96

I think I believe, I say I believe, that the imagination can do anything it can let itself do. (But anything? Anything at all?) Which is a whole lot more complicated than it sounds at first; what it really means is that the first thing the imagination must imagine is itself. I have to create myself creative, all over again, re-doing the job I said the Creator took care of in the beginning. Children come here all ready to tap into the creative powers, but I found out a long time ago that getting access to those same powers again, as a putative adult, in the face of self-consciousness and self-judgment, comes down to a question of courage. Only very young or very fortunate people think that letting yourself do things is easy.

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October 3, '96

To a former student:

My current effort is turning into the hardest thing I've ever tried to write, and I have no idea who its audience might be, but Quixotically, I continue.

It seems to be all plot, and I, as you probably realize, am not good at plot. The narrator is writing in some unspecified future year, in a neighborhood like mine, except that practically everything we take for granted doesn't work anymore. Houses have burned down because there was no water pressure to put fires out, most of the trees have

been cut for firewood, all available land is being used to grow food — and so on, which is exactly the problem: once you get started down this path there is no end to the what-if detail you have to imagine, which would be fine if I were my friend Kim Robinson (who writes SF novels imagining entire worlds in seamless detail), but I'm not and never will be. I much prefer (or at least think I much prefer) to get into some simple, well-worn groove like Girl Meets Boy, Has Great Sex, Then Heartbreak (or whatever order the events come in) and then watch my characters spend most of their time reflecting upon their emotions. But no! Apparently I am an artist, damn it, and therefore must attempt new things instead of being allowed to keep doing what I am halfway capable of. Thus, as if the manifold shortcomings of my previous works were not enough, I have the ongoing pleasure of discovering ever new ways in which writing a novel is beyond my powers.

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My only real hope, as a young man, or the only one I admitted to myself, lay in the possibility that I might someday love someone enough to make up for all that I had done and not done. If only I could open my heart. And the only power that could open my heart, it seemed, was the beauty of women, which was somehow – and this is all that I can offer you by way of explanation or justification – a remedy for all the unbeauty of Aaron’s life and death. I wasn’t just attracted to women’s beauty, I believed in it. I still do believe in it – along with other manifestations of beauty – though I’m not sure anyone else could know what those words mean to me.

I can’t help imagining they sound shallow to you, Adam, but people have to be allowed to find the Presence where they can. We aren’t all going to go live alone at Walden Pond, or tend the poor in Calcutta, or devote our lives to the study of sacred texts, or get rich and then give all our riches away. I’m trying not to think about how you’ll react to all this, but it’s hard all over again each day I sit down to write.

Still I will say this, because it’s what I believe: I was always sure, and I’m still sure, that beauty is far more serious than most people realize. That it is a mystery, not to be explained, not to be denied. As much of a mystery as evil, the countervailing force.

On the secret calendar of my life, eras were marked off, one from the next, not by degrees or accomplishments or jobs or where I lived, but by falling in love and breaking up. Living was about the women I might meet and whether one of them might turn out to be the