Doctors in Spite of Themselves

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In and of itself, Mark Vonnegut’s *The Eden Express* (1975)—a harrowing account of his experience with mental illness—is captivating. Well-written and perceptive, it expresses a unique view of a particular kind of mental disorder and has been hailed as a “textbook” of sorts for those suffering from or working with victims of schizophrenia. However, beyond its individual merits, *The Eden Express* serves as an interesting complement to the novels and ideas of Mark’s father, novelist Kurt Vonnegut.

Despite the fact that Mark’s book is non-fiction and his father’s are fiction, their writing styles and their sense of values share many similarities. While there is a strong autobiographical strain running through Kurt’s novels, he is such a trickster (even an admitted liar) in his fiction that we never know quite what to believe. Therefore Mark’s non-fiction account of his life during the late 1960s and early 1970s provides the reader with a bit more insight into a portion (and a product) of Kurt’s life and work.

Naturally, Mark would have been influenced by his father simply by virtue of that relationship. Beyond that, however, Mark found himself, during his college years, in a very special, and some might say enviable, position. His father had been catapulted into the literary limelight and had become a revered, if often controversial, figure on college campuses. His novels were being discussed and examined in and out of the classrooms of America and it seems likely that Mark’s mere presence or appearance in a group might have sparked many a conversation about his famous father’s work and life. There are indications that Mark did not have a strong sense of his own identity prior to his father’s rise to stardom; thus the prestige he might have enjoyed as his father’s son may have been accompanied by an even greater struggle to “find” himself.

In 1958, when Mark was twelve, Kurt Vonnegut’s older sister, Alice, died of cancer within 36 hours of her husband’s death in a commuter train accident in New Jersey. Kurt and his wife took Alice’s four boys into their home. Mark’s mother, Jane, later wrote a book entitled *Angels Without Wings* which was published posthumously in 1987. In it, she describes
the experience of merging two sets of cousins into one family and how it seemed to affect each child.2

Mark had been the oldest child and only son (his younger sisters were then eight and three) before the families joined. He was bright and especially gifted in math, thoughtful and quiet—except in neighborhood play where he often felt compelled to defend himself physically. Jane says that he always felt different and that "part of the reason for his sense of isolation must have been his identification with his father, who, being a writer, felt like an outsider wherever he was" (141).

But even if Mark felt alone, he no doubt had a strong sense of his place within the family structure. However, his security was blown to "smithereens," as Jane puts it, upon the arrival in the household of his four cousins, two older and two younger. Mark was no longer the oldest, the strongest, the smartest (for aren't older siblings always "smarter"?), and, perhaps, in fact, he no longer felt the "most" anything. Jane admits that Mark must have felt shunted aside during this period of swirling emotions and activity. In the following months and during the years leading up to the illness that precipitated the writing of his book, it appears that Mark felt himself responsible for staying out of the way, being good, and helping see to it that the others were happy.

*The Eden Express* is written about the two-year period following Mark's graduation from Swarthmore College in 1969. Mark took pride in being a "hippie" and, like many young people of that time, he was deeply dissatisfied and disillusioned with society and life in general. His parents' marriage was disintegrating and he says he found himself "drinking more, not sleeping well, but there were so many good reasons to be upset that I saw my state of mind as more an asset than something to worry about" (19). Finally, feeling he had to get away from the East Coast, from the cities with their dehumanizing institutions, racism and greed, he decided to leave the States with a young woman and look for a small farm in British Columbia where they could live and share the land with a few friends. They did find an abandoned farm in an idyllic setting in British Columbia: eighty acres with a rundown house, a stream, and mountains all around for only $12,000. By August, it was theirs and they were soon joined by some friends, old and new, in creating what seemed the formula for a perfect communal life. It wasn't long, however, before his initial euphoria began to dissolve. The old feelings of paranoia and disorientation began to return, and during a necessary trip back East he felt himself
"falling apart." As he saw it, nothing back in the States had changed; maybe it had gotten worse. He wondered why everyone else wasn't as upset as he over the lives they all lived and the horrors around them. He felt better upon returning to the farm. One night five months after first arriving in Canada, however, he decided to try some mescaline offered by a friend. Mark was not an experienced drug user (except for marijuana) and the drug induced a "bad trip" that served as the catalyst for his descent into mental illness. Over the next six months he suffered three "breakdowns" and hospitalizations during which he was diagnosed as an acute schizophrenic. Finally, after those months of illness, psychotherapy, anti-depressants and then megavitamins, he began to recover. But, he was never able to feel at home or right again on the farm, and he left it for good, returning to the East Coast where he continued his recovery, went on to write The Eden Express, and then to study and eventually practice medicine.

Reading The Eden Express evokes recollections of the novels of Kurt Vonnegut in part because both writers express themselves in down-to-earth language with a conversational tone easily understood to which one can readily relate. Mark's real-life experience with mental illness is so bizarre that it is important he use an intelligible voice, one that does not throw the reader off track by disguising his despair and pain with abstract intellectualization. And although Kurt's novels are fictional stories, they too are bizarre. Couching them in ordinary language gives them an edge of immediacy and a core of comprehensible truth. While Mark does not, I think, possess Kurt's great wit and gift for irony, he does exhibit a wry sense of humor; I often "recognized" Kurt's voice in The Eden Express.

For example, Mark says of the hippies of his era: "The America they were fleeing didn't seem to think they were worth much. So they were doing a very sensible thing, building a culture where their very real virtues and attributes had a chance, where they wouldn't be just so much shit" (31). He writes, "we wanted to go beyond that [getting in touch with things that were already there] and develop entirely new ways of being and experiencing the world" (48). This kind of language and the ideals it espouses are pure elder Vonnegut. It is reminiscent of Eliot Rosewater's concern for the "useless" and "unattractive" people of Rosewater County in God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater and of how both Eliot and Billy Pilgrim (in Slaughterhouse-Five) "were trying to re-invent themselves and their universe" (101).
Readers familiar with the subject matter of Kurt’s work will find reminders of it in the words, phrases and/or topics on almost every page of *The Eden Express*. Kurt uses dancing in one way or another in almost all of his novels and Mark, too, mentions dancing several times to express appreciation of things just for their own sake. He is thrilled by the sea of blue-roofed houses he sees in his travel across the state of Minnesota and writes, “This is what dancing lessons from God were all about, blue roofs” (21). Later, while in the throes of his psychotic adventure and during an episode of elation while experiencing what he called “astral sex,” he says, “I can’t begin to describe what dancing with angels was like” (109). And during one of his stays in the hospital, Mark imagines that his father visits him and says, after they have talked about things they never had before, “I just wanted to dance with you once before I left” (121). At one point in *The Eden Express*, Mark recalls a time when he was in college and decided to experiment with drugs with some friends. He was apprehensive about it, but decided, “Oh, well, . . . Strange travel suggestions are dancing lessons from God” (63). This is almost a direct quotation from his father’s *Cat’s Cradle* wherein the narrator says, “. . . of course, I would have agreed gaily to go anywhere anyone suggested. . . . Peculiar travel suggestions are dancing lessons from God” (50). Perhaps they are both suggesting, with this phrase, that sometimes it is best to just go ahead and dance—to enjoy life unabashedly, take risks and not give things too much thought or take ourselves or life too seriously.

In *Galapagos*, the blue-footed boobies’ instinctive courtship dance is graceful, pure and simple, and the widowed schoolteacher, Mary Hepburn, once suggested to her students that it might be called a form of art. In contrast, the humans in *Galapagos* are unable to achieve any sort of grace with their dancing; Siegfried von Kleist’s “dancing” is awkward and beyond his control (he has an inherited neurological disease), and James Wait begins his career of fleecing older widows as a young dancer. Kurt may be proposing that if we humans could learn to dance (and live) more harmoniously, with instinctive grace and beauty and in tune with ourselves and nature, we would be more likely to survive the future, as did the blue-footed boobies, without succumbing to the self-destructive behaviours that shape much of human life.

Just as the image of dancing seems to represent the virtues of grace, simplicity and honesty for both Mark and Kurt, so do their canine friends. Dogs are given important, if small, roles in Kurt’s novels and they are important, too, to Mark. He refers often to Zeke, the Labrador retriever
he took to the farm with him, noting that "the utter trust, simplicity, and spontaneity of being with Zeke made most human relationships seem hollow, clumsy, and hardly worth it" (23). Similarly, in Chapter One of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Kurt tells us about the dog who keeps him company in his late night hours, saying, "We talk some. I let him know I like him, and he lets me know he likes me... 'You're all right, Sandy,' I'll say to the dog. 'You know that, Sandy? You're O.K.'" (7). A remarkably similar passage appears in his earlier novel, *Breakfast of Champions*, wherein the troubled Pontiac dealer Dwayne Hoover "reserved most of his conversation for the dog. He would get down on the floor and roll around with Sparky, and he would say things like, 'You and me, Spark, and 'How's my old buddy? and so on. And that routine went on unrevi­sed, even after Dwayne started to go crazy'" (18). Dogs are not always viewed with admiration by either writer; Mark calls Tanga, another dog on the farm, "an outright foul and obnoxious creature who should have been shot" (40), and Kurt's Kazak in *Breakfast of Champions* terrorized the narrator. But, at their best, dogs can be seen to provide humans not only solace, companionship and unconditional love, but a way of maintaining contact with their humanity.

Mark admits that he might have formed an unusually close attachment to Zeke to compensate, in part, for his increasing feelings of alienation from the people in his life. Back home, his family seemed to be breaking up (his parents were by then separated and his siblings were scattering), and on the farm he spent more and more time alone. Indeed, time itself became both friend and enemy as his illness began manifesting itself in more frequent episodes of disorientation.

The element of time shapes Kurt's novels and one need not read far into *The Eden Express* to see that Mark uses it in much the same way. Both writers break their chapters into segments with each being a sort of anecdote by itself; these little stories are often presented in non-chronological order. The brief, nonlinear segments serve to shake our perception of the "natural" order of things; they seem confusing and yet that very confusion forces us to rethink the way we are experiencing the story and helps us to come to some new understanding of the events detailed. For example, in *Breakfast of Champions*, Kurt alternates chapters about the writer Kilgore Trout with chapters about Dwayne Hoover. By continually shifting our attention back and forth between the two as we see them moving inexorably toward each other, a disorder is created that is disturbing and enhances both the gradual escalation of Dwayne's men-
tal disease and their climactic meeting which causes Dwayne to become a raving lunatic. This technique serves to enhance the feeling of events in time being out of control and irrational. The form serves both Mark and Kurt well in their goal of exposing life’s absurdities.

But time provides Kurt and Mark with more than an amenable structural device; its enigmatic nature is a subject of major interest to them. The most notable example of Kurt’s experiments with the concept of time is his novel *Slaughterhouse-Five*. He starts the body of his novel by saying,

Listen: Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time.
Billy has gone to sleep a senile widower and awakened on his wedding day. He has walked through a door in 1955 and come out another one in 1941. He has gone back through that door to find himself in 1963. He has seen his birth and death many times, he says, and pays random visits to all the events in between. (23)

Billy Pilgrim, the protagonist in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, appears to be Kurt’s alter ego in the novel. Billy, an optometrist from Ilium, New York, cannot bear to remember the fire-bombing of the city of Dresden, Germany, a real-life experience for Kurt about which he tried to write for twenty years. Billy is mysteriously transported not only through time but to another planet, Tralfamadore, and from the people there he learns that “it is just an illusion we have here on Earth that one moment follows another one, like beads on a string” (27). For Billy, time has no objective meaning and Kurt seems to be telling us that chronological time is just another myth that we have created to comfort ourselves and give our lives meaning.

Just as Billy Pilgrim travels back and forth in time, so does Mark in his schizophrenic journey. At one point he notices another couple and wonders “if they were traveling backward in time, too” (104). As he becomes more and more disoriented during the time leading up to his first breakdown, he considers time’s illusory qualities and tells us that “Time stopped being continuous; it jumped around with lots of blanks” (85). And sometimes during what he calls his “cosmic jaunts” he says it was as if “no time at all had passed in my absence,” while other times, “it was as if I had been in some sort of suspended animation. Years had passed for everyone but me” (107). This is reminiscent of Eliot Rosewater, the “flamboyantly sick” main character in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, who loses a year of his life to insanity.
The conventional notion of time is of a continuing chronology during which events seem to occur in a linear fashion, giving us a sense of the past, present and future. We have so learned this basic principle and used it to define our lives that we are confused when it doesn’t appear to function as we expect. Hours spent in a gently rocking boat in the middle of a peaceful lake may seem to pass as minutes, but one’s wait of a few minutes in a dentist’s office, filled with dread, may seem much longer.

In the twentieth century, the concept of time as a linear process has become blurred as, for example, jet flight provides the ability to travel through several time zones—even moving backward in time. We lead increasingly complex lives, picking up scattered bits of information from newspapers, magazines, and spurts of television. From these and other sources we almost simultaneously experience events that have occurred, are now occurring, and may occur. The concept of time, once a seemingly stable reality, often seems irrelevant and even disturbingly unreal. This altering of the experience of time may have contributed to Mark’s frequent inability to make any sense at all of his place in time, an inability identified as one symptom of schizophrenia—the disease that has been popularly designated “the disease of the century.” Schizophrenia, the raison d’etre for Mark’s book, is also one of Kurt’s central themes.

The term schizophrenia was first used in 1911 by Dr. Eugen Bleuler, a Swiss psychiatrist, who defined it as “a split between the individual’s perception of reality and reality” (Berger 40). It is a disease that is highly complex and has, thus far, defied anything like a precise diagnosis. Berger cites Dr. Edward J. Sachar of the New York State Psychiatric Institute who calls it “a vast wastebasket of all kinds of psychiatric diseases” (40).

Kurt Vonnegut’s style of writing has been described as schizophrenic and his characters are usually at least confused and sometimes actually driven insane by their conflicting perceptions of reality. He uses the mental illness of his characters to illustrate the sickness in our society—indeed, of the whole planet. On the other hand, that sickness may contain the seeds of renewal and survival. For example, in *Mother Night*, the narrator and protagonist Howard Campbell was a counter spy for the United States who inadvertently helped the Nazis during World War II. Years later he says of his crime, “I’ve always known what I did. I’ve always been able to live with what I did. How? Through that simple and widespread boon to modern mankind—schizophrenia” (133). In *Galapagos*, a young Peruvian soldier identified as a paranoid schizophrenic burglarizes a shop, setting off a series of events that ironically facilitates
the continuation of the human race. The narrator says, "Everybody alive today should thank God that this soldier was insane" (148). And on the title page of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the author tells us that it is written "somewhat in the telegraphic schizophrenic manner of tales of the planet Tralfamadore."

Schizophrenia is a pervasive and persistent theme in the novels of Kurt Vonnegut and it provides, in a way, a perfect vehicle for his belief that, like his characters Billy Pilgrim and Eliot Rosewater, we all experience conflicts between our perception of reality and reality itself. Howard Campbell, on the other hand, uses the schizophrenic nature of society in general and himself in particular to, if not excuse, at least explain his actions during the war. As is true of his characters, Kurt has no final answers or explanations for the insanities we create and live with, but his schizophrenic style of writing provides him an outlet and, more importantly, a way of "re-inventing himself and his universe" in an attempt to make it bearable.

It seems ironic then, that Mark was diagnosed as schizophrenic only after what had been a seemingly successful attempt to re-invent himself and his universe in British Columbia. One can only speculate as to the true causes of his breakdown, but surely, as he implies, his use of drugs played a role. Mark, an amateur student of psychology, had never believed that chemicals caused or could cure mental illness. He had agreed with the psychologists who assert that there is no such thing as mental illness—only people who behave differently than most people in a society—or that abnormal behavior is simply a normal response to an abnormal situation. He seemed to romanticize his own growing insanity. Even during the worst periods of his illness the hallucinatory aspects of the disease produced such extremes of elation and despair, such incredible visions and seeming insights that it seemed almost artistic to him. However, after months of treatment during which talk therapy failed him again and again, and in which drug therapy finally succeeded in affecting a turnaround, he came to have a sharply different view. After he recovered, Mark had this to say:

It's such a poetic affliction from inside and out, it's not hard to see how people have assumed that schizophrenia must have poetic causes and that any therapy would have to be poetic as well. A lot of my despair of ever getting well was based on the improbability of finding a poet good enough to deal with all that had happened to me. It's hard to say when I accepted the notion that the problem was biochemical, it went so hard against everything I had been taught about mental illness. At the farm we were com-
ing more and more to seeing physical illness as psychological. A cold or slipping with a hammer and smashing a finger was psychological. Schizophrenia was biochemical? (193)

And, late in his book he writes, "As poetic as schizophrenia is, I know of very few cases in which poetry was of much help." So in the end, useful and beautiful as it was, art failed Mark just as it failed Kurt's character, Eliot Rosewater, in Kurt's 1965 novel *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* (65).

Interestingly, Mark's mother, in her book, recalls an eerie experience of her own which in some ways appears similar to Mark's breakdown in 1971. In the summer of 1958, she began having recurring nightmares and then hallucinations during the day—seeing "signs" about the house that convinced her that some "refugees" were coming. Telling no one her secret, she became obsessed with preparing for their arrival. After a month or so of this, she awoke one morning with the certainty that the refugees had arrived, were in the barn, had a baby with them, and needed her help. She went straight to the barn, but no one was there. Deeply disappointed, she could barely make it back to her bed and had just enough energy to whisper to Kurt that she was afraid, that she couldn't find the baby in the barn. Kurt immediately called the doctor who gave her a shot of something that made her sleep for several hours. When she woke up, she found herself back in her own life. Her ideas about the refugees seemed like a far off dream and neither those ideas nor the nightmares ever returned. Two months later, however, she found herself the "mother" of her four nephews, one of whom was a baby, and it seemed, in retrospect, that her summer adventure of the mind had been a sort of warning—a way of preparing her for their arrival.

Jane says that both her "episode" and Mark's were cases of "expedient insanity." Hers had helped ready her for a future trauma and his "... had removed him from a situation, both physically and psychologically, that he had to get out of in order to grow" (147). But it is obvious the medication the doctor gave Jane snapped her out of her period of disorientation and with regard to Mark she concedes, "It had to have been chemical... [and] his chemistry was our chemistry, wasn't it? Whether we were responsible for it or not?" (146).

Just as Jane appears to believe that Mark's illness was caused by a combination of physical and psychological factors, so does Kurt. In *Palm Sunday*, published in 1981, he says,
Mark has taught me never to romanticize mental illness, never to imagine a brilliant and beguiling schizophrenic who makes more sense about life than his or her doctor. . . . [Mark says] society cannot be blamed, and neither, thank God, can the friends and relatives of the patient. Schizophrenia is an internal chemical catastrophe . . . of monstrously bad genetic luck. As his father, though, I am still free to say this, I think: I believe that a culture, a combination of ideas and artifacts, can sometimes make a healthy person behave against his or her best interests, and against the best interests of the society and the planet, too. (242)

Kurt’s schizophrenics do not necessarily make more sense about life than those around them, including their doctors, but they seldom make less. It depends upon how the individual reader perceives them and their circumstances. The madness of his characters and of the worlds in his novels, drawn in such a way as to make them identifiable to us, is usually made up of a combination of internal and external factors. He claims in Breakfast of Champions (written in 1971 during and after Mark’s illness and rehabilitation) that “bad chemicals and bad ideas [are] the Yin and Yang of madness” (14). The “bad ideas” that were given to Dwayne Hoover when he read Kilgore Trout’s novel brought to full bloom Dwayne’s incipient madness.

Whatever the reasons for Mark’s illness, his book sheds some light on the work of his father by the comparisons that can be made and the conclusions that might be drawn from those comparisons. Mark’s real-life experience as related in The Eden Express could be a prototype for one of his father’s works and, in its own way, it seems to prove the danger of the kind of lives we lead as expressed in Kurt’s writing. Reading about Mark’s breakdown is an experience akin to watching one of Kurt’s characters crumble before us in a world where reality and illusion are intertwined and all but indistinguishable. Kurt exposes the mixed messages we receive from the time we are born and the contradictions we live with every day. We abhor the thought of war and yet we build bombs in the name of peace. We profess admiration for those who lead selfless lives, but we strive for material success and encourage it in our children. And we create myths—our religions and our psychological theories—to help explain ourselves and to justify our behavior. Mark finally could not distinguish reality from myth or illusion, and Kurt seems to suggest in his novels that there is no reality except that which we create, that life is, after all, just a story we make up about ourselves.

It may be that Mark wrote his book to help explain his experience to himself and to others and that Kurt writes for the same reasons. One over-
riding impression I have of both writers is that they are kind and caring men. As noted earlier, Mark took on the role of caretaker early in life, perhaps as a young child with two younger siblings, and certainly with the arrival of his cousins who had suffered the loss of their parents. He says in his book that while on the farm he often became upset when he thought others were unhappy. And, of course, he is now a doctor, so caring for others has become his profession as well. Kurt’s caring comes through in his concern for his characters and his abiding hope that we might find a way out of the traps that we set for ourselves. He writes warmly, in the voice of an “ultimately reliable Dutch uncle from the heartland of America” (Klinkowitz 90). And he makes his priorities clear when Eliot Rosewater says, “There’s only one rule that I know of . . . ‘God damn it, you’ve got to be kind’” (Rosewater 93).

Kurt has said that he was influenced early in life by the writings of Robert Louis Stevenson. The quote that Mark uses at the beginning of Chapter One in *The Eden Express* is by Stevenson: “It is a better thing to travel hopefully than it is to arrive.” With the creation of their written works and the sharing of those works with others, both Mark and Kurt Vonnegut can be seen to be traveling hopefully. If they were not, they could not and would not offer themselves as generously as they have.

**Notes**

1 Jane and Kurt were divorced in 1973. She later married Adam Yarmolinsky, a Washington, D.C. lawyer, and died in December of 1986.

2 In *Angels Without Wings*, the names of family members were changed to protect their privacy, but it seems apparent that the child Jane calls Matt is actually Mark.
Works Cited


