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Edited and with an Introduction by **HAROLD BLOOM**

Kurt Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse-Five

NEW EDITION

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Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations

Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*
New Edition

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HAROLD BLOOM

Introduction

On December 19, 1944, Kurt Vonnegut was captured by the Germans during the Battle of the Bulge; he was 22 years old. Sent to Dresden, he survived the firebombing of the city on February 13–14, 1945, in which 135,000 Germans were killed. That is the biographical context (in part) for the novel, *Slaughterhouse-Five, or The Children's Crusade* (1969).

Since Vonnegut had begun publishing novels in 1952, it is clear that nearly a quarter-century had to go by before the trauma of 1945 could be transmuted into the exorcism of *Slaughterhouse-Five.* I have just reread the novel after many years, remembering my shocked admiration for it when it first appeared and not looking forward to encountering it again. As it should, *Slaughterhouse-Five* remains a very disturbed and disturbing book and still moves me to troubled admiration. I prefer *Cat's Cradle*, but *Slaughterhouse-Five* may prove to be an equally permanent achievement.

The shadow of Céline's *Journey to the End of the Night* never quite leaves Vonnegut's starker works, including *Slaughterhouse-Five.* I myself read the anti-Semitic Céline with loathing; one sees what is strong in the writing, but a Jewish literary critic is hardly Céline's ideal audience. So it goes.

It is difficult to comment on *Slaughterhouse-Five* without being contaminated by its styles and procedures, which is necessarily a tribute to the book. In "structure" (an absurd term to apply to almost any novel by Vonnegut), *Slaughterhouse-Five* is a whirling medley, and yet it all coheres. Billy Pilgrim, as a character, does not cohere, but that is appropriate, since his schizophrenia (to call it that) is central to the book.

The planet Tralfamadore, where Billy enjoys pneumatic bliss with Montana Wildhack, is certainly preferable to a world of Nazi death camps and Dresden firebombings. The small miracle of *Slaughterhouse-Five* is that it could be composed at all. Vonnegut always writes from the survivor's stance, where all laughter has to be a step away from madness or fury. So indeed it goes.

Somewhere in the book, the Tralfamadorians tell Billy Pilgrim that their flying-saucer crews had verified the presence of seven sexes on Earth, all of them necessary if babies are to go on being born. I think that is one of the useful moral observations I will keep in mind whenever I recall *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

WILLIAM RODNEY ALLEN

Slaughterhouse-Five

Nearly a quarter of a century passed between the night Kurt Vonnegut survived the firebombing of Dresden in World War II and the publication of his fictionalized account of that event, *Slaughterhouse-Five*. As Vonnegut says, "It seemed a categorical imperative that I write about Dresden, the firebombing of Dresden, since it was the largest massacre in the history of Europe and I am a person of European extraction and I, a writer, had been present. I *had* to say something about it."[1] But the problem was, as Vonnegut remarks in the novel itself, "There is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre."[2] Consequently he was frustrated in his early attempts to tell the single story he felt he had to tell: "I came home in 1945, started writing about it, and wrote about it, and *wrote about it*, and WROTE ABOUT IT. . . . The book is a process of twenty years of this sort of living with Dresden and the aftermath."[3] Precisely because the story was so hard to tell, and because Vonnegut was willing to take the two decades necessary to tell it—to speak the unspeakable—*Slaughterhouse-Five* is a great novel, a masterpiece sure to remain a permanent part of American literature.

The story of Dresden was a hard one for an American to tell for a simple reason: it was designed by the Allies to kill as many German civilians as possible, and it was staggeringly successful in achieving that aim. Because the government rebuffed his attempts shortly after the war to obtain information

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From *Understanding Kurt Vonnegut,* pp. 77–100.

about the Dresden bombing, saying only that it was classified, it took Vonnegut years to realize the scale of the destruction of life on the night of February 13, 1945. What he eventually learned was that, by the most conservative estimates, 135,000 people died in the raid—far more than were killed by either of the atomic bombs the United States dropped later that year on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Vonnegut was not killed himself in the attack by purest chance: he and a few other American POWs and their guards had available to them perhaps the only effective bomb shelter in the city, a meat locker two stories underground. They and only a handful of others survived the attack. This massive destruction of life was achieved by a technological breakthrough of sorts—the combination of two kinds of bombs that produced far greater devastation than either could have alone. As Vonnegut explained in an interview:

> They went over with high explosives first to loosen things up, and then scattered incendiaries. When the war started, incendiaries were fairly sizeable, about as long as a shoebox. By the time Dresden got it, they were tiny little things. They burnt the whole damn town down. . . . A fire storm is an amazing thing. It doesn't occur in nature. It's fed by the tornadoes that occur in the midst of it and there isn't a damned thing to breathe. . . . It was a fancy thing to see, a startling thing. It was a moment of truth, too, because American civilians and ground troops didn't know American bombers were engaged in saturation bombing.[4]

In another interview he said, "When we went into the war, we felt our Government was a respecter of life, careful about not injuring civilians and that sort of thing. Well, Dresden had no tactical value; it was a city of civilians. Yet the Allies bombed it until it burned and melted. And then they lied about it. All that was startling to us."[5]

Yet as crucial as Vonnegut's experience at Dresden was to his life and his fictional career, he has resisted the temptation to overdramatize it, to raise it to an apotheosis of the sort Hemingway did of his wounding in World War I at the Italian front. When asked if the events at Dresden changed him, Vonnegut replied, "No. I suppose you'd think so, because that's the cliché. The importance of Dresden in my life has been considerably exaggerated because my book about it became a best seller. If the book hadn't been a best seller, it would seem like a very minor experience in my life."[6] Dresden, then, was no road-to-Damascus-like conversion to a totally new way of thinking for Vonnegut; he was, after all, a young man convinced like most Americans of the necessity of destroying Nazism by whatever means necessary. The change came gradually, as a long process of thinking about the nature of war and

writing about it, at first unsuccessfully. Finally, Vonnegut was less affected by the actual experience of Dresden than he would be by the fame that came with the enormous popularity of his book on the subject.

As James Lundquist puts it, Vonnegut's task in writing the novel was somehow to bridge "the increasing gap between the horrors of life in the twentieth century and our imaginative ability to comprehend their full actuality."[7] Indeed, what *can* one say about the madness in our time of human beings slaughtering their fellow human beings—coldly, methodically, scientifically, in numbers heretofore inconceivable? In his book *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Paul Fussell says that World War I was such a shock to those who experienced it that the only response they found adequate to describe it in literature was a searing irony. One thinks of such literary products of the war as Wilfred Owen's "Dulce et Decorum Est," a poem contrasting the martial phrase from Cicero that it is "sweet and proper" to die for one's country with the grotesque, panic-stricken death of soldiers in a mustard gas attack. But if World War I was a shock with its machine guns, its heavy artillery, and its trench-warfare charges into no-man's land, what of the next war with its saturation bombings, its death camps, its atomic bombs? Like the post–World War I writers Vonnegut had to find a new way to convey the horror, a new form to reflect a new kind of consciousness. He used irony, to be sure, but he went further, by altering the fundamental processes of narration itself. More than a conventional reminiscence of war, *Slaughterhouse-Five* is an attempt to describe a new mode of perception that radically alters traditional conceptions of time and morality.

Put most simply, what Vonnegut says about time in the novel is that it does not necessarily "point" only in one direction, from past to future. As Lundquist observes, "The novel functions to reveal new viewpoints in somewhat the same way that the theory of relativity broke through the concepts of absolute space and time."[8] Twenty years after the publication of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, theoretical physicists like Stephen F. Hawking are becoming more convinced that there is no reason why under some circumstances the "arrow of time" might point from future to past rather than from past to future.[9] If such a reversal is possible, then the famous description in *Slaughterhouse-Five* of a backwards movie (in which air force planes suck up bombs into themselves from the ground and fly backwards to their bases, where soldiers unload the bombs and ship them back to the factories to be disassembled) might be more than a wistful fantasy of a peaceful world. Of course, Vonnegut is less interested in new theories in physics than he is in his characters' confrontations with a world that makes no sense in terms of their old ways of seeing it. Hence, rather than beginning his story by quoting Einstein, Vonnegut puts a particular person in a very particular situation: "Listen: Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time" (19).

But that striking opening sentence comes not in chapter 1 but in chapter 2. Chapter 1 consists of Vonnegut speaking in his own voice about the difficulties of writing *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Beginning with his 1966 introduction to the reissued *Mother Night*, Vonnegut had begun to speak more openly about himself and about the autobiographical connections underlying his writing. In the opening and closing chapters of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, however, he takes that process much further. By making the autobiographical "frame" of the novel part of the novel itself (rather than setting those sections apart as a preface and an afterword) Vonnegut, as Lundquist puts it, "conceptualizes his own life the way he later does Billy's, in terms of Tralfamadorian time theory. The structure of the chapter about writing the novel consequently prefigures the structure of the novel itself."[10] Vonnegut jumps from how he returned to Dresden in 1967 on a Guggenheim fellowship with his "old war buddy," Bernard V. O'Hare, to what it had been like to try to write about Dresden just after the war, to his first meeting after the war with O'Hare in Philadelphia, to his time teaching in the Writer's Workshop at the University of Iowa. Yet as Reed observes, "There is surprisingly little difficulty in following this seemingly disjointed narrative. The prologue [of] the first chapter, and the quick general guidelines to Billy's life in the second, provide the reader with a strong sense of direction from the outset."[11]

Perhaps most helpful is Vonnegut's discussion in chapter 1 of his failed attempts at writing a traditional narrative about Dresden—one with an Aristotelian beginning, middle, and end:

> As a trafficker in climaxes and thrills and characterization and wonderful dialogue and suspense and confrontations, I had outlined the Dresden story many times. The best outline I ever made, or anyway the prettiest one, was on the back of a roll of wallpaper.
>
> I used my daughter's crayons, a different color for each main character. One end of the wallpaper was the beginning of the story; and the other end was the end, and then there was all that middle part, which was the middle. And the blue line met the red line and then the yellow line, and the yellow line stopped because the character represented by the yellow line was dead. And so on. The destruction of Dresden was represented by a vertical band of orange cross-hatching, and all the lines that were still alive passed through it, came out the other side (4–5).

There are many reasons why such a traditional structure did not work for the novel Vonnegut wanted to write, but the principal one is that characters' lives, like those of real people, do not themselves proceed in one direction:

in reality one does as much "backward" traveling in time through memory as "forward" traveling in anticipation of the future. Thus while not identical with it, *Slaughterhouse-Five*'s narrative mode is allied with the stream-of-consciousness technique pioneered by Joyce and Faulkner, which seeks to reproduce the mind's simultaneous blending of the past through memory, the present through perception, and the future through anticipation. Vonnegut's own life, and Billy Pilgrim's, is characterized by an obsessive return to the past. Like Lot's wife in the Bible, mentioned at the end of chapter 1, Vonnegut could not help looking back, despite the danger of being turned metaphorically into a pillar of salt, into an emblem of the death that comes to those who cannot let go of the past. To get to the heart of the matter of Dresden, moreover, Vonnegut felt he had to let go of the writer's usual bag of chronological tricks—suspense and confrontations and climaxes—and proceed by a different logic toward the future of the novel form.

Thus Vonnegut gives away what would be the traditional climax of his book—the execution of Billy's friend Edgar Derby "for taking a teapot that wasn't his"—in the novel's first paragraph. Throughout the novel he intentionally deflates suspense by mentioning in advance the outcome of any conflict he creates. The readers learn early, for example, that Billy will be kidnapped and taken to the planet Tralfamadore in 1967, where he will learn of the very different ways the Tralfamadorians view the universe. He learns as well that Billy will be shot to death on February 13, 1976, by Paul Lazzaro, a paranoid sadist Billy had been captured with in the war. He even learns with Billy the ultimate fate of the universe: the Tralfamadorians will accidently blow it up while experimenting with a new type of rocket fuel. Thus, rather than being like a straight line, the narrative chronology of *Slaughterhouse-Five* is more like an ascending, widening spiral that circles over the same territory yet does so from an ever higher and wider perspective. Finally, like most science fiction writers, Vonnegut hopes to push the reader's perceptual horizon as far as he can toward infinity—toward the union of all time and all space. There mystery remains, even though suspense disappears, since suspense is a function of a lack of knowledge at a single point in time and space.

Paradoxically, in creating this cosmic, nonlinear narrative Vonnegut uses fragments of all sorts of traditional narrative forms, much as a bird might use twigs, bits of string, and its own feathers to construct a nest, something very different than the sum of its parts. As Richard Giannone observes, "Graffiti, war memos, anecdotes, jokes, song—light operatic and liturgical—raw statistics, assorted tableaux, flash before the readers eye."[12] The most important linear narrative underlying all of these is the Judeo-Christian Bible, which is itself a central motif in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. There time proceeds from the creation to man's fall to the birth, crucifixion, and resurrection of Christ to

the end of time with the Second Coming. Giannone suggests that the Gospels were "an amalgamation of language forms that were available to early Christians to spread their good tidings, rather than a fixed ideal shape sent down out of the blue. . . . [Yet] the old forms were inadequate to convey the momentous news, so primitive Christians made their own."[13] Thus Vonnegut tries in *Slaughterhouse-Five* to do what the Gospel writers attempted to do in their time: construct a new form out of the fragments of old forms.

That Vonnegut was conscious of doing so—that he found the Christian, linear vision of time no longer adequate—is apparent by his remarks in the novel on a book by Kilgore Trout called *The Gospel from Outer Space*. According to Trout, the traditional Gospels are flawed because they seem to suggest that the moral lesson one should learn from Jesus' crucifixion is: "*Before you kill somebody, make absolutely sure he isn't well connected*." In Trout's revised version of the story, rather than being the Son of God, "Jesus really *was* a nobody, and a pain in the neck to a lot of people with better connections than he had. He still got to say all the lovely and puzzling things he said in the other Gospels" (94). Yet when this nobody is crucified, the heavens open up with thunder and lightning, and God announces that he "will *punish horribly anybody who torments a bum who has no connections*" (95). In the course of the novel it becomes clear that the weak, hapless, clownishly dressed Billy Pilgrim is precisely this "bum who has no connections"—that he is in effect a sort of new Christ. Such observations as the fact that Billy lay "self-crucified" (69) on a brace in his German POW boxcar, or that Billy "resembled the Christ of the carol" (170) that Vonnegut takes as the novel's epigraph ("The cattle are lowing, / The baby awakes. / But the little Lord Jesus / No crying he makes.") make clear that this identification of Billy as a Christ-figure is Vonnegut's conscious intention.

Like Christ, Billy brings a new message to the world, although it is a very different one from his predecessor's. And like Jesus he is an innocent who accepts his death, at the hands of an enemy who reviles and misunderstands him, as an opportunity to teach mankind the proper response to mortality. Both Billy and Jesus teach that one should face death calmly, because death is not the end. In the Christian vision the self after death proceeds forward in time eternally, either in heaven or hell; for Billy, however, "after" death the soul proceeds backward in time, back into life. As Billy learns from the Tralfamadorians,

> When a person dies he only appears to die. He is still very much alive in the past, so it is very silly for people to cry at this funeral. All moments, past, present, and future, always have existed, always will exist. The Tralfamadorians can look at all the different moments

> just the way we can look at a stretch of the Rocky Mountains, for instance. They can see how permanent all the moments are, and they can look at any moment that interests them. It is just an illusion we have here on Earth that one moment follows another one, like beads on a string, and that once a moment is gone it is gone forever (23).

Thus Billy, the new Christ, preaches that human beings do have eternal life—even if there is no life after death. The literary consequence of the Tralfamadorian conception of time is the Tralfamadorian novel, which consists of "brief clumps of symbols read simultaneously." As the Tralfamadorians tell Billy, these symbols, or messages, when seen all at once "produce an image of life that is beautiful and surprising and deep. There is no beginning, no middle, no end, no suspense, no moral, no causes, no effects" (76). *Slaughterhouse-Five* is of course itself an attempt to write this sort of book, as Vonnegut announces in his subtitle: "This is a novel somewhat in the telegraphic schizophrenic manner of tales of the planet Tralfamadore." While human beings cannot read all the passages of the book simultaneously, its short length, its scrambled chronology, its deft juxtapositionings of different times to make thematic points, and its intricate patterns of imagery all combine to give the reader something of that effect. Once he finishes the novel—after a few hours, perhaps in one sitting—the reader can visualize all of Billy's moments stretched out before him like the Rocky Mountains; further, he can see the author's life in the same way, all the way from World War II to the assassination of Robert Kennedy in 1968, when Vonnegut was composing the last pages of *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

Yet while the novel boldly attempts to do away with traditional chronological narration on one level, it still gives the reader a story that builds toward the bombing of Dresden, which is recounted in greatest detail late in the book. Rather than being a traditional novel or a purely experimental, "Tralfamadorian" novel, *Slaughterhouse-Five* is more like one superimposed on the other. One can easily follow the traditional *Bildungsroman* of Billy's life. Born in 1922, like his creator, he endured a childhood marked by intense fears—of drowning when his father subjected him to the "sink or swim method," of falling into the Grand Canyon on a family trip, of the total darkness when the guides extinguished the lights in Carlsbad Caverns. These early images have great relevance for Billy's fear and ineptitude in the war and afterward. His refusal to try to swim and consequent passive sinking to the bottom of the pool is a symbolic wish to return to the safety of the womb. Billy falls constantly in the novel—into ditches, from boxcars, from the sky in a plane crash—despite his intense fear of falling epitomized by his Grand Canyon

experience. Finally, the darkness in Carlsbad Caverns prefigures that in the meat locker two stories underground in Dresden—the most important symbolic womb into which Billy retreats for safety. One of the many ironies of the book is that such a passive person should be one of the few to survive the destruction of the city. As Vonnegut says simply of his hero, "He was unenthusiastic about living" (52).

After this shaky childhood Billy attends college for only a few weeks before going off to war as an unarmed chaplains assistant. In no time he is captured, along with a hapless tank gunner named Roland Weary, in the Battle of the Bulge, the last great German counteroffensive of the war. Freezing in inadequate clothing, hungry, frightened out of his wits, Billy becomes "unstuck in time" for the first time, finding himself living moments out of his past or his future. Weary dies in transit to the POW camp of gangrene of the feet, which he had claimed was caused when the time-tripping Billy abstractedly stepped on him. Before he dies, Weary tells his story to Paul Lazzaro, who vows to avenge Weary's death by tracking Billy down after the war and killing him. Lazzaro is an emblem of the fact that a soldier can never really escape his war experiences—that they will always "track him down" even years later. In the POW camp the dispirited group of Americans is greeted by some hale and hearty Englishmen who have been there most of the war, growing healthy on good Red Cross food (sent by mistake in excessive amounts), exercise, and English optimism. They are the opposite of Billy, the fatalistic, disheveled weakling who simply drifts from one disaster to the next in helpless resignation. After a falling out with the Englishmen over personal hygiene and philosophical attitudes, the Americans are sent to Dresden, a supposedly "open" city, where they soon have their rendezvous with the most significant day in the city's history, February 13, 1945.

After the war Billy does far better than one would expect, since he becomes an optometrist, marries the boss's daughter, and is soon driving a Cadillac, living in an all-electric home, and pulling in over $60,000 a year. But the thematic reason Vonnegut makes Billy so successful is perhaps more important than the slight problem of verisimilitude: Vonnegut wants to show that all Billy's material comforts—his magic fingers bed, the expensive jewelry he gives Valencia, his wife, his fancy car (which will be the cause of his wife's death)—can do nothing to smooth over the pain of what he has experienced. Shortly after the war Billy had checked himself into a mental hospital, where he received shock treatments for depression. Today his problem would be called posttraumatic stress syndrome. Late in the novel, as he feels agony while listening to a barbershop quartet sing "That Old Gang of Mine" at a party celebrating his wedding anniversary, Billy realizes that "he had a great big secret somewhere inside," even though "he could not imagine what it

was" (149). His secret is of course the awareness of the horrors of war and the certainty of death—an awareness the frantic materialism of postwar America was desperately trying to cover up.

The cracks in the American dream show through Billy's apparently successful postwar life. Valencia is a parody of consumerism, since she constantly consumes candy bars while making empty promises to lose weight in order to please Billy sexually. Billy's son appears to be headed for jail as a teenager before he joins the Green Berets and goes off to fight in Vietnam. On his way to the office Billy stops at a traffic light in a burned-out ghetto area and drives away when a black man tries to talk with him. Vonnegut was obviously responding to the incredible social tensions of the late 1960s, which saw the burning of major portions of several American cities in race riots, the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert Kennedy, and the seemingly endless acceleration of the war in Vietnam. A major reason *Slaughterhouse-Five* had the enormous impact it did was because it was published at the height of the conflict in Vietnam, and so delivered its antiwar message to a most receptive audience. In a book of powerful passages, there is no more powerful one than this at the end of the novel, in Vonnegut's autobiographical chapter 10: "Robert Kennedy, whose summer home is eight miles from the home I live in all year round, was shot two nights ago. He died last night" (182). One of Robert Kennedy's promises in his presidential campaign was to stop the war, and when he died that hope seemed to die with him. For Vonnegut, and for Billy, it must have seemed that Dresden was happening all over again in Vietnam.

In 1967, on the night of his daughter's wedding, Billy is picked up by a flying saucer and taken in a time warp to Tralfamadore, where he is displayed in a sort of Tralfamadorian zoo by his abductors. Since Billy had not been very happy on earth, he finds that during his stay of several years (in terms of Tralfamadorian time, not Earth time) he is "about as happy as I was on Earth" (98). His happiness is increased when the Tralfamadorians kidnap a sexy movie actress, Montana Wildhack, and bring her to the zoo as Billy's "mate." So while Billy enjoys sexual bliss for the first time with the willing Ms. Wildhack, he gets instruction from the Tralfamadorians on the true nature of the universe. Billy and Montana appear as a sort of new Adam and Eve, who live in the confines of a perfect world, until Billy eats of the tree of knowledge, in effect, by learning the true nature of time and the place of conscious beings in the universe. He is expelled from his symbolic garden when the Tralfamadorians (for unexplained reasons) send him back to Earth. An enlightened Billy then begins his mission of preaching his new gospel to his fellowmen—who are understandably skeptical about his claims.

Vonnegut leaves room for the idea that Billy's trip to Tralfamadore is all in Billy's mind. This sort of "escape hatch" from fantasy into realism is charac-

teristic of the sci-fi genre: in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Author's Court* Twain has his hero receive a blow on the head and probably dream the novel's events. In *Slaughterhouse-Five* Billy had been in a mental hospital and received shock treatments. During his stay there he had met Eliot Rosewater, who makes a cameo appearance from Vonnegut's previous novel in order to introduce Billy to the sci-fi works of Kilgore Trout. One of the novels Billy reads, *The Big Board*, concerns an Earth couple kidnapped by aliens and displayed on their planet in a zoo. An event in 1968, moreover, suggests a physical explanation for the Tralfamadorian episodes: Billy survives a plane crash on the way to an optometrists' convention that kills everyone else and leaves him with a serious head injury. In chapter 1 of the novel Vonnegut mentions the French writer Céline, who had received a head wound fighting in World War I, and who had thereafter heard voices and had written his death-obsessed novels during his sleepless nights. Like Billy, Céline too was obsessed with time: Billy's Tralfamadore experience may be seen as the equivalent of Céline's—and Vonnegut's—attempts to deal with the problem of mortality through writing fiction. As Vonnegut observes of Rosewater and Billy, "They had both found life meaningless, partly because of what they had seen in war. . . . So they were trying to re-invent themselves and their universe. Science fiction was a big help" (87).

Billy's trip to Tralfamadore, then, finally begins to look more like a metaphor than a literal description of events. His space travel is simply a way for Vonnegut to describe the growth of his own imagination out of the Christian, linear vision of time to the cosmic perspective of time as the fourth dimension. This is not to say, however, that Vonnegut offers the Tralfamadorian *attitudes* toward that vision as final truth. Tralfamadorians—"real" or imagined—are not human beings, so that their attitude of absolute indifference toward the terrors of the universe—even to the ultimate terror of its annihilation—could never work for humans. If *Slaughterhouse-Five* is a combination of the traditional narrative and the Tralfamadorian novel, it is also a synthesis of Christian and Tralfamadorian morals: the reader is not so much urged to choose the latter over the former as to superimpose the two. When Billy passionately implores the Tralfamadorians to tell him how they live in peace, so that he can return to give that knowledge to Earth, his hosts reply that war and peace come and go at random on Tralfamadore as they do everywhere else. Their response to any frustration on Billy's part—to his profoundly human need—to know why—is simply that "there is no *why*" (66). When Billy wonders why the universe must blow up, they respond that "the moment is structured that way." The Tralfamadorians claim that "only on Earth is there any talk of free will" (74). Such profound indifference could never suffice for human beings, nor does Vonnegut imply that it should.

Slaughterhouse-Five is built on the paradox that it appears to offer acceptance and even indifference as responses to the horrors of the twentieth century, when in fact it is a moving lament over those horrors—a piercing wail of grief over the millions of dead in World War II. Emblematic of this paradox is a short phrase from the novel that has become probably the best-known and most often repeated by his readers of any in Vonnegut's work: "So it goes." In *Palm Sunday* Vonnegut explains that the phrase was his response to his reading of Céline's *Journey to the End of Night*: "It was a clumsy way of saying what Céline managed to imply . . . in everything he wrote, in effect: 'Death and suffering can't matter nearly as much as I think they do. Since they are so common, my taking them so seriously must mean that I am insane.'"[14] Every time someone dies in the novel—from Wild Bob to Valencia to Billy Pilgrim himself to Robert Kennedy—Vonnegut repeats "So it goes." Once this pattern is established, Vonnegut has fun with it, as when he has Billy pick up a bottle of flat champagne after his daughter's wedding: "The champagne was dead. So it goes" (63). Thus the phrase finally embodies all the essential attitudes toward death in the novel—acceptance, sorrow, humor, outrage. If at times "So it goes" reads like a resigned "Let it be," it more often comes through as the reverse: "Let it be *different*—let all these dead live!" So Vonnegut does let them live, in effect, by positing the Tralfamadorian idea that thy are always alive in their pasts.

Despite its mask of Tralfamadorian indifference *Slaughterhouse-Five* conveys at times an almost childlike sense of shock that the world is such a violent place. Children form an important motif in the book, which is subtitled "The Children's Crusade." Vonnegut had chosen that ironic phrase as a way to reassure Mary O'Hare, Bernard's wife, that he was not going to portray war as a glamorous affair fought by "Frank Sinatra and John Wayne or some of those other glamorous war-loving, dirty old men" (13). When the British POWs, after several years in captivity, see Billy and the other recently captured Americans, they confess that "we had forgotten that wars were fought by babies" (91). Before recounting the bombing of Dresden, Billy and his young German guard see a group of adolescent girls taking a shower. They are "utterly beautiful" (137). Yet when the bombs begin to fall, Vonnegut records that "the girls that Billy had seen naked were all being killed. . . . So it goes" (152).

But *Slaughterhouse-Five* does not stop with the pathos of innocent children being killed. It refuses to be a self-satisfied antiwar book like, say, *Johnny Got His Gun*. While conveying a sense of outrage, horror, regret, and even despair over the insanity of war, Vonnegut does not think that stopping war is a realistic possibility or that, if it were, this would end the pain of the human condition. In chapter 1, when talking about his Dresden project to a movie

producer, Vonnegut had gotten the response, "'Why don't you write an anti-glacier book instead?' What he meant, of course, was that there would always be wars, that they were as easy to stop as glaciers. I believe that, too" (3). Even more significant is Vonnegut's admission that "if wars didn't keep coming like glaciers, there would still be plain old death" (3). Finally, while Vonnegut accepts war and death as inevitable, he refuses to endorse the sentimentalized, childlike attitude of acceptance of the inevitable epitomized in the prayer hanging on *Billy's* office wall and inside a locket on a chain hanging around Montana Wildhack's neck: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom always to tell the difference" (52, 181). As Vonnegut observes, "Among the things Billy Pilgrim could not change were the past, the present, and the future" (52). Dresden has happened, is happening, and will always happen.

Yet if the war is always going on, it is always ending, too. Life comes out of death, as surely as Billy survives the bombing of Dresden in a slaughterhouse. In chapter 1 Vonnegut describes the end of the war, when thousands of POWs of all nationalities were gathered in a beetfield by the Elbe River. This moment of liberation of the soldiers of all countries would grow for twenty years in Vonnegut's mind until it became the central image in *Bluebeard*, his most recent novel. The last sound in *Slaughterhouse-Five* is not that of bombs falling, but of a bird chirping just after the war: "*Poo-Tee-weet?*" By making the chirp a question Vonnegut seems to ask all the survivors of the war, "Despite everything, would you like to try again?"

Reed speaks for most critics of Vonnegut's writing when he says, that "*Slaughterhouse-Five* remains a remarkably successful novel . . . [that] neither falters from, nor sensationalizes the horrors it depicts, and tenaciously avoids pedantic or moralistic commentary; no small achievement given the subject matter and the author's personal closeness to it."[15] Vonnegut was indeed close to the events of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, but it took him nearly a quarter of a century to get far enough away from them in time to have the proper perspective. The authority of that perspective perhaps most forcefully rings through the simple phrase Billy utters about Dresden near the novel's end: lying in his hospital bed after his plane crash, listening to Bertrand Rumfoord belittle the "bleeding hearts" who would mourn the loss of innocent life in the Allied firebombings, Billy responds: "I was there" (165). Finally, *Slaughterhouse-Five* gains its power not as an act of moralizing, but of witness.

Notes

1. *Conversations with Kurt Vonnegut*, ed. William Rodney Allen (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1988) 230. Hereafter *CKV*.

2. *Slaughterhouse-Five* (New York: Delacorte/Lawrence, 1969) 17. Subsequent references are noted parenthetically.

3. *CKV* 163.
4. *CKV* 173–74.
5. *CKV* 95.
6. *CKV* 94.
7. James Lundquist, *Kurt Vonnegut* (New York: Ungar, 1976) 69.
8. Lundquist 71.
9. Stephen F. Hawking, A *Brief History of Time* (New York: Bantam, 1988).
10. Lundquist 75.
11. Peter J. Reed, *Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.* (New York: Warner, 1972) 179.
12. Richard Giannone, *Vonnegut: A Preface to His Novels* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1977) 84.
13. Giannone 85–86.
14. *Palm Sunday* (New York: Delacorte/Lawrence, 1981) 296.
15. Reed 203.

PETER FREESE

Kurt Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse-Five *or, How to Storify an Atrocity*

During the night of February 13, 1945, three waves of British and American bombers dropped about 3,000 tons of bombs, mostly incendiaries, upon the residential center of Dresden, a virtually undefended city with at best a marginal strategic significance. In this night, the ancient capital of Saxony was filled to overflowing, since to its 630,000 permanent residents were added about 30,000 prisoners of war of diverse nationalities and at least 600,000 refugees fleeing from the advancing Red Army, who had neither a proper home nor a chance to seek the protection of an air-raid shelter. With their attack, the Allied Forces staged an unprecedented spectacle of annihilation, which turned an overcrowded city into "one big flame [that] ate everything organic, everything that would burn" (178)[1] and exterminated about 135,000 helpless civilians within the space of 14 hours and ten minutes.

A young man who survived this "greatest massacre in European history" (101) and saw how a raging firestorm changed "the loveliest city" (148) into a smouldering moonscape and killed almost twice as many victims as the atomic bomb dropped upon Hiroshima,[2] was the American POW Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. It took him "twenty-three years" (2) and several apocalyptic novels[3] to exorcise this traumatic encounter with what Lifton aptly defined as "the increasing gap we face between our technological capacity for perpetrating atrocities and our imaginative ability to confront their full actual-

From *Historiographic Metafiction in Modern American and Canadian Literature*, edited by Bernd Engler and Kurt Müller, pp. 209–22.

ity."[4] The eventual result of Vonnegut's attempt to come to terms with his Dresden experience was his "anti-war book" (3) *Slaughterhouse-Five, or The Children's Crusade* (1969), of which he says it was "a therapeutic thing" and made him "a different person."[5] The painful gestation of this unique novel can hardly surprise, since any writer who tries to reconstruct a historical atrocity of such unimaginable proportions by means of traditional fictional strategies, that is, by storifying the event through an individual narrative perspective, is bound to fail, for the sheer number of casualties transcends the limits of personal empathy. A historical novel about the destruction of Dresden, therefore, is not only beset by the genre-specific problems of recreating the past through the epistemological limitations of the present, but also defeated by the very limits of the human imagination. This is why Vonnegut has to resort to unheard-of narrative strategies and why *Slaughterhouse-Five* is a tale that defies all generic classifications and introduces strange new ways of dealing with the grievous lessons of history.

Vonnegut's "Dresden a story" (5) is a slim novel consisting of ten chapters that vary greatly in length and seem to be rather arbitrarily divided. The first and the last chapter function as a narrative frame and offer a built-in manual of instruction for the puzzled reader. In the opening chapter; Vonnegut concatenates seemingly irrelevant autobiographical fragments in what appears to be a wilfully random way and reports on the extreme difficulties he had in writing his book. Here, then, he follows a well-worn strategy of modernist fiction by making the difficult genesis of the text a part of it. In the concluding chapter he pursues a different strategy; he mixes episodes from his own life with passages about his protagonist's adventures, concluding the text with the latter's journey through the smoking remnants of Dresden. The narrative frame is not fully closed, for the inset narration juts out beyond it and the text that opens in the factual world ends on a fictional plane. Not only is the traditional technique of the frame tale irritatingly modified, but Vonnegut also intrudes quite unabashedly as an actor or witness into the inset story and thereby contributes once more to the bewildering blending of two narrative strands with different degrees of 'reality' and of two time levels which convention demands should be clearly distinguished, namely those of the narrated action and the narrative process. Twice a particular event is authenticated by a sudden "I was there" (67; 212); when a prisoner exclaims "Oz" upon his first sight of beautiful Dresden, this is followed by an unexpected "that was I" (148); and when a sick POW wails that he has excreted everything but his brain, one reads "That was I. That was me. That was the author of this book" (125).

These sudden illusion-breaking intrusions are not the only proof of the pervasive presence of a constantly manipulating narrator. The laconic refrain

"So it goes," that punctuates the text in more than a 100 instances, keeps the reader steadily aware that the text is the highly subjective product of a troubled mind at work behind it, and when new characters are introduced, the perspective leaves the protagonist's *persona* and switches to an Olympian point of view. Moreover, Vonnegut reveals his presence through sweeping value judgments such as "Like so many Americans, she was trying to construct a life that made sense from things she found in gift shops" (39), and he betrays his ironic distance through irreverent comments, as when he observes that the diarrhea of the coughing prisoners is "in accordance with the Third Law of Motion according to Sir Isaac Newton" (80). In statements like that about Billy finding himself once more engaged "in the argument with his daughter, with which this tale began" (165), he explains his narrative procedures, and in observations like "there are almost no characters in this story, and almost no dramatic confrontations, because most of the people in it are so sick" (164) he reflects upon the problems he faces in storifying his intractable *sujet*. Taken together, his bewildering blending of fact and fiction, his disturbing mixture of different time levels, his illusion-breaking intrusions, his deft manipulation of the point of view, his sweeping value judgments and biting comments, his careful explanations and bothered reflections make the narrator a mediating instance that is insistently present between the protagonist and the reader, prevents the latter's identification with the former, and makes the customary quasi-pragmatic reception of the novel impossible.

Vonnegut fictionalizes his Dresden experience by making a piteous optician from Ilium, New York, the protagonist of his novel, and when he christens this anti-hero Billy Pilgrim, he evokes Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* and insinuates that Billy is a contemporary Everyman on his burdensome journey through an earthly valley of tears. Like his creator, Billy was born in 1922, and he will be murdered in Chicago on February 13, 1976, seven years after the publication of the novel and on the anniversary of the Dresden firestorm. This preposterous and grotesquely passive man, who is otherwise a very ordinary being, is "unstuck in time" (23) and thus possesses the extraordinary ability to travel into the past and the future and to spend time on the extragalactic planet Tralfamadore. Since Wells's *The Time Machine*, the motif of time-travel is a stock-in-trade element of science fiction, but to conservative readers its irreverent application to a historical subject as serious as the Dresden massacre must seem glaringly inappropriate. However, this violation of generic conventions in a self-reflexive tale that blends autobiography with realistic narration, satirical exaggeration, and "science fiction of an obviously kidding sort"[6] is by no means the only problem, since it is impossible to decide whether Billy really travels in time or only hallucinates his extragalactic journeys, whether *Slaughterhouse-Five* is a science-fiction novel or a

novel with a mentally disturbed protagonist who is haunted by science-fiction fantasies.

On the one hand, the narrator insists on the 'reality' of Billy's time-travels through such statements as "Billy Pilgrim was having a delightful hallucination. [. . .] This wasn't time-travel. It had never happened, never would happen." (49) or "Billy [. . .] dreamed millions of things, some of them true. The true things were time-travel" (157). On the other hand, Billy experiences war and captivity as an unbearable ordeal, suffers a first crack-up in the prison camp and another "nervous breakdown" (24) as a student, is the only heavily injured survivor of an airplane crash, and loses his wife in a freakish incident. Released from hospital with "a terrible scar across the top of his skull" (25); he is "quiet for a while" (25) and then all of a sudden begins to spread his Tralfamadorian gospel. This sounds suspiciously like the biography of a man who develops schizophrenia as what Laing calls "a special strategy [invented] in order to live in an unlivable situation,"[7] and such a reading seems confirmed by the fact that after his return from Dresden Billy spends some time in a mental hospital, where a fellow patient, Eliot Rosewater, the mad protagonist of Vonnegut's previous novel *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, introduces him to the work of the science-fiction writer Kilgore Trout and makes him read *The Big Board*, a novel that lays out the scenario of his later adventures on Tralfamadore. Thus *Slaughterhouse-Five* leaves it vexingly open whether it is Vonnegut—who uses science-fiction strategies to distance the terror of Dresden—or Billy who employs them to flee into a more hospitable fantasy world. But by pointing out that Eliot Rosewater and Billy Pilgrim "were trying to re-invent themselves and their universe" and that in this attempt "science fiction was a big help" (101), the text provides the crucial *raison d'être* for linking the Dresden firestorm with science-fiction motifs.

Vonnegut employs the science-fiction level of his tale as one of several generic conventions through which to search for the meaning of the Dresden massacre. The puzzling interplay of these conventions, which are both realistic and fantastic, mimetic and anti-mimetic, not only serves as the formal equivalent of the insight that an atrocity like the Dresden firestorm defies any traditional storification, but it also abolishes the customary distinction between fiction and historiography. *Slaughterhouse-Five* shows that the difference between the historian's discovery of pre-existing realities and the novelist's invention of homemade stories is not one of principle but one of accentuation only, since historiography, too, "prefigures the historical field and constitutes it as a domain upon which to bring to bear the specific theories [it] will use to explain 'what was really happening in it.'"[8] And Vonnegut is in a privileged position to drive home this decisive point, for he is a German-American who suffered from anti-German sentiments as a Cornell student

and then survived the destruction of Dresden by the Allies as an American soldier in German captivity and thus cannot but assume a mediating stance, which the text emplots by presenting Billy and his German guard, the *luck*less Werner *Gluck*, as "distant cousins" (156). This is why Vonnegut, who approaches the destruction of Dresden from the points of view of both the victims and the victimizers, is immune against rashly taking sides and can unmask the official versions of the Dresden massacre as nothing but predictable and prejudiced fictions. In the introductory chapter, Vonnegut recalls with deceptive simplicity:

> I happened to tell a University of Chicago professor at a cocktail party about the raid as I had seen it, about the book I would write. He was a member of a thing called The Committee on Social Thought. And he told me about the concentration camps, and about how the Germans had made soap and candles out of the fat dead Jews and so on.
>
> All I could say was, "I know, I know, I know." (10)

In the novel proper Billy Pilgrim experiences exactly the same situation, when after his airplane crash he shares a hospital room with Bertram Copeland Rumfoord. This prototypically 'successful' American is a famous "Harvard history professor" (183) at work on "a one-volume history of the United States Army Air Corps in World War Two" (183f.), and between him and Billy the following dialogue ensues:

> "It *had* to be done," Rumfoord told Billy, speaking of the destruction of Dresden.
>
> "I know," said Billy.
>
> "That's war."
>
> "I know. I'm not complaining."
>
> "It must have been hell on the ground."
>
> "It was," said Billy Pilgrim.
>
> "Pity the men who had to *do* it."
>
> "I do.
>
> "You must have had mixed feelings, there on the ground."
>
> "It was all right," said Billy. (198)

These two scenes clearly show that every version of the past is conditioned by the needs and values of the person who holds it, but Vonnegut is not yet satisfied. He makes Rumfoord acquaint Billy with President Truman's announcement of the Hiroshima bomb and Irving's book about *The Destruc-*

tion of Dresden, and by lengthily quoting from these factual documents about massive air raids within his fictional recreation of the most murderous one, he further underscores his point. Truman's callous statement that "the force from which the sun draws its power has been loosed against those who brought war to the Far East" (185) and that thus the victims of Pearl Harbor have rightfully retaliated by killing "71,379" (188) Japanese civilians; Lieutenant General Eaker's incensed admonition that, in drawing the frightful picture of the civilians killed in Dresden, Irving should have remembered "that V-1's and V-2's were at the very time falling on England, killing civilian men, women, and children indiscriminately" (187); and Air Marshal Saundby's embarrassed admission that the "great tragedy" of Dresden was "one of those terrible things that sometimes happen in wartime, brought about by an unfortunate combination of circumstances" (187) are all revealing rationalizations of mass murder. They range from the claim for moral superiority through the insistence on rightful revenge to the admission of logistic mistakes, and Eaker's version even insinuates that one can balance one atrocity against another and thus expiate guilt by mutual neutralization. This exercise in inhuman book-keeping is as ludicrous as the fact that "the twenty-seven-volume *Official History of the Army Air Force in World War Two*" contains "almost nothing [. . .] about the Dresden raid," because "the extent of the success had been kept a secret for many years after the war—a secret from the American people. It was no secret from the Germans, of course" (191). The intra-textual confrontation of these official documents with Vonnegut's factual experience and Billy's fictional adventure convincingly demonstrates that 'fictions' are not at all limited to the realm of *belles lettres*, and it makes the puzzled reader muse with Richard Nixon in Robert Coover's *The Public Burning*: "Strange, the impact of History, the grip it had on us, yet it was nothing but, words."[9]

Billy Pilgrim has no mastery over his time-travels and thus "no control over where he is going next" (23), and he experiences the 54 years of his life in a discontinuous and seemingly random sequence. Since the novel follows the erratic sequence of Billy's life as a "spastic in time" (23), it liberates Vonnegut from the strictures of a linear plot and a logically unfolding chronology and allows him to unfold his tale in a "telegraphic-schizophrenic manner" (subtitle) by relating short experiential fragments like the pieces of a faultily assembled puzzle. On closer scrutiny, however, what seems like wilful disorder is revealed as a carefully designed texture, and readers who are conversant with the cinematographic techniques of hard cuts, associative fades, and artful montage, can impose order upon the narrative contingency through a process of sense-making co-authoring. In doing so, they not only detect an artfully executed deep structure, but also recognize that Vonnegut employs his unusual mode of presentation for the urgent purpose of escaping

the yoke of narrative succession. But in contrast to his modernist predecessors, who experimented with similar means to manipulate the unfolding of psychological time only, Vonnegut maintains that chronological time, too, must not be treated as "the straight and uniform string of beads most people think it is," because "we do live our lives simultaneously."[10] Consequently, he uses the science-fiction motif of time-travel to break up not only the subjective experience but also the objective measurement of time and thereby to spatialize his tale. This allows him to achieve three goals at once, namely, to relativize the official versions of a historical event by reconstructing it from an idiosyncratic point of view, to thematize contemporary problems through a subjective consciousness, and to extrapolate the possibilities of tomorrow from the potential of today. Consequently, his innovative tale is not only a self-reflexive inquiry into the impossibility of writing a historical novel,[11] but it also demonstrates, through an artful interplay of its three levels, that both James Baldwin and E. L. Doctorow were right when they maintained that "the past is all that makes the present coherent"[12] and that "there is no history except as it is composed."[13]

As a tale that abolishes the customary distinction between fact and fiction and violates generic conventions as well as established rules of narration, *Slaughterhouse-Five* asks the reader to perform a rather demanding task. Since Vonnegut is well aware that literature "requires the audience to be a performer" and that therefore "the limiting factor is the reader,"[14] he provides detailed directions for use, and he does so in the introductory chapter, which is not the rambling melange of odd bits and pieces it seems to be, but an artful collage of literary quotations and autobiographical fragments that have subtle thematic relevance and serve as cryptic pointers at things to come. Among these elements are a postcard from the Dresden cab driver Gerhard Müller, a dirty limerick about "a young man from Stamboul" (2f.), a circular song about Yon Yonson, an unidentified quotation from Horace, *Odes* II:14:1f., a passage from Charles Mackay's *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds* of 1841, a paragraph from Mary Endell's *Dresden, History, Stage and Gallery* of 1908, a quotation within a quotation from Goethe's *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, three lines from Theodore Roethke's poem *Words for the Wind*, an observation from Ferdinand Céline's *Mort à Credit* as quoted from Erika Ostrovsky's *Céline and His Vision*, a passage from the Gideon Bible, namely Genesis 19:23–25, about the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and the first and last sentences of *Slaughterhouse-Five* as a self-reflexive quotation from the novel within the novel. This odd string of references violates another generic distinction by closing the customary gap between 'high' and 'low,' since 'serious' authors from Horace to Roethke are invoked side by side with a popular doggerel and a dirty limerick. And the sheer number of these

references attests to the importance of a narrative strategy that thrives on the blending of different discourses and that creates a multiply refracted intertextuality, which is further thickened by the fact that with Kilgore Trout, Eliot Rosewater, and Howard Campbell major characters from Vonnegut's earlier novels reappear and enlarge the referential horizon.

One would have to engage in a page-by-page reconstruction of Vonnegut's associative technique to reveal the cryptic functionality of these oddly self-reflexive references, but a single example must suffice to reveal the method behind the narrative madness and to illustrate the degree to which *Slaughterhouse-Five* is an imaginative re-processing of earlier discourses. When Roland Weary, who is certainly very weary but by no means a Roland, escapes from the unbearable reality of war into his private fantasy world of the Three Musketeers, he tells himself about the heroic deeds of these legendary heroes, and the whole passage turns out to be a word-by-word repetition of the earlier quotation from Mackay's book, in which he dilates upon the irrationality of the romantic literature about the Crusades. This subversive repetition plus variation exposes Weary's fantasies as a timeless human aberration, but Vonnegut is not content with this telling refraction. Therefore, he once more undercuts the patriotic heroism of the Three Musketeers by making a sensation-seeking secretary inquire about the gruesome death of a man while "eating a Three Musketeers Candy Bar" (9) and by having Billy's obese fiancee sit at the bedside of her broken-down lover and munch "a Three Musketeers Candy Bar" (107).

In more general terms, the metafictional strategies which the introductory chapter offers for a successful co-authoring of the inset story and an imaginative reconstruction of the meaning of history are the *regressus ad infinitum* as a narrative equivalent of epistemological doubt, the blurring between fact and fiction as an expression of ontological insecurity, and the cumulation of multiply cross-referenced repetitions as an indication of man's imprisonment in the ruling linguistic discourses. It is a 'postmodern' truism that serious storytellers can no longer depict a shared reality and thus are incapable of recreating a historic event 'as it really was.' Confronted with competing realities that depend upon the perceptions and value systems of their individual projectors, Vonnegut takes recourse to the science-fiction strategy of the Martian perspective and makes use of the opposition between Earthlings and Tralfamadorians to demonstrate the dubiousness of the ontological distinction between fact and fiction. Another consequence of such radical idealism, convincingly thematized in Borges' *ficciones*, is the discovery that there is no *prima causa*, that every cause of an effect is in turn the effect of a previous cause and that every author of a fictional character is himself a character in the fiction of a preceding author. Vonnegut's playful claim that "I myself am a work

of fiction"[15] and Billy's re-enactment of scenes from Kilgore Trout's *The Big Board* equally attest to this insight, and thus it is small wonder that *Slaughterhouse-Five* constitutes what John Barth dubbed "Another story about a writer writing a story! Another regressus in infinitum!"[16] The narrative game with instances of mediation that can be endlessly multiplied is introduced by the infinitely repeatable song about Yon Yonson and the self-reflexive network of quotations within quotations. These elements are the structural equivalents of the novel's overall message that each answer which man discovers in his painful search for meaning only leads to another question and that consequently not even an eyewitness account of the Dresden massacre can provide this historical event with any objective meaning, but has to be content with a resigned "So it goes."

The subtitle of *Slaughterhouse-Five* announces that it is "a novel," but its first sentence reads: "All of this happened, more or less" (1). This laconic statement constitutes a disturbing violation of traditional reader expectations and creates considerable ontological insecurity. And the following sentence—"The war parts, anyway, are pretty much true" (2)—only intensifies this insecurity and includes the venerable concept of poetic truth in the bewildering game with fact and fiction. Vonnegut says that as an eye-witness he had thought it would be easy to write his Dresden book, "since all I would have to do would be to report what I had seen" (2), but he admits that this expectation turned out to be completely wrong. Consequently, he discards the mimesis principle as no longer adequate, and his resigned characterizations of his novel as a "lousy little book" (2) and "a failure" (22) exemplify how a fictional context can relativize a factual statement. When the narrative proper begins with "Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time" (23), only to thrice qualify this statement by a skeptical "he says" (23), it not only insinuates that Billy exists also outside the text, but the unusual choice of a reporting instead of a narrating tense constitutes another disruption of reader expectations. These strategies are obviously meant to forestall an effect that was long taken for granted but is now unmasked as a momentous misunderstanding: any narrative reconstruction of a historical event cannot but proceed by selection and valuation and is thus by its very definition a sense-making endeavor. Therefore, a traditionally told novel about the destruction of Dresden would be in danger of providing the massacre with a meaning and of unwittingly contributing to a domestication of its horror. And it is this effect which Vonnegut does his very best to prevent, for his novel is meant to convey the opposite message, namely, that "there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre" (19).

The third strategy that helps to establish the carefully wrought pattern behind the surface disorder is the artful cumulation of repetitions in changing configurations. At first, the dirty limerick and the song about Yon Yonson

seem mere digressions, but the latter is integrated into the narrator's discourse when he refers to himself by saying "My name is Yon Yonson [. . .]" (7), and soon the referential texture is so firmly established that a serious reflection on human transitoriness can simply consist of a collage of new and previous references: "*Eheu, fugaces labuntur anni*. My name is Yon Yonson. There was a young man from Stamboul." (11) Gerhard Müller's Germanism "if the accident will" (2), which the author-narrator "like[s] very much" (2) and envisions as the title of a planned story, later turns out to be a centrally important comment on the contingency of human history. The curiously inappropriate comparison of the narrator's alcoholic breath with "mustard gas and roses" (4; 7), which is taken up when he thinks he can smell "mustard gas and roses" (73) through the telephone, achieves thematic significance when Billy experiences the mountains of corpses in Dresden as stinking "like roses and mustard gas" (214) and the smell becomes a metaphorical bracket between narrative present and narrated past, between Vonnegut and Billy Pilgrim. The definition of young soldiers as "foolish virgins" (14) proves literally true for Billy; the ironically misnamed Pope Innocent the Third's praise of the children who go on Crusades is subverted by Roethke's poem and ironically confirmed by Billy's behavior; and the questioning "Poo-tee-weet?" (19) of the birds assumes new meanings when it is taken up in different contexts. These and many other details from the introductory chapter gradually grow into carefully wrought chains of repetitions and variations, which not only provide the inset story with a meaningful texture but also remind the reader that Vonnegut is still haunted by the events which he makes his fictional protagonist go through.

The first chapter, however, not only establishes Vonnegut's innovative narrative strategies, but also thematizes the novel's essential concerns in an oblique way. These concerns are the fraudulent opposition between being and appearance, the ubiquity of human transitoriness and death, and the crucial alternative between either capitulating before life's inherent meaninglessness or attempting to discover and, if necessary, even to invent a meaning for it. With regard to the opposition between appearance and reality, which is already apparent in the uncertain status of Billy's time-travels, Vonnegut contrasts the notion of warfare as embodied by "Frank Sinatra and John Wayne or some of those other glamorous, war-loving, dirty old men" (14) in their mendacious Hollywood movies with his painfully different experience. Thus, he ironically subverts what the mass media disseminate as historical truth and reveals the patriotic discourse about heroism, comradeship and manly self-fulfillment as a variation of what Mackay, more than a hundred years earlier, had unmasked as *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds*. Vonnegut depicts Billy and his fellow soldiers as helpless and disoriented children, and he employs frequent cross-references to the medieval

children's crusade in order to debugle with terrible efficiency the widespread macho-images of heroic soldierhood. And since such images originate from the faulty values shared by societies, he once more makes use of the Tralfamadorians' pacifist perspective not only for satirically unmasking the mendacity of patriotic fervor and hero worship as well as the belief in progress and Social Darwinism, but also for bitingly exposing such social institutions as organized Christianity[17] and the American economic system.

Like many modern novels, *Slaughterhouse-Five* is essentially an exploration of the nature of time and death, and once again it is the first chapter that thematizes these notions and prepares for Billy's being "spastic in time" (23). From the fact that Vonnegut's wife "always has to know the time" (7) to his resigned remark that it is "always time to go" (12) and to his visit to the World's Fair exhibitions of "the past [. . .] according to the Ford Motor Company and Walt Disney [and] what the future would be like, according to General Motors" (18), and from the necessity of Earthlings "to believe whatever clocks said—and calendars" (20) to Vonnegut's useless "outline" of his novel "on the back of a roll of wallpaper" (5), the first chapter abounds in pertinent references. In the story proper this concern is taken up by Billy Pilgrim, an optician turned metaphysician who prescribes "corrective lenses for Earthling souls" (29), when he proclaims the Tralfamadorian gospel as based on a new perception of time. Thus Vonnegut's musing about "how wide [the present] was, how deep it was, how much was mine to keep" (18), is answered by Billy's assertion that "it is just an illusion we have here on Earth that one moment follows another one" (27). And the concern with human mortality, that makes all art a "dance with death" (21), is not only translated into ironically relevant actions when Billy in his flight from death by hostile bullets performs "involuntary dancing" (33) movements and leaves tracks in the snow that look like "diagrams in a book on ballroom dancing" (39), but it is also triumphantly overcome by the Tralfamadorian concept of death as "just violet light—and a hum" (43; 143), which is experienced only temporarily and resembles the pretense that soldiers are "theoretically dead" (31) in a maneuver.

Once more, then, the unusual structure of the novel, in which the linear succession of a chronologically unfolding plot is replaced by circular spatiality, is revealed as the formal equivalent of its contradictory message. And the structural daredevilry of Vonnegut's experiment becomes obvious when one compares the traditional outline for his book with a beginning, a middle, and an end, which he discards as useless, with the Tralfamadorian novels, in which a surprised Billy finds "no beginning, no middle; no end, no suspense, no moral, no causes, no effects" but simply "the depths of many marvelous moments seen all at one time" (88). Of course, the time-bound nature

of human language prevents a narrative that is just an atemporal "clump of symbols" (88), but within the given limits Vonnegut successfully discards the logical succession of beginning, middle, and end, does away with suspense by not only quoting the final line of his novel at its very beginning but by also prematurely disclosing that "the climax of the book will be the execution of poor old Edgard Derby" (4f.), disrupts any cause-and-effect sequence through the radical fragmentation of his fable, and refuses to provide his tale with a clearly recognizable moral. Thus, he turns his idiosyncratic tale into "a Duty-Dance with Death" (subtitle) and, in the process, elevates his fictional evocation of the Dresden firestorm into a philosophical inquiry into the conditions of human existence.

Both the ubiquitous discrepancy between appearance and reality and the ineluctability of human transitoriness point to the central concern of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, namely, the desperate quest for the meaning of a life that permits events as gruesome as the Dresden massacre. And this concern, too, is multiply thematized in the introductory chapter. The taxi-driver's formulation "if the accident will" (2) aptly diagnoses the contingency of human existence, and the quotations from Céline and Roethke point to modern literature's obsession with the transitoriness of life. Harrison Starr's claim that "there would always be wars" (3) highlights the impotence of reason, and Edgar Derby's execution illustrates the unbearable injustice of human systems of order. The ludicrous answer of the Air Force that details about the bombing of Dresden are "top secret still" (11) is a frightening exercise in illogicality, and Vonnegut's anthropological insight "that there was absolutely no difference between anybody" (8), is the very apogee of absurdity. In the story proper the quest for meaning is continued on the level of the surface action by repeated questions that range from Billy's bewildered "Why me?" (76) and the title of the propagandistic pamphlet "Why We Fight" (40) to an American POW's astonished "Why me?" (91) and the "Why?" (99) of Billy's dream about giraffes. But at the same time such questions are rejected as meaningless by the Tralfamadorians, who consider "free will" an illusion, smile about Earthlings as "the great explainers, explaining why this event is structured as it is, telling how other events may be achieved or avoided" (85), and flatly insist that "there is no why" (77). But in spite of the many similarities between Vonnegut and his protagonist, there is an easily overlooked but decisive difference. Implementing Vonnegut's admission that his novel has no real characters because they are all "so sick and so much the listless playthings of enormous forces" (164), Billy comes to the insight that "*everything* is all right, and everybody has to do exactly what he does" (198) and thus abandons the concepts of free will and individual responsibility in favor of a resigned fatalism. Vonnegut, however, draws a totally different conclusion from his Dresden experience, because he educates his sons

to be pacifists, constantly makes moral judgments, and is certainly "not overjoyed" (211) by the Tralfamadorian teachings. The very facts that he manages to write *Slaughterhouse-Five*, that, like Lot's wife, he is "so human" (22) that he looks back, and that he exhorts his readers to "listen" (22) to a tale which he admits to be "a failure" (22) testify to the difference between an actively protesting Vonnegut and his fatalistic protagonist and furnish the novel with an unresolved philosophical tension that confronts its readers with the task of re-examining their own positions and wresting their individual meaning from an incomprehensible world.

> This does not mean, however, that *Slaughterhouse-Five* indulges in cynical relativism. On the contrary, it keeps competing views of what happened in Dresden and why in a precarious and irritating balance by offering mutually incompatible explanations. In his "Address to the American Physical Society" (1969) Vonnegut says in no uncertain terms that "the Second World War was a war against pure evil. [. . .] Nothing was too horrible to do to any enemy that vile,"[18] but in his introduction to a new edition of *Mother Night* he frankly admits that "if I'd been born in Germany, I suppose I would have been a Nazi."[19] It is this unresolved tension that makes Billy, who is wracked by sudden crying fits, weep for both the guilt of the Allied perpetrators and for the guilt of the German victims who provoked the bombardment and that prevents the novel from offering some pat moral by accusing anyone in particular. Instead it evokes a spectrum of reactions that ranges from Billy's fatalistic notion that "everybody has to do exactly what he does" (198) and the disinterested Tralfamadorian perspective that "those who die are meant to die, that corpses are improvements" (210) to the narrator's outrage at the fact that humans have repeated the same cruelties from the medieval Crusades through the destruction of Dresden to the war in Vietnam. In his influential novel *Cat's Cradle*, that became a cult book of the youthful counterculture of the sixties, Vonnegut makes his self-styled social messiah Bokonon resignedly observe "History! Read it and weep!,"[20] and it is this very desperation about man's inability to learn that sets the tone of *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

In a 1973 interview Vonnegut admits his inability to face the gory details of the Dresden massacre, when he says that

> there was a complete blank where the bombing of Dresden took place, because I don't remember. And I looked up several of my war

> buddies and they didn't remember, either. They didn't want to talk about it. There was a complete forgetting of what it was like. There were all kinds of information surrounding the event, but as far as my memory bank was concerned, the center had been pulled right out of the story.[21]

Of course, it is Vonnegut's survivor's guilt and his need to suppress the unbearable horror that offer biographical reasons for the fact that the thematic center of his novel is endlessly circumnavigated but never fully encountered and that only a few gory details such as the digging up of rotting bodies from "hundreds of corpse mines" (214) or the cremation of the dead "with flamethrowers" (214) are briefly referred to. But Vonnegut makes an epistemological virtue of this psychological necessity by going after a more inclusive target, namely the delusion of war in general. At all times, wars have cruelly deprived children of their childhood, destroyed priceless cultural values, and wiped out innocent lives, and thus it makes perfect sense that in his "anti-war book" (3) the Dresden firestorm is seen as just another instance in the endless sequence of human brutality from Sodom and Gomorrah through the medieval Crusades to the jungle war in Vietnam. Moreover, Vonnegut tells his story at a time about which he coolly observes:

> Robert Kennedy, [. . .], was shot two nights ago. He died last night. So it goes.
>
> Martin Luther King was shot a month ago. He died, too. So it goes.
>
> And every day my government gives me a count of corpses created by military science in Vietnam. So it goes. (210)

An audience that is increasingly immunized against atrocities by being exposed by the mass media to its daily allowance of mutilated corpses can hardly be roused by yet another novel with realistic details about the horrors of war, and this is why Vonnegut, like Joseph Heller in his *Catch-22*, has to resort to other strategies. His painfully understated "anti-war book" (3) abandons all attempts at mimetic recreation and instead conveys its outrage about the constant continuation of atrocities by showing that there is no appropriate response to the Dresden massacre. Vonnegut's seemingly unconcerned attitude is easily recognizable as a defense mechanism, and his use of science-fiction strategies, of which he aptly says they serve the same function as "the clowns in Shakespeare,"[22] signals not a lack of taste but a desperate attempt at coping with the irrationality of mass extermination and at effecting what De Quincey in his essay about the porter scene in *Macbeth*

calls 'the reflux of the human upon the fiendish.'[23] His narrative reduction of a massive historical event to the multiple-refracted interplay between a traumatized narrator who needs to keep his experience at bay, and a helpless protagonist who hardly understands what is happening to him, turns out to be a highly successful way of translating a historical atrocity, which transcends all human imagination, into the realm of individual empathy and of thus confronting the puzzled reader with the task of co-authoring the shocking meaning of a tale which is an accomplished example of how a historical event can be imaginatively storified by means of advanced metafictional strategies.

Notes

1. Page numbers in brackets refer to Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five or The Children's Crusade* (New York, 1970).

2. For details see David Irving, *The Destruction of Dresden* (London, 1963).

3. See my essay "Zwischen Dresden und Tralfamadore: Visionen des Weltuntergangs in Kurt Vonneguts Romanen von *Das höllische System bis Schlachthof 5*," *Apokalypse: Weltuntergangsvisionen in der literatur des 20. Jahrhunderts*, ed. Gunter E. Grimm et al. (Frankfurt, 1986), 88–109.

4. Robert J. Lifton, "Beyond Atrocity," *Saturday Review*, 27 March 1971, 23.

5. In Richard Todd, "The Masks of Kurt Vonnegut, Jr." *The New York Times Magazine*, 24 January 1981, 17.

6. Kurt Vonnegut, *Wampeters, Foma & Granfalloons (Opinions)* (New York, 1974), 262.

7. R. D. Laing, *The Politics of Experience and The Bird of Paradise* (Harmondsworth, 1967), 95.

8. Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore and London, 1975), x.

9. Robert Coover, *The Public Burning* (Harmondsworth, 1978), 172.

10. *Wampeters, Foma & Granfalloons*, xxvi and 239.

11. For details see my "Doctorow's 'Criminals of Perception,' or What Has Happened to the Historical Novel," in *Reconstructing American Literary and Historical Studies*, ed. Gunter Lenz et al. (Frankfurt and New York, 1990), 345–371.

12. James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* (London, 1969), 4.

13. E. L. Doctorow, "False Documents," in *E. L. Doctorow: Essays and Conversations*, ed. Richard Trenner (Princeton, 1983), 24.

14. Ice David Bellamy, *The New Fiction: Interviews with Innovative American Writers* (Urbana, 1974), 197.

15. *Wampeters, Foma & Granfalloons*, xxi.

16. John Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse: Fiction for Print, Tape, Live Voice* (New York, 1959), 114.

17. For the curious opposition between Vonnegut's harsh rejection of Christianity and his insistence on the necessity of religious systems see my "Invented Religions as Sense-Making Systems in Kurt Vonnegut's Novels," in *Religion and Philosophy in the United States of America*, ed. Peter Freese (Essen, 1987), vol. I, 213–240.

18. Kurt Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle* (New York, rpt. 1970), 168.
19. *Wampeters, Foma & Granfalloons*, 262.
20. *Wampeters, Foma & Granfalloons*, 262.
21. Kurt Vonnegut, *Mother Night* (New York, rpt. 1970), vii.
22, *Wampeters, Foma & Granfalloons*, 262.
23. See Thomas De Quincey, "On the Knocking on the Gate in *Macbeth*," in *Shakespeare, Macbeth: A Casebook*, ed. John Wain (London, rpt. 1972), 93.

PHILIP WATTS

Rewriting History: Céline and Kurt Vonnegut

Midway through his 1975 introduction to a paperback edition of Céline's last three novels—*Castle to Castle*, *North*, and *Rigadoon*—Kurt Vonnegut confesses: "I get a splitting headache every time I try to write about Céline. I have one now. I never have headaches at any other time." Through this quip Vonnegut points to a process of identification with Céline that begins on the biographical level—the two writers have the same "unusual head" and share similar literary concerns. But his headache is also a symptom of the problematic nature of Vonnegut's reception of Céline, for what comes out of the relation between these two authors is not only the traditional issue of literary influence, but also the problem of historical revisionism and ideological transmission. Vonnegut's 1969 account of the destruction of Dresden, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, is to a great extent a rewriting of the war sequences in Céline's 1932 *Voyage au bout de la nuit*. As his 1975 essay makes clear, however, Vonnegut may have turned to Céline not only for his innovative style, but also because of his proximity to fascist politics after 1936. In exploring an issue that had been bracketed by Céline's earlier American readers, Vonnegut also comes dangerously close to reproducing Céline's attempts in his trilogy to rewrite the history of World War II in terms that were more compatible with wartime politics.

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When Vonnegut wrote this eight-page introductory essay, he was at the height of his national popularity. Generally recognized as one of the voices of the emerging counterculture, he had just published the best-selling *Breakfast of Champions* and commanded imposing sums on the college lecture circuit. From the opening paragraphs of his introduction, Vonnegut acknowledges that he owes at least part of his success to Céline; he states that in fact "every writer is in his debt." Perhaps because he has had such success in the marketplace, Vonnegut ties literary influence to the notion of debt, and his essay exploits a metaphoric potential already at work in the discourse on literature. We speak, after all, of an author's legacy, of his gift, of his heirs, of his contribution to a literary tradition, of various writers' indebtedness to their precursors, and of the homage writers pay to one another as if the very idea of cultural transmission depended upon a form of economic exchange. But if the terminology of economics seems to be present whenever we begin to speak of literary influence, for Vonnegut it should not be read as merely metaphoric. Céline's presence is literally a present, a gift that Vonnegut will treat as a debt.

In his short introductory piece, Vonnegut makes it clear that debt stems from his discovery of Céline's work during the period when he was writing *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Vonnegut relates his feelings upon reading *Journey to the End of the Night* for the first time: "The book penetrated my bones, anyway, if not my mind. And I only now understand what I took from Céline and put into the novel I was writing at the time, which was called *Slaughterhouse-Five*."[1] I will return to the specific links between *Journey to the End of the Night* and Vonnegut's novel, but first I want to emphasize that his reading of Céline inspired Vonnegut to complete the war novel he had been trying to write for some twenty-five years, a novel that not only secured his place in American letters but became his first commercial success and generated a lucrative movie contract with a Hollywood studio. Vonnegut is acutely aware that his success in the American literary marketplace was due, at least in part, to the gift of a French author who ended his life in relative poverty, who used the language of impoverished "guttersnipes," and whose sales in America remain low.[2] Vonnegut not only acknowledges his debt to Céline, but his use of the reimbursement metaphor determines the entire introductory essay. Although it is unclear whether Vonnegut played a part in getting Céline's postwar novels translated and distributed, his introduction to a trade paperback edition of the works may have been a way to initiate the repayment process. After all, Vonnegut began his own career by publishing his novels as paperback originals, a move that was predicated on the desire for increased sales and that tied Vonnegut inextricably to popular science fiction and other pulp fiction genres.[3] In any case, Vonnegut defines Céline's

place in the canon of modern literature by comparing him to Hemingway and suggesting that maybe Céline, too, should have been awarded the Nobel Prize. Vonnegut's essay is not only a panegyric on Céline's literary merits, but also an attempt to bolster the market for his works.

There is, however, another aspect to this reimbursement motif that does not figure in the Penguin edition at all, but is made explicit in the title Vonnegut tacked onto the piece when he reprinted it in *Palm Sunday*, his 1981 autobiographical collage. Here, the essay bears the title "A Nazi Sympathizer Defended at Some Cost." Six years after the original publication of the essay, Vonnegut was still caught in the web of debt and repayment, of inheritance and reimbursement. He was not only indebted to Céline for his success, but chose to honor that debt through what he considered a pro bono defense. Vonnegut may have been paid for writing the introduction to the Penguin edition, but he included it in his autobiographical collection, as he says, "with no financial gain in prospect." Furthermore, Vonnegut insists that the essay could harm his reputation, which is firmly anchored a liberal, humanist, pacifist tradition—"many people will believe that I share many of [Céline's] authentically vile opinions."[4]

Although Vonnegut doesn't intend to justify Céline's anti-Semitism, the position he adopts forces him to confront the French author's politics. He is quick to set up a clear distinction between the diatribes of the pamphlets and the novels, from which, Vonnegut claims, Céline's "cracked politics" are "virtually exclude[d]." Vonnegut is here repeating Céline's own statements made after the war—that novels were stylistic events, purged of all political ideology, a position that Céline first adopted during his 1950 trial for collaboration. Of Céline's pamphlets, Vonnegut writes: "His words are contemptible to anyone who has suffered from anti-Semitism." At the same time, however, Vonnegut finds what he calls "a twisted sort of honor in [Céline's] declining to offer excuses of any kind." In sticking by his opinions, Vonnegut seems to be saying, Céline was being honorable. This is the point in his essay where Vonnegut complains of a headache, as if it were a symptom, a physical manifestation, of the untenability of this defense. Ultimately, Vonnegut resorts to the defense that isn't one: in attempting to explain Céline's hatred, Vonnegut can say only that he has "heard no explanation for this other than" that Céline "was partly insane."[5] Vonnegut's introduction, then, provides Céline with an elaborate defense based on the insanity plea. It is as if, in Vonnegut's mind, Céline could be read by the American public only after he had been acquitted of his intellectual crimes. But in defending Céline, Vonnegut also evades the fact that Céline's novels, from *Féerie pour une autre fois* to *Rigadoon*, can be read as stylized attempts to rewrite the war in relation to the terms of his own defense. The real difficulty in reading Céline comes from the fact that any

attempt to rehabilitate the novels reproduces precisely the arguments Céline himself had used in justifying his political positions.

Still, even if Vonnegut attempts to exorcise Céline's "cracked politics" from the later novels, he is nonetheless one of the few American writers to have confronted this political aspect of Céline, an aspect that, because the pamphlets haven't been translated, hasn't undergone the process of cultural transmission. Whereas Allen Ginsberg praised Céline for incorporating "aural speech patterns" into his prose and read him as a great vilifier, Vonnegut ties this use of the vernacular to a "privileged" perspective on historical events.[6] If Vonnegut is in Céline's debt, it is not because of the "three dot" style, a technique that Vonnegut claims can be imitated only by gossip columnists ("They like its looks," he writes, perhaps referring to Herb Caen of the *San Francisco Chronicle*), but because Céline, in Vonnegut's view was the first modern writer to use a vernacular in the representation of historical events. This stylistic innovation by Céline produced what Vonnegut calls the "finest novels we have of the total collapse of Western civilization in two world wars, as witnessed by hideously vulnerable common men and women."[7] Vonnegut is thus promoting an assessment of Céline as not just a stylistic innovator, but also a war novelist who lived through and recorded two cataclysmic historical events.[8] Céline becomes Vonnegut's model for rewriting history, but it is precisely through this rewriting that the problem of "cracked politics" reappears.

While Vonnegut seems to present a politics-free Céline to the U. S. reading public, it is possible nonetheless that he was attracted to Céline *because* rather than *despite* his Nazi sympathies. Vonnegut's identification with Céline may take place at the level of his politics. Although it is often parodic, often to the second degree, Vonnegut's fiction constantly returns to an attraction to fascism, a tendency identified by Saul Friedlander in other texts of the same period that exhibit a desire not so much to excuse as to understand and perhaps also to exorcise, to purge the guilt associated with fascist atrocities.[9] One of Vonnegut's early novels, *Mother Night*, is presented as the confessions of Howard W. Campbell, Jr., an American Nazi and fascist propagandist who writes his autobiography while awaiting trial for war crimes in an Israeli jail (his cell is next to Eichmann's). Vonnegut has continued to ask himself what it means to be a German-American after World War II, even inscribing his own family fictionally in historical events of the war. In a 1980 lecture on filial ties delivered to the Mental Health Association of New Jersey, he told the story of an imaginary psychiatrist named "Colonel Vonnegut," who "cured" the S. S. staff at Auschwitz so they could keep on killing.[10] And in his 1982 novel *Deadeye Dick*, the narrator's father befriends the young Hitler in prewar Vienna, saves his life by buying one of his paintings, and flies a swastika flag outside the family home in Midland City, Ohio. Vonnegut uses German fascism to reflect upon

the values of contemporary American society, a society that he at once admires and distrusts.[11] At the same time, however, these representations of "Nazi sympathizers" dangerously scramble notions of guilt and innocence and come close to being exculpatory. Vonnegut's novels, like his introduction to Céline's, are also defendants' insanity pleas, and his characters are all afflicted with the same type of "insanity" attributed to Céline, a madness in which the attraction to an ideology of hate paradoxically verges on moral purity. Vonnegut's attempt to launch Céline's last works must thus be read not only as a defense of the French writer, but also as an effort to legitimize some of Vonnegut's own concerns about politics, anti-Semitism, and World War II.

* * *

If in his 1975 essay Vonnegut reflects upon his use of Céline, his 1969 war novel, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, can be read at least partly in relation to Céline's 1932 *Voyage au bout de la nuit*. While linked to other contexts—science fiction, suburban satire, and 1960s counterculture—*Slaughterhouse-Five* depends nonetheless on the opening sections of Céline's first novel for both its tone and its representation of war. In the first few pages Vonnegut tells us that, while awaiting a flight to Germany, he began to read Erika Ostrovsky's 1967 study, *Céline and His Vision*. A passage by Céline, lifted from Ostrovsky's work, sets the mood for the rest of Vonnegut's novel: "No art is possible without a dance with death . . . The truth is death . . . I've fought nicely against it as long as I could . . . danced with it, festooned it, waltzed it around."[12] Céline's presence as a writer who directly confronted death is thus inscribed at the beginning of Vonnegut's novel. Even the book's first page echoes this voice since one of the alternate titles of *Slaughterhouse-Five* is "A Duty-Dance with Death." Both authors witnessed the destructive force of war and placed this wartime experience at the center of their literary endeavors. What Vonnegut inherits from Céline is a terminology of spectacle with which to represent and ultimately to condemn the horrors of war, as well as a protagonist who remains uncomprehending when faced with this destruction.

Vonnegut's alter-title on the inseparability of death and dance may have been culled from Ostrovsky's study, but there can be little doubt that he had already found this deathly aesthetic in Céline's representations of World War I. In the opening chapters of *Journey to the End of the Night*, for example, Céline applies the vocabulary of spectacle to his representations of the battlefield. After the gruesome death of the colonel, Bardamu compares him to a vaudevillian:

> I thought again of the colonel and how fine the fellow looked, with his cuirass and his helmet and his mustaches. Put him on at

> a music hall, walking about among the bullets and shells as I had seen him, and the turn would have filled the Alhambra those days. He'd have wiped the floor with Fragson herself, though at the time I'm speaking of she was tremendously popular.[13]

With these references to the Alhambra, a famous music hall before the war, and to Fragson, one of the most popular music hall singers of the time, Céline begins transforming reality into spectacle. A little later, Bardamu compares himself to a "spectator" watching villages burn, which he likens to a "fair ground" and a "pretty sight."[14] These are just a few examples of a sign system that is ubiquitous in Céline's novels, a commingling of theatrical and martial terminology that Céline would more fully exploit later in his World War II novels.

In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the reader is also confronted with wartime spectacles and with war as spectacle. Arriving at a prison camp in Germany, Billy Pilgrim and the other American soldiers are entertained by British prisoners who stage their own version of *Cinderella*. This show is echoed in the narrative by the characters' transforming themselves into actors. As the novel progresses, Billy Pilgrim slowly changes into costume until, just before the bombing, he is clad in a blue toga and silver slippers. The residents of Dresden who get their first look at American soldiers then are amazed at the merry sight of "these hundred ridiculous creatures," a description that Vonnegut concludes: "Here were more crippled human beings, more fools like themselves. Here was light opera." And within this operatic troupe/military troop, "Billy Pilgrim was the star." Later still, moments after the destruction of Dresden by Allied bombs, the four soldiers assigned to guard the American prisoners are described as open-mouthed, looking "like a silent film of a barbershop quartet."[15]

Although the use of theatrical terminology in a literary text is not usual, there are certain peculiarities that tie Vonnegut's spectacle to Céline's. The spectacles in both works reveal a nostalgia for somewhat outdated musical forms. In an American context, the barbershop quartet plays the same role as the Alhambra music hall does in the French setting. Both represent a style that is popular, vernacular, somewhat naive, and hopelessly *passé*. Vonnegut developed this type of allusion in later novels, drawing on the films of Laurel and Hardy; for his 1976 novel, *Slapstick*, and speaking of the "music" of artillery shells in Hocus Pocus, published in 1990. The theatrical terminology never obscures the historical referent, however. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, as in *Journey to the End of the Night*, the spectacular vocabulary facilitates the transition from lived experience to literary text and functions, paradoxically, as a central component in the author's quest to rewrite history. Not only do both

authors use this theatricality to satirize military discipline, but Vonnegut's work, like Céline's, asserts its fictionality in order to confront and contradict what each author sees as the official discourse of history. Whereas *Journey to the End of the Night* destabilizes the discourse of patriotism and nationalist authority, Vonnegut's spectacular text directly confronts a central aspect of American cultural history: the epic war movie. In the opening passages of *Slaughterhouse-Five* the author sets up this confrontation when he promises a friend that he will never write a novel that might be turned into a movie starring John Wayne or Frank Sinatra. Vonnegut is offering his pacifist spectacle of the war in opposition to such pro-war spectacles as *The Longest Day*. It is an irony of American cultural production that *Slaughterhouse-Five* was turned into a Hollywood movie only a few years after its publication.

The second aspect of Céline's legacy to Vonnegut is the creation of a wide-eyed, candid protagonist. Vonnegut tells us that after reading *Journey to the End of the Night*, he felt compelled to write the phrase "so it goes" each time someone, or something, died. Here is how Vonnegut explains the use of this phrase:

> It was a clumsy way of saying what Céline managed to imply so much more naturally in everything he wrote, in effect: "Death and suffering can't matter nearly as much as I think they, do. Since they are so common, my taking them seriously must mean that I am insane. I must try to be saner."[16]

This statement, loaded with irony, must be read as implying the contrary of what it proposes. Rather than expressing resignation in the face of death, *Slaughterhouse-Five* constantly expresses horror at the atrocity of war, and we quickly realize that if Vonnegut pleads insanity, as he did for Céline, it is only because he feels so out of touch with a society that would permit the massive annihilation seen during wartime. After the liminary chapter, *Slaughterhouse-Five* is told from the perspective of Billy Pilgrim, a successful suburban optometrist in the 1960s and a somewhat bemused private in the U. S. Army during World War II. Billy Pilgrim's fundamental characteristic is his naive, candid outlook as he witnesses the destruction of Dresden. It is this view of war, conveyed by a passive, alienated, and candid narrator that Vonnegut "takes" from Céline.[17]

There is little doubt that Céline's use of invective is unsurpassed in twentieth-century literature. Still, countering the accumulation of diatribe and hyperbole is Céline's use of understatement, usually channeled through the voice of a somewhat confused narrator. In *Journey to the End of the Night*, Bardamu's candid worldview is perhaps best demonstrated by the famous

phrase "[one] is as innocent of Horror as one is of sex," and much of the novel is constructed around Bardamu's loss of innocence. Directly echoing Céline's claims about the innocence of the young troops, Vonnegut writes: "We *had* been foolish virgins in the war right at the end of childhood." (Vonnegut's "virgins" was, as it turns out, much closer to the term Céline had originally used: "puceau.") In one of the first scenes of *Journey to the End of the Night*, Bardamu realizes that two German soldiers are shooting at him and aiming to kill. Rather than feeling fright or anger, Bardamu's reaction is incomprehension: "The colonel perhaps knew why those two fellows were firing and the Germans maybe knew it too; but as for me, quite frankly, I didn't at all." A little later he exclaims: "I felt somehow I ought to be polite to the Germans." Thirty years later, Billy Pilgrim reacted to a German sniper in the same way Bardamu had: "Billy stood there politely, giving the marksman another chance. It was his addled understanding of the rules of warfare that the marksman *should* be given a second chance."[18] And where Céline had described enemy bullets as "swarm[ing] . . . wasps," Vonnegut called them "lethal bee[s]," changing the species but not the genus of the referent.

One character in *Slaughterhouse-Five* not only understands but actually enjoys the madness of war: Roland Weary, an antitank gunner from Pittsburgh whose specialty and avocation is torture. If Bardamu was the model for Billy Pilgrim, Roland Weary's model was perhaps Lieutenant Saint-Engence, the officer in *Journey to the End of the Night* who delights in showing his blood-caked sword to his comrades. Weary spends most of the war quizzing Billy Pilgrim on the worst forms of torture and execution, asking questions that the young soldier can never answer. When, for example, Roland Weary explains the use of a bayonet's "blood gutter," Billy's innocence recalls Bardamu's response on seeing the lieutenant's weapon: " . . . he held out his sabre for them to see. There was indeed some dried blood on it, which filled the little groove made for that purpose."[19] The emphasis on the troops' innocence, their awkward politeness, and the correspondences between secondary characters all mark the tight textual links between the two works. They share an ideological stance as well, for in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, as in *Journey to the End of the Night*, the main character's incomprehension before these horrors permits the author to enlist the reader's sympathy in his acerbic condemnation of war.

Vonnegut's reception of Céline is thus at once stylistic and political in the sense that *Slaughterhouse-Five* incorporates a denunciation of war. But there is another side to the ideology at work in Vonnegut's novel that is troubling, to say the least, and that has to do with his representation of the destruction of Dresden, the novel's real store. Vonnegut was writing against what he considered the official history of World War II, but in

doing so he launched his work down the slippery slope of historical revisionism, forcing us to reconsider both *Slaughterhouse-Five* and the nature of his reception of Céline.

When Billy Pilgrim, in his 1960s incarnation, is hospitalized, he must share a room with a rather loud, self-assured "retired brigadier general in the Air Force Reserve" named Bertrand Copeland Rumfoord, professor of history at Harvard and author of the twenty-seven volume *Official History of the Army Air Force in World War Two*, in which, predictably, there is "almost nothing . . . about the Dresden raid." A few pages later, Professor Rumfoord reads Ira C. Eaker's introduction to an actual study by David Irving entitled *The Destruction of Dresden*, in which Eaker reiterates the reasons why bombing the German city was necessary. In his last scene Rumfoord defends the bombings by simply stating: "It *had* to be done." There is little doubt that both Rumfoord, a fictional Harvard historian, and Eaker, a real Air Force general, express the orthodox government and academic view of the war. To counter this history, Billy Pilgrim, in a voice tremulous to the point of being inaudible, can only say, "I was there."[20]

In this presentation of official history there is a subtle twisting of historiography on Vonnegut's part. Although Rumfoord is a fictional creation, there is in fact a German historian named Hans Rumpf, whose study, *The Bombing of Germany*, strongly condemns the Allied air raids.[21] And although Ira C. Eaker's introduction to Irving's work justifies the Dresden bombings, Irving himself ultimately denounces the Allied action. Both Rumpf and Irving share Vonnegut's view, but his silence about the content of their studies suggests a desire to be the lone voice of a counter-history that would both represent and condemn the massive destruction of Dresden. Because it remains vernacular and slightly naive, the novel seems to be the only genre through which Vonnegut could present what he had attributed to Céline: a history of the "total collapse of Western civilization . . . as witnessed by hideously vulnerable common women and men." And just as Céline's 1932 novel has been read not only as an indictment of World War I, but also as a pacifist manifesto against what Céline saw as the mounting belligerence in France in the 1930s, Vonnegut's novel can be read as an allegory condemning the American air raids launched against North Vietnam in the late 1960s.[22]

There is, however, a second, more troubling aspect to what Vonnegut conceptualizes as his struggle against an official silence on the bombing raids. The 1969 novel raises questions that Vonnegut would return to in his 1975 essay, questions of guilt and responsibility concerning the war. The opening chapter of *Slaughterhouse-Five* relates how, as a graduate student in Chicago, Vonnegut once told a professor, who "was a member of a thing called the Committee for Social Thought," that he was writing a book on the Dresden

air raids. The professor responded by invoking the torture and extermination of Jews in the Nazi concentration camps, causing Vonnegut to reply, "I know, I know. I *know*." Vonnegut's response remains elliptical, but it can be read as the expression of his exasperation at having to hear, once again, about the horror of the death camps. As Vonnegut vents his frustration at not being able to write about his experience, the text suggests a systematic comparison between the destruction of Dresden, on the one hand, and the Holocaust, on the other. This comparison is implicit in the 1975 essay, where Vonnegut writes: "As the war was ending [Céline] headed for the center of the holocaust—Berlin."[23] The reference is to the bombing of Berlin, but we cannot read the term "holocaust" without suspecting that in his defense of Céline Vonnegut is attempting to replace one horror with another, particularly since he places the anti-Semite rather than the Jew at the center of this "holocaust." Although Vonnegut makes a few references to Nazi extermination camps in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the bombing of Germany, rather than the German Holocaust, becomes for him the massacre that is situated beyond the bounds of representation. It is as if, in Vonnegut's work, the Holocaust is silenced so that the fire-bombing of Dresden may be heard. This rhetoric of substitution leads Vonnegut to call the bombing "the greatest massacre in European history."[24]

What is most disturbing about this type of comparison is that it relies upon a system of false analogies, which has become one of the principal rhetorical tools of negationists, whose goal is to deny the fact of the Holocaust. Drawing this type of analogy inevitably leads to what Alain Finkielkraut has called "lying two times"—once about the bombings and a second time about the death camps—the first step in the negationists' falsification of history.[25] One of the most notorious among these negationists is David Irving, whom Vonnegut cites and whose book about the bombing of Dresden was followed by claims that there were no gas chambers at Auschwitz, a statement as outrageous as it is hateful.[26] I do not want to be understood as accusing Vonnegut of being a negationist, but the type of comparison presented in *Slaughterhouse-Five* reiterates the arguments used to defend Nazi war criminals at the end of World War II.[27] Allied air raids on Germany and Japan were cited to excuse the atrocities committed by the Nazis in the extermination camps. If Vonnegut didn't learn this rhetoric of comparison from Céline—in 1969 Vonnegut had probably read only *Journey to the End of the Night*—*Slaughterhouse-Five* nevertheless foreshadows both Céline's last novels, and their implicit comparison between the death camps and the bombing raids on Germany, and Vonnegut's own need to defend a "Nazi sympathizer."

Analyzing Céline's presence in Vonnegut's work forces us beyond the traditional boundaries of the source study and the tracing of literary influence.

In processing the intertextual links between these two authors it is necessary to consider not only the similarities of style, lexicon, and imagery, but also the transmission of ideologies. Vonnegut's reception of Céline seems most pronounced when it is furthest from literary concerns, and it was perhaps his discovery of the nature of this reception that made Vonnegut so anxious to settle his debt to Céline.

Notes

1. Vonnegut's introduction to the Ralph Manheim translations of Céline's last three novels appeared for the first time in the Penguin editions of 1975 and 1976. Manheim's translations of *Rigadoon*, *Castle to Castle*, and *North* were originally published in 1974, 1969, and 1972, respectively. My quotations from Vonnegut's introduction are taken from his nonfiction collection *Palm Sunday* (New York, 1981). See page 296 for this remark about *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

2. According to Peter Glassgold, of New Directions, *Journey to the End of the Night* sells a few thousand copies a year, *Death on the Installment Plan* around 2,000 copies annually, and *Guignol's Band* a few hundred. The Penguin editions of Céline's German trilogy with Vonnegut's introduction had only one printing.

3. For a succinct account of Vonnegut's publishing history, see *Critical Essays on Kurt Vonnegut*, ed. Robert Merrill (Boston, 1990), 2.

4. Vonnegut, *Palm Sunday*, 292.

5. Ibid., 294.

6. Allen Ginsberg, quoted in Erika Ostrovsky, *Céline and His Vision* (New York, 1967), 21.

7. Vonnegut, *Palm Sunday*, 293.

8. The other novelist who read Céline historically was Joseph Heller, whose 1961 novel, *Catch-22*, echoes Céline's absurdist representations of war. It is also possible that *Catch-22* inspired Vonnegut to write *Slaughterhouse-Five*, which, like Heller's novel, is centered on an Allied bombing raid.

9. Saul Friedlander, *Reflections of Nazism: An Essay on Kitsch and Death*, trans. Thomas Weyr (New York, 1984), 12–13.

10. Vonnegut, *Palm Sunday*, 242–43.

11. Vonnegut's fascination with the "banality of evil" has been noted by Morris Dickstein in his study of *Mother Night*. According to Dickstein, Howard W. Campbell's "own specific gravity is not banal but mediocre." See his *Gates of Eden* (New York, 1977), 108.

12. Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five* (New York, 1969), 18. Ostrovsky quotes from two different sources, Céline's *Le Pont de Londres* and his correspondence.

13. Louis-Ferdinand Céline, *Journey to the End of the Night*, trans. John Marks (Boston, 1934), 15.

14. Ibid., 25.

15. Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, 130, 153.

16. Vonnegut, *Palm Sunday*, 296.

17. Both Bardamu and Billy Pilgrim have been compared to Voltaire's Candide by different critics. On Bardamu, see Marie-Christine Bellosta, *Céline ou l'art de la contradiction* (Paris, 1990), 21. See also Morris Dickstein's study of black humor in

the 1960s, where Billy Pilgrim is described as a "befuddled, childlike hero" (*Gates of Eden*, 97–98).

18. Céline, *Journey*, 9, 7, 38; Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, 13, 20.

19. Céline, *Journey*, 27.

20. Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, 165, 171, 167.

21. Hans Rumpf, *The Bombing of Germany*, trans. Edward Fitzgerald (New York, 1962).

22. *Slaughterhouse-Five* explicitly links the destruction of Dresden to the U.S. military's objective of "bombing North Vietnam back into the Stone Age" (52).

23. Vonnegut, *Palm Sunday*, 295.

24. Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, 87.

25. Alain Finkielkraut, *L'Avenir d'une négation: Reflexion sur la question du génocide* (Paris, 1982), 142.

26. The rhetoric employed by the Holocaust negationists is exemplified by an advertisement published in the Duke University *Chronicle*, 5 November 1991, 14. The author of this slanderous piece calls, typically, for an "open debate" about the Holocaust and attempts to make his readers believe that he too is a "historian," citing David Irving's claim that the "Auschwitz death-camp story" is "a sinking ship." The other fundamental aspect of the negationists is their claim to be working against the overwhelming orthodoxy of official history.

27. In the French context, see, for example, the arguments against the Nuremberg trials proffered by Maurice Bardèche in his *Nuremberg ou la Terre promise* (Paris, 1948). Bardèche's defense of the Nazis rests upon his claim that the Allied bombings of Germany were at least as bad as the Nazi extermination camps.

LAWRENCE R. BROER

Slaughterhouse-Five*: Pilgrim's Progress*

> This is a novel somewhat in the telegraphic schizophrenic manner of *Tales of the Planet Tralfamadore*, where the flying saucers came from.
>
> —*Slaughterhouse-Five*

> In the middle of the journey of our life I came to myself in a dark wood where the straight way was lost.
>
> Ah! how hard a thing it is to tell what a wild, and rough, and stubborn wood this was, which in my thought renews the fear.
>
> —Dante, *The Divine Comedy*

From *Player Piano* to *Slaughterhouse-Five* Vonnegut describes the "collisions"[1] of people and machinery without apparent resolution—an expression of the author's own state of mind as he attempts to work out the schizophrenic dilemma of his major characters. In *Breakfast of Champions* (1973) Vonnegut tells us that the idea of schizophrenia had fascinated him for years. "I did not and do not know for certain that I have that disease," he says. "I was sick for awhile, though. I am better now. Word of honor—I am better now" (210). In a lighter vein, Vonnegut portrays his personal disequilibrium in reference to what he calls "Hunter Thompson's disease"—the affliction of "all those who feel that Americans can be as easily led to beauty

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From *Sanity Plea: Schizophrenia in the Novels of Kurt Vonnegut*, revised edition, pp. 85–96, 211–13.

as to ugliness, to truth as to public relations, to joy as to bitterness. . . . I don't have it this morning. It comes and it goes."[2] So come and go the efforts of Malachi Constant, Howard Campbell, Jonah, and Eliot Rosewater to overcome that fear, cynicism, and will-lessness which impedes the spiritual growth of Vonnegut's hero.

Each of these characters is more successful, however, than Paul Proteus in achieving moral awareness and combining this awareness with existential responsibility for his actions. Each confronts the dark side of his personality and attempts to practice the moral imperative described by Malachi's spiritual twin, Unk, in *Sirens of Titan* as, "making war against the core of his being, against the very nature of being a machine" (300). Yet, tormented by the fear that he is no better than a robot in a machine-dominated world, each moves back from the threshold of complete moral awakening. The lingering pessimism that is Kilgore Trout, or Billy Pilgrim, remains. No resolutions are possible for Vonnegut or his protagonists until Vonnegut has found some way to achieve an "equilibrium" based on the belief that people can successfully resist becoming appendages to machines or, as is said of Billy Pilgrim and people in general in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, "the listless playthings of enormous forces" (164).

In opposing the standard view of Vonnegut as fatalist, Kathryn Hume objects as well to the notion that Vonnegut's work is static or repetitious—repeating rather then developing, as Charles Samuels says.[3] Hume sees that Vonnegut's "heavy reliance upon projection makes his books unusually interdependent," "a single tapestry."[4] She infers the spiritual progress of Paul Proteus by noting "the artistic and personal problems he [Vonnegut] takes up in one story are directly affected by those he did or did not solve in the previous story." Nowhere is Hume's insistence upon the intensely personal nature of Vonnegut's work and upon continuity and progress at the heart of Vonnegut's vision more pertinent than in the case of *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Breakfast of Champions*—novels that Vonnegut says were conceived as one book and that Peter Reed identifies as the "central traumatic, revelatory, and symbolic moment" of Vonnegut's career.[5]

A striking paradox of *Slaughterhouse-Five* is that it presents us with Vonnegut's most completely demoralized protagonist while making what is to this point the most affirmative statement of Vonnegut's career. The former heroes' gains in awareness and moral courage fail Billy Pilgrim entirely—by design—for Billy like Kilgore Trout in *Breakfast of Champions* becomes Vonnegut's scapegoat, carrying the author's heaviest burden, of trauma and despair, but his sacrifice makes possible Vonnegut's own "rebirth." Vonnegut is careful to dissociate himself from Billy as from no character before—signaled by the fact that the author speaks to us directly

in the important first chapter about the impact of the war on him, and that with references such as "I was there," and "that was me," he personally turns up in the narrative four times.[6]

To understand that personal catharsis is central to Vonnegut's intentions, one must appreciate Thomas Wymer's view of those ludicrous-looking extraterrestrials in *Sirens of Titan* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* who kidnap Billy Pilgrim and appear to teach him wonderful ways to cope with suffering and death.[7] Disputing the usual interpretation that the Tralfamadorians speak for the author, Wymer shows that Vonnegut warns *against* the perils of fatalism rather than affirms such a philosophy. Those who confuse Vonnegut with Billy Pilgrim or mistake the author as a defeatist, believing that the insidiously addictive ideas that come to invade Billy's mind are Vonnegut's miss the predominantly affirmative thrust of *Slaughterhouse-Five* and Vonnegut's career as a whole. Billy Pilgrim's conversion to Tralfamadorian fatalism, OR FATAL DREAM, which is Tralfamadore by anagram, assures his schizophrenic descent into madness.

It is not surprising that readers typically confuse Tralfamadorian pessimism with the author's own thinking. Doubtlessly the author breathes some of his own despair into the dazed, impotent, and demoralized Billy Pilgrim. In an address at Bennington College in 1970, the author 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.[8]

At the end of World War II, while serving as a prisoner of war in Dresden, Germany, Kurt Vonnegut had scientific truth of this kind dropped on him as well, a truth that killed one hundred thirty-five thousand people and metamorphosed the loveliest city he had ever seen, "intricate and voluptuous and enchanted . . . into a blackened, smoldering hole" (148). In fact it is to pour out his personal pessimism about the massacre machinery of war and about the lasting traumatic effects of the war on his nerves that Vonnegut writes the important autobiographical first chapter of *Slaughterhouse-Five*.[9]

While Vonnegut comments about the ineffectiveness of war protests, the antiwar element in this novel is direct and powerful. Vonnegut tells his sons not to work for companies that make war machinery (19) and to express contempt for people who think we need machinery like that. Vonnegut makes clear that it is *O'Hare's* view that antiwar books are like antiglacier books (3–

4). True to his promise to O'Hare's wife, Vonnegut demonstrates that wars are fought by children, subtitling his novel "The Children's Crusade"; characters who glorify war like Colonel Wild Bob and Bertram Copeland Rumfoord are made to appear absolutely ridiculous. In one telling image, a war movie run in reverse, Vonnegut demonstrates the power of art to subvert the destructive process of war. Fires go out; dead or wounded soldiers are made whole; bombs fly back into planes which fly backwards to friendly cities; the bombers are dismantled and minerals used for bombs are returned to the earth (73–75). Unfortunately, Billy uses fantasy not to reconstruct his own robotic personality, but to escape the present. His vision transports him to an Edenic world of "two perfect people named Adam and Eve." He seeks a condition of "prebirth" (43).

Billy Pilgrim's gentleness and subsequent refusal to participate in the world's destructiveness elicits our sympathy. Richard Erlich notes that even Billy's virtue as a "fool among knaves" [from Swift's *Tale of a Tub*] is a laudable ideal.[10] We see Billy as a latterday Christ who spends three days entombed in a slaughterhouse/bomb shelter. On the way to his Dresden prison camp, Billy suffers a sleepless agony, clinging to a "cross-brace" (78); he is found "lying at an angle on the corner-brace, self crucified" (80). Yet Billy is every bit as "flamboyantly sick" as Eliot Rosewater, who joins Billy in a mental ward. What passes for gentleness indicates the lobotomy performed on Billy by the cruel conditions around him. Billy is so crippled by the psychologically damaging blows he receives before, during, and after the war that he increasingly withdraws from reality and ultimately loses his sanity. Suggesting the spiritual death that awaits him, he arises from his underground tomb to find a green coffin and an old man pushing a baby carriage.[11] Billy's retreat from pain into the "morphine paradise" of Tralfamadore (whose inhabitants are green) will cancel any hope of new life.

The horrors of Dresden, Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and the Nazi concentration camps focus the panorama of violence and inhumanity that defines Pilgrim's world. Death, senseless cruelty, and absurd injustice are Vonnegut's main subject, prompting him to say that, "I believe even if wars didn't keep coming like glaciers, there would still be plain old death" (4). Thus the slaughterhouse where Billy is kept as a prisoner in Dresden becomes more than a grotesque naturalistic image of human beings dehumanized by war, hanging like butchered animals on hooks. It becomes an all-encompassing metaphor for human existence in which suffering and death are commonplace. "So it goes," says Billy Pilgrim, without relief, cessation, or sense, now as always.

If one counts deaths that are predicted or imagined as well as those that occur, there may be a greater proliferation of corpses in *Slaughterhouse-Five* than in any other twentieth-century novel. We encounter death by

starvation, rotting, incineration, squashing, gassing, shooting, poisoning, bombing, torturing, hanging, and relatively routine death by disease. We get the deaths of dogs, horses, pigs, Vietnamese soldiers, crusaders, hunters, priests, officers, hobos, actresses, prison guards, a slave laborer, a suffragette, Jesus Christ, Robert Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Billy Pilgrim's mother and father, his wife, Edgar Derby, Roland Weary, the regimental chaplain's assistant, Paul Lazzaro, Colonel Wild Bob; we get the deaths of a bottle of champagne, billions of body lice, bacteria, and fleas; the novel, entire towns, and finally the universe; we encounter individual deaths, the death of groups en masse; accidental, calculated, and vengeful deaths; recent and historical deaths. So it goes, says Billy Pilgrim, in a world of senseless suffering and meaningless death.[12]

There may be hundreds of "corpse mines" (214) operating in Dresden, but through Billy's time travelling we see that his entire life is like a corpse mine—a continuity of terror stretching all the way back to childhood when his hairy father threw him in the pool at the Y.M.C.A. and told him to sink or swim (which he says was "like an execution"—Derby's? (44)) and forward in time to his death when Paul Lazzaro makes good his promise to have Billy killed after the war.[13] At age twelve Billy wets his pants when from the "rim of Bright Angel Point," his parents make him peer into the cavernous depths of the Grand Canyon (89). The place is notorious for suicidal leaps. The vortex of Carlsbad Caverns, whose "darkness . . . was total" (90) proves equally frightening. We hear that Billy's parents have placed a particularly gruesome crucifix on the wall of his bedroom, hence that Billy "had contemplated torture and hideous wounds at the beginning and the end of nearly every day of his childhood" (38). Billy responds to childhood trauma as much as to the horrors of war when he commits himself to a mental hospital during his senior year at the Ilium School of Optometry. Billy feels that his mother's presence at his hospital bedside is particularly threatening. He feels himself get "much sicker" and pulls the covers over his head until she goes away. He experiences schizophrenic disorientation at the sight of her lipstick-smeared cigarettes and the "dead water" on the bedside table. Billy recoils from his mother because she is insipid, materialistic, and morally obtuse, but he is mystified that his aversion, his embarrassment and weakness in her presence, should be so strong simply because she gave him life (102).

Billy fails to associate fears of his father's aggression (throwing him into the deep end of the Y.M.C.A. swimming pool, then taking him to the rim of the Grand Canyon) with Oedipal desire for his mother conveyed by the womb/vortex imagery of rims and dark, foreboding holes. It is notably at his mother's touch that Billy wets himself. Montana Wildhack, a surrogate mother in Billy's Tralfamadorian fantasy, later causes Billy to have wet dreams

(134). Billy and Eliot Rosewater share a mental ward partly because of what they had seen in war (101), but also because neither has yet penetrated that Oedipal screen Eliot's doctor describes as "the most massively defended neurosis I've ever attempted to treat." In the most direct and intimate Oedipal fantasy in all Vonnegut's fiction, Billy longs for the peace and security he felt during infant bathings:

> Billy zoomed back in time to his infancy. He was a baby who had just been bathed by his mother. Now his mother wrapped him in a towel, carried him into a rosy room that was filled with sunshine. She unwrapped him, laid him on the tickling towel, powdered him between the legs, joked with him, patted his little jelly belly. Her palm on his little jelly belly made potching sounds.
>
> Billy gurgled and cooed. (84–85)

Eliot is right when he comments to Billy's mother, "a boy *needs* a father" (103). But Billy's father is dead and the alienation between Eliot and Senator Rosewater appears irremediable. Only when Vonnegut's repressed persona begins to deal with buried Oedipal tensions and asserts a creative, independent identity will he stop being "dead to the world" (105), masking his fears with escapist fantasies or drugging himself to reality. John Tilton rightly observes that life against death-in-life is the psychic conflict at the core of this novel.[14] In Billy, the conflict between Eros and Thanatos significantly intensifies. The inability to bring repressed fear and guilt to consciousness causes Billy to pervert that which is organic and procreative (the vagina) into that which is mechanical and destructive, an entrapping mechanistic spiral. Not only must Billy deal with normal Oedipal longings; he must reconcile himself to a mother whose coldness and insensitivity to his feelings deepens his guilt and insecurity.

Vonnegut's omnipresent "clock" effectively merges Billy's childhood nightmare with that of his war experience—"the greatest massacre in European history, which was the fire-bombing of Dresden" (101). In the darkness (literal and metaphorical) of Carlsbad Caverns, the sudden glare of his father's pocket watch transports Billy forward in time to World War II. According to the Tralfamadorians, the two "clumps" of time bear no connection—"no moral, no causes, no effects" (88). Not only is time meaningless; they say the universal clock is fixed, immutable, and immune to human intervention. Events are inevitably structured to be the way they are and hence do not lend themselves to warnings or explanations (86). Only on earth is freedom of will a subject to be taken seriously. Lulled by the Tralfamadorian "anesthetic" (77) of fatalism, Billy remains a "bug trapped in amber" (77), a moral sleep walker

who substitutes forms of "morphine paradise" (99) for necessary self-analysis. Billy's moral paralysis makes him feel as if he is "frozen" (81), turned to "stone" (81), entrapped by the spirallike ladder that leads into the Tralfamadorian spaceship. Will-less and unaware, he fails to see that his father's unconscious hostility, the violence of lunatic nations at war, Tralfamadorian aggression, and his own passivity represent the same universal will to destruction.[15]

Nothing really prepares Billy Pilgrim for the momentous horrors of Dresden and the unimaginable displays of human cruelty and injustice offered by the war. It is not long after Billy is sent overseas that he develops a vivid sense of the monstrous torture instruments, the killing machines of war, that tear and mutilate the body and create such sadistic creatures as the revenge-crazed Paul Lazzaro, who carries a list in his head of people he is going to have killed after the war (140), and the equally rabid Roland Weary.[16] Billy learns from Weary about wounds that won't heal, about "blood gutters" and such tortures as having your head drilled through with a dentist's drill and being staked to an anthill in the desert (36–37).

Billy's natural gentleness and innocence, appropriate to his role as a chaplain's assistant, hardly prepare him for the idiocy of battle. Vonnegut writes,

> Weary was as new to war as Billy. He was a replacement, too. As a part of a gun crew, he had helped to fire one shot in anger—from a 57-millimeter antitank gun. The gun made a ripping sound like the opening of the zipper on the fly of God Almighty. The gun lapped up snow and vegetation with a blowtorch thirty feet long. . . . It killed everybody on the gun crew but Weary. (34–35)

In Billy's mind, war has converted the creative potency of God Almighty, along with his own, to aggression and death. Billy is loath to discover that his wife associates sex and glamor with war (121). In the opening chapter, Vonnegut jokes that the war has made his own phallus inoperable—a "tool" that "won't pee anymore" (2, 3).[17] Billy's prisoner-of-war experience becomes an "acrimonious madrigal" (79), a nightmare of victimization and madness. He and everyone around him exhibit some form of insane, mechanically conditioned behavior, that which is overtly aggressive, or that which allows aggression to happen. On the one hand, we encounter the mindless hating and killing, superpatriot machines of Howard Campbell, Colonel Wild Bob, and Bertram Copeland Rumfoord, whose glorifications of war and exhortations to battle appear ludicrous alongside the pitiful suffering of Billy and his comrades (67). Billy himself looks like "a broken kite" (97). Billy's absorption in the prison-camp production of Cinderella

confirms his schizophrenic deterioration. He can relate only to imaginary scenes and people. "Theatrical grief" (125) becomes more real to him than anything in the outside world. Cinderella's silver boots, he discovers, fit him perfectly—"Billy Pilgrim was Cinderella, and Cinderella was Billy Pilgrim" (145). Billy even has to be told that he has caught fire standing too close to a prison-camp stove (91), an alarm as foreboding as the "enormous clock" (96) that presides over the Cinderella set and the "sea" of dying Russian prisoners in which Billy finds himself "dead-center" (93). No wonder, then, that Billy's self-protective delusions lead him to dream, like Eliot Rosewater, of floating up "among the treetops" (48), or, like Malachi Constant, to hallucinate a "morphine paradise" such as Tralfamadore (49, 99). Either prospect leaves him as disembodied as Winston Niles Rumfoord in *Sirens of Titan*. Notably, the Hound of Space, Kazak, barks in a voice "like a big bronze gong" (48).

We encounter the equally mindless cheerfulness of the British prisoners of war, whose obsessive pretense of order and cleanliness causes them to put up a sign that reads, "Please leave this latrine as tidy as you found it" (125), a madness of its own. This form of hopeless programming includes illusions of peace and harmony of people like Billy's wife and mother, who are blind to the more sordid and desperate aspects of existence, and the awkward sentimentality and automatic loyalty to God and country of Edgar Derby. All are fully automated boobs, ready to conform to the most convenient mold, whether in the mistaken interests of survival or friendliness or out of the lack of imagination to do anything better; thus, they become the ready slaves of whatever anonymous bureaucracies, computers, or authoritarian institutions take hold of their minds.

The horrors of war that prove most traumatic of all to Billy are the destruction of Dresden and the death of his best friend, Edgar Derby. Billy had been told by the English prisoners of war that, "You needn't worry about bombs, by the way . . . Dresden is an open city. It is undefended, and contains no war industries or troop concentrations of any importance" (146). Despite his manly bluff and awkward sentimentality, Derby seems a symbolic human extension of Dresden (83). He is a teacher of Contemporary Civilization who enters the war out of pure motives, who takes care of his body, and who with utter sincerity, over the rude suggestion of Paul Lazzaro that he "go take a flying fuck at the moon" (147), tries to provide helpful leadership to Billy and his fellow prisoners. Derby's loyalty to the sacred, civilized graces of family, love, God, country, leads Billy to believe that Derby must be the greatest father in the world. Yet none of this exempts Derby from the stupidity and absurdity of death, which Vonnegut himself comments upon in the first chapter of the book:

> I think the climax of the book will be the execution of poor old Edgar Derby. . . . The irony is so great. A whole city gets burned down, and thousands and thousands of people are killed. And then this one American foot soldier is arrested in the ruins for taking a teapot. And he's given a regular trial, and then shot by a firing squad. (5)

Other pitiful ironies of war that wear indelibly on Billy are the execution of Private Eddie Slovik, shot for challenging authority, and the fact that despite all the popular movies that glorify war and soldiering starring manly figures like John Wayne or Frank Sinatra, it is usually the nation's young and innocent who are first sent to be slaughtered.

Life for Billy after the war seems no less brutal or pointless; like glaciers, death keeps right on coming. All the members of Billy's family suffer hideous deaths, his wife by carbon monoxide poisoning (25), his father in a hunting accident (32), and everybody on the plane flying to an optometrists' convention is killed in a crash, except Billy and the copilot (25). Linking the horrors of war with the horrors of civilian life, Billy mistakes the Austrian ski instructors who come to rescue him for German soldiers. He whispers to them his address: "Slaughterhouse-Five" (156). Billy's life at home is filled with the same pain and warpedness, the same maddening contrasts between sanity and insanity that went with war. He turns on the television set only to find that all the shows are about silliness or murder. He looks into the window of a tawdry bookstore only to find hundreds of books about sexual perversion and murder. He looks up at the news of the day being written across the top of a building and finds it to be about power, anger, and death (200).

Vonnegut protests the literal holes machines put in people, but it is the more subtle, spiritually corrosive effects of technological progress that destroy Billy's equilibrium for good. Surrounded by the soulless junk of middle-class suburbia and saddled with an inane wife who can't believe anyone has married her, Billy leads a sterile, machine-ridden life. In robot fashion, all sixty-eight thousand employees of General Forge and Foundry Company in Ilium are required to wear safety glasses manufactured by their own firm. "Frames are where the money is," Vonnegut remarks (24). Billy lives in an all-electric home, sleeps in a bed with Magic Fingers (62), owns a fifth of a Holiday Inn, and half of three Tastee-Freeze stands (61). In a perfectly chosen image of the debasement of spiritual realities by machinery, Vonnegut has Billy playing hymns on an organ and sermonizing from a portable alter made by a vacuum cleaner company in Camden, New Jersey (31). Not only has Billy's mechanical world despiritualized his environment and traumatized him with its awesome power for physical destruction; it has depleted his imagination and his will to be something better than a machine himself.

Is it really any wonder that Billy Pilgrim learns to experience death as merely a "violet light and a hum" (43), and that he invents a pain-killing philosophy of life for refuge? Whether it is the horrors of the Dresden holocaust or the nightmare of Billy's vapid civilian life at home with a fat and inane wife, what finally destroys Billy's equilibrium is the irreconcilable contrast in his life between an ideal world of beauty, justice, mercy, and peace, and that of the psychologically devastating accumulation of horrors that turn him into a dazed and disembodied scarecrow. This principle of ironic contrast—between Dresden and holocaust, justice and the arbitrary death of Edgar Derby—separates Billy from his sanity, inducing that state of "catalepsis" that lands Eliot Rosewater in an asylum.

Billy's final unbalancing, equal to Eliot Rosewater's "big click," comes at Billy's and Valencia's anniversary party when Billy listens to a barbershop quartet. Vonnegut writes:

> As the quartet made slow, agonized experiments with chords—chords intentionally sour, sourer still, unbearably sour, and then a chord that was suffocatingly sweet, and then some sour ones again . . . Billy had powerful psychosomatic responses to the changing chords. His mouth filled with the taste of lemonade, and his face became grotesque, as thought he really were being stretched on the torture engine called the rack. (172, 173)

Psychosomatic responses, indeed. Life, with its torturous vacillation between sweet and sour, sublimity and pathos, has become so unendurable for Billy that he becomes stuporous, his actions somnambulistic, and in an act of total disengagement, he retreats "upstairs in his nice white house" (176), which gives every appearance of being an asylum. Billy struggles momentarily to understand "the big secret somewhere inside" (173). He remembers the night Dresden was destroyed—the firestorm that "ate everything . . . that would burn" (178), that turned the city into a desert and people into little petrified human beings. But Billy is again incapable of bringing his nightmare into full consciousness; rather he calls upon the consolations and alleged wisdom of his outer-space, or inner-space, friends, the Tralfamadorians, who cause him to believe that death does not matter since no one really dies, hence to resign himself to his own death at the hands of Paul Lazzaro (143). The reality of Billy's death is problematical, more a death-wish produced by unloving parents and the horrors of war. After learning that Billy's "will" is "locked" up with the tape on which he sees his death enacted, we are told that nobody else was there—indeed, "not even Billy Pilgrim is there" (143). Perhaps Billy is merely hallucinating

again—his death no more real than those Tralfamadorian flying saucers that "come from nowhere" (75).

According to Patrick Shaw, the key to understanding the Tralfamadorians resides in their physical attributes, described thus:

> They were two feet high, and green, and shaped like plumber's friends. Their suction cups were on the ground, and their shafts, which were extremely flexible, usually pointed to the sky. At the top of each shaft was a little hand with a green eye in its palm. (26)

"A plumber's friend," Shaw explains,

> is the common household implement consisting of a rubber suction cup attached to a broomstick-like handle. It is a gadget used for unclogging drains, for quite literally loosening excrement and accumulated filth from sewage pipes.[18]

Therefore Shaw concludes that the Tralfamadorians perform the symbolic function for Pilgrim of cleansing the pipes of his perception, unclogging his vision and imagination by disabusing him of historical, sociological fixations. One assumes that Shaw means the belief that human beings can have a meaningful impact upon future events, that they can influence their own lives. Says Shaw, "Roland Weary tries quite literally to 'beat the living shit' out of Pilgrim, but only the Tralfamadorians, through unsentimental, sardonic logic, succeed in removing the waste from Pilgrim's mind. Himself a bit of human waste sticking in the cosmological pipes, Pilgrim comes 'unstuck in time' and simultaneously unclogs his own perceptions so that he realizes the 'negligibility of death, and the true nature of time.'"[19]

Shaw agrees with David Goldsmith that the superior vision provided by the cycloptic Tralfamadorian eye atop the phallic, shaftlike periscope contrasts with Pilgrim's own failure as an earthly optometrist to improve the way in which people see. Billy falls asleep fitting his patients (56). Shaw says, "As his own vision is progressively cleared by his experiences with the spacemen, as he realizes more and more the defectiveness of his earthly 'eyes' and the fallacies of history and earth time, Pilgrim is less able to function as an eye doctor." As "one who is taught by extraterrestrial powers how to see into the past, the present, and the future," he becomes in a sense a kind of "contemporary, spastic Tiresias."[20] Goldsmith argues that as a projection of the author's own condition, this cleansing of Billy's pipes marks Vonnegut's "mature acceptance" of the horrors of life as something it does no good to worry about. Such a perspective, says Goldsmith, "simply provides the comforts which

have enabled Vonnegut to live with his wartime nightmare."[21] Death, from the Tralfamadorian view, no matter how horrible, can have no significance. Thus Goldsmith says Vonnegut has finally washed the horror and guilt of Dresden from his mind and has come to accept the previously unacceptable—man's capacity for evil and his helplessness to do much better, as if he were controlled by some exterior force. To wit, "Billy the optometrist who fits people with glasses has fitted Vonnegut with a pair which, if not exactly rose colored, have enabled him to see things in their proper perspective."[22]

Because of the seeming inevitability of those forces that enfeeble Billy Pilgrim's will to survive, most critics agree with Shaw and Goldsmith that Billy's weary lament, "So it goes," projects the author's own sense of futility. Yet nothing seems further from the point of Vonnegut's novel than to believe that the Tralfamadorians speak for the author—that what Stanley Kauffmann and Jack Richardson join in calling the wisdom of "a higher order of life"[23] is in fact a revelation of the author's own sense of hopelessness in the face of those enormous deterministic forces that make playthings of all the novel's characters. Those who argue that the fatalistic philosophy offered by the Tralfamadorians makes *Slaughterhouse-Five* seem full of danger are right.[24] The consolations of Tralfamadorian fatalism are hideously bobby trapped—leading to a form of moral paralysis that precludes responsibility or action. Billy's flight from the responsibilities of "wakeful humanity"[25] leads directly into what John Tilton calls "a spiritual oubliette."[26]

Not only do the Tralfamadorians, with their "earthly combination of ferocity and spectacular weaponry and talent for horror" (115) not improve Billy's vision, they eventually blow up the universe while experimenting with new fuels for flying saucers. Caged in a zoo, turned into a puppet and made to do the bidding of mechanical creatures whose own world is both physically and morally sterile, Billy in his tranquilized existence becomes the very embodiment of what Vonnegut has warned against for years. Insulated from pain, Billy has simply abdicated his humanity, trading his dignity and self-integrity for an illusion of comfort and security, and becoming himself a machine.

If settling into his womblike Tralfamadorian environment,[27] closing his eyes to any unpleasantness in the world, Billy Pilgrim becomes more than ever the plaything of those enormous forces at work on him throughout his life, Kurt Vonnegut may have saved his own sanity through the therapeutic processes of art, climaxed by an act of symbolic amputation: the severing of the Billy Pilgrim within himself, poisoned with existential gangrene. That this is as much Kurt Vonnegut's baptism by fire as it is the story of Billy's madness may be the overriding truth of *Slaughterhouse-Five*; hence, the revelation in *Breakfast of Champions* that, "I see a man who is terribly wounded, because he

has dared to pass through the fires of truth to the other side, which we have never seen. And then he has come back again to tell us about the other side" (180). Billy's regress is Vonnegut's progress. Not only has Vonnegut shored up his own sanity by facing directly into the fires of Dresden, making his long-deferred "dance with death," without which he says no art is possible (21), but like Lot's wife he has asserted his inviolable humanity and freed himself from the self-imprisoning fatalism of Tralfamadore. Vonnegut knows that the Tralfamadorians are merely ourselves—an appropriate symbol for the mechanistic insanity of our own planet, an extension into the future of our own warlike globe. He knows too that with sufficient imagination and heart, we can, like Salo in *Sirens of Titan*, dismantle our own self-imprisoning machinery and become whatever we choose to become.

No wonder after completing this process of cleansing and renewal Vonnegut said,

> Well, I felt after I finished *Slaughterhouse-Five* that I didn't have to write at all anymore if I didn't want to. . . . I suppose that flowers, when they're through blooming, have some sort of awareness of some purpose having been served. . . . At the end of *Slaughterhouse-Five* I had the feeling that I had produced this blossom . . . that I had done what I was supposed to do and everything was O.K.[28]

If Vonnegut's "therapy" culminates in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the full meaning of that therapy becomes clear in a novel that not only incorporates all the essential machine themes of his previous works but which serves as nothing less than the spiritual climax to his life and career, *Breakfast of Champions*.

Notes

1. *Breakfast of Champions*, p. 219.

2. *Wampeters*, p. 235.

3. "Age of Vonnegut," *New Republic*, 12 (June 1971), p. 31. Cited in Hume, "The Heraclitean Cosmos of Kurt Vonnegut," p. 208.

4. "Vonnegut's Self-Projections," p. 178.

5. *Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.*, pp. 172, 173. Tony Tanner comments that through the integration in *Slaughterhouse-Five* of scenes and characters from all previous novels, Billy Pilgrim not only slips backwards and forwards in time, "he is also astray in Vonnegut's own fictions" (*City of Words*, p. 195).

6. John Tilton says that to analyze the narrative mode of *Slaughterhouse-Five* is to analyze its primary subject—its author. But he presents a thoroughgoing argument that despite their similar birthdates and shared ceremonial Luftwaffe saber, Vonnegut and Billy Pilgrim are vastly different people. While Billy fails to bring his nightmare to consciousness, Vonnegut visits his war buddy Bernard V. O'Hare for the express purpose of recalling Dresden. At the same time Billy claims he is

kidnapped by a flying saucer and taken to Tralfamadore, Vonnegut actually travels to Dresden as an act of responsibility. (*Cosmic Satire in the Contemporary Novel*, pp. 72, 89, 103). In *Fates Worse Than Death*, while providing extensive details supporting the autobiographical importance of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut explains that it was his fellow ex-Dresden POW Joe Crone who served as the model for Billy Pilgrim (106).

7. "The Swiftian Satire of Kurt Vonnegut, Jr." in *Voices for the Future*, ed. Thomas D. Clareson (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1976), vol. 1, pp. 238–62, esp. pp. 243–53, 259–62. See also Wymer's extension of this argument in "Machines and the Meaning of Human in the Novels of Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.," in *The Mechanical God: Machines in Science Fiction*, ed. Thomas P. Dunn and Richard D. Erlich (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1982), pp. 11–52.

8. *Wampeters*, p. 161. Vonnegut speaks of his youthful optimism before the war and how it changed after the bombings of Dresden and Hiroshima: "'Hey, Corporal Vonnegut,' I said to myself, 'maybe you were wrong to be an optimist. Maybe pessimism is the thing.' I have been a consistent pessimist ever since, with a few exceptions." Cited in *The Vonnegut Statement*, p. 13. More recently, in *Palm Sunday*, Vonnegut comments that while he had certainly been pessimistic, he was astonished to find "myself an optimist now"—underestimating the intelligence and resourcefulness of his fellow human beings (p. 209).

9. Vonnegut describes the emotional difficulty of dealing with repressed memories of his Dresden experience, for instance, the five thousand pages he has thrown away. For valuable discussion of the way Vonnegut releases these memories gradually over the course of his early novels, see Peter Reed, *Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.*, pp. 177, 178, 186–95; and David Goldsmith, *Fantasist of Fire and Ice* (*Popular Writers Series*, Pamphlet No. 2, Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1972).

10. "Study Guide for *Slaughterhouse-Five*" (English Department, Miami of Ohio University).

11. This reference appears in an unpublished essay by William H. Pahika, "The Vehicle and the Thing Conveyed: A Commentary on *Slaughterhouse-Five*."

12. Billy's understated response to horror is not a sign of Vonnegut's stylistic "cuteness," as Sandford Pinsker says, but an expression of schizophrenic withdrawal. Billy attempts to prevent himself from thinking of gory realities in the manner of Hemingway's wounded heroes. In both cases the psychic defense becomes a moral deficiency. See Pinsker, *Between Two Worlds: The American Novel in the 1960s* (New York: The Whitston Publishing Company, 1980), p. 98.

13. Time tripping for Billy is a matter of acute regression. Explanations by J. G. Keogh and Edward Kislaitus about the function of sci-fi conventions in *Slaughterhouse-Five* apply throughout Vonnegut's work. They explain that the novel's many space warps and time jumps create the kind of surrealism one finds in the dream-visions of Graham Greene, and that Vonnegut's sci-fi methodology works like medieval allegory "with the content adjusted to the twentieth century" ("Slaughterhouse-Five and the Future of Science Fiction," *Media and Methods*, January, 1971, pp. 38–39, 48). Cited in Reed, "Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.," *Dictionary of Literary Biography, Documentary Series*, pp. 351–52. John Tilton comments that no matter how erratic or eccentric Billy's disordered thoughts appear, nothing is "extraneous, whimsical, or disconnected" in this perfectly crafted novel (*Cosmic Satire in the Contemporary Novel*, p. 88).

14. *Cosmic Satire in the Contemporary Novel*, p. 102. The fictional conflict between Eros and Thanatos has an eerie analogue in Vonnegut's personal experience as a prisoner of war in Dresden. The Dresden factory where he was assigned work—turned into an inferno by allied fire-bombing—made vitamin-enriched malt syrup for pregnant women.

15. Tony Tanner explains that Billy's "serene, conscienceless passivity" contributes as much to such tragedies as Dresden as does the violence of Lazzaro and Roland Weary (*City of Words*, pp. 312, 313). Vonnegut continues in *Slaughterhouse-Five* to explore what Doris Lessing calls "the ambiguities of complicity," which cause the reader to think carefully about degrees of responsibility for violence and injustice ("Vonnegut's Responsibility," *New York Times Book Review*, 4 February, 1973, p. 35). Cited in Reed, "Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.," *Dictionary of Literary Biography Documentary Series*, p. 327."

16. Roland Weary's name, with its allusion to the medieval *Song of Roland*, suggests the haze of romance through which Weary sees his life. His vision of himself as one of the three Musketeers is woefully delusive. Nearly everyone in the novel becomes trapped in romantic conventions of some kind. I take this insight from Pahika's essay, "The Vehicle of the Thing Conveyed. . . ."

17. In chapter 1, Vonnegut associates his condition with Billy's through a reference to Tralfamadorian clocks. As "somebody" plays "with the clocks" against his will, Vonnegut becomes "a non-person," suggesting schizophrenic disembodiment and will-lessness (20).

18. "The Excrement Festival: Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*," *Scholia Satyrica*, 2, no. 3 (1976), p. 5.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid.

21. *Fantasist of Fire and Ice*, p. 26.

22. Ibid., p. 28.

23. "Easy Writer," *The New York Review* (July 2, 1970), p. 8. Richardson sees Vonnegut as a "too easily understood parabalist," conjuring up "mindless worlds" like Tralfamadore to teach "unenlightened earthlings" a tolerance for pain. Stanley Kauffmann decries Vonnegut's philosophy as "sophomoric" and undemanding, then describes the "wise spacefolk," the Tralfamadorians, who enlighten earthlings. In "Stanley Kauffmann on Films," *New Republic* (May 13, 1972), p. 35. A majority of critics assume that the Tralfamadorians speak for Vonnegut, that the author is as resigned to Tralfamadorian fatalism as Billy Pilgrim. In an article entitled "The American War Novel from World War II to Vietnam," Kalidas Misra sees Vonnegut's vision as so dark, his characters so powerless, that she uses *Slaughterhouse-Five* to describe a shift in the modern war novel from "hope to final despair." "The American War Novel from World War II to Vietnam," *Indian Journal of American Studies*, vol. 14 (2) (1984), p. 76. See the introduction to Robert Merrill's *Critical Essays on Kurt Vonnegut* (Boston, Mass.: G. K. Hall, 1990) for a superb overview of the debate about Vonnegut's alleged espousal of Tralfamadorian fatalism.

24. John Irving provides valuable counterpoint to the argument by Josephine Hendin, Roger Sale, Jack Richardson, John Gardner, et al., that Vonnegut infects his readers with despair and world weariness. Irving agrees that Vonnegut "hurts" us with visions of a mined planet and evaporated sunny dreams. But Vonnegut's "bleak impoliteness" provokes us to be more thoughtful, creative, and kind. See "Kurt Vonnegut and His Critics," *New Republic* 181 (September 22, 1979): 41–49.

25. *Cosmic Satire in the Contemporary Novel*, pp. 79–101.

26. Ibid., p. 101

27. Through the mindless, erotic satisfactions of Montana Wildhack's hallucinated bosoms (a porno version of Aamons Monzano), Billy achieves the Oedipal fulfillment he has always sought. John Tilton observes that Vonnegut's biographical exposition of Billy's formative years implies that Billy was, at twelve, already on his way to Tralfamadore (*Cosmic Satire in the Contemporary Novel*, p. 76).

28. *Wampeters*, pp. 280, 281.

CHRISTINA JARVIS

The Vietnamization of World War II in Slaughterhouse-Five *and* Gravity's Rainbow

> If World War II was the straightforward movie everyone could be in, Vietnam was the sequel that was so confused that it demanded a review of the original. Perhaps the seeds of a later confusion were present in the midst of seeming clarity.
>
> —George Roeder, *The Censored War*

On November 3, 1969 Richard Nixon announced to a politically divided nation that the war in South East Asia would be conducted according to a new plan of "Vietnamization."[1] Making good on Johnson's earlier promise that the United States was not going to send American boys "to do what Asian boys ought to be doing for themselves," Nixon's policy of Vietnamization meant that the United States would train the South Vietnamese army to wage the ground war on its own, allowing U.S. troops to withdraw in greater numbers.[2] Despite advocating a plan that placed more responsibility for fighting in the hands of the ARVN, Nixon adamantly declared that the U.S. was not lessening its commitments to the South Vietnamese people or to victory. In televised speeches on April 20 and 30, 1970, Nixon addressed the implications of Vietnamization along with his decision to invade Cambodia, justifying his policies in terms of America's power and prestige. During the April 20th speech on Vietnamization, Nixon avowed: "We are not a weak people. We are a strong people. America has never been defeated in

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the proud one-hundred-ninety-year history of this country, and we shall not be defeated in Vietnam" (qtd. in Carroll 11). Ten days later, employing more Cold War rhetoric, Nixon asserted that "the world's most powerful nation" could not afford to act "like a pitiful helpless giant"; freedom throughout the world was in jeopardy.[3] As historian Peter Carroll has noted, during the ten day period between speeches Nixon "ordered several screenings of the movie *Patton*, a film which celebrated military toughness, high risk attacks, and the disregard of formal channels" (11). While screenings of *Patton* no doubt offered inspiration for his unauthorized attacks in Cambodia, they also remind us that Nixon, like his predecessors, was haunted by the specter of World War II—a war that offered Americans a clear-cut, decisive victory and positioned the U.S. as global superpower. In contrast to the "bad war" (Vietnam), the "good war" had become "the culminating myth of the American experience and nation character" (Isaacs 7).

While Nixon was touting his new vision and plans for the war, another process of Vietnamization was taking place: the "Vietnamization" of World War II in American literature. Kurt Vonnegut's 1969 novel, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and Thomas Pynchon's 1973 masterpiece, *Gravity's Rainbow*, revealed that the war in Vietnam was shaping representations of World War II just as the legacies and cultural narratives of the Second World War were influencing policy in Vietnam. Following the lead of Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Gravity's Rainbow* deconstructed the binary framing of America's "good war," offering a "Vietnamized" version, full of discontinuities, fragmented bodies, and multiple shades of gray.

Through readings of *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Gravity's Rainbow*, this essay examines how the Cold War with its specific hot episodes in Vietnam created a prism for reimagining and reconfiguring cultural narratives about masculinity and the Second World War. Vonnegut and Pynchon's texts, I argue, simultaneously address World War II and Vietnam in an attempt to undermine the privileged space that "the good war" occupies in America's cultural imagination. While presenting revisionist accounts of World War II, these later postmodern novels also fragment and expand our notions of bodies in and at war, offering a shift away from an exclusive focus on the human body to other types of "bodies" (i.e., bodies of capital, bureaucracy, flows of excrement and technology, etc).

Slaughterhouse-Five: A New Kind of War Story

In the late 1940s, "the war film—with a full panoply of flags, insignia, martial music, and expressions of love for country—made a strong comeback" (Marling 127). After reaching a new height in popularity in 1943 when it accounted for approximately 30 percent of Hollywood's output, the combat

film was no longer appealing to a war-weary nation in 1945, and it was virtually abandoned by the war's end. As the Cold War began to heat up in the Far East and the war against communism spread in the U.S., World War II narratives once again had appeal. Explaining this allure, Marling and Wetenhall write:

> World War II seemed clean, straightforward, refreshingly unambiguous in a Cold War world of espionage and ideology. In less than a decade, World War II and its symbols came to stand for the postwar ideal, for things as they should have turned out: American valor and know-how supreme; America always victorious. (127)

At the forefront of this wave of new World War II movies was Republic Pictures' 1949 film, *Sands of Iwo Jima*. With John Wayne playing Sergeant Stryker, the film introduced a somewhat troubled and unconventional protagonist, but still managed to celebrate the "hardboiled, blood-and-guts" heroism of American men. Cashing in on the patriotic fervor the movie created, Marine recruiters set up booths in the lobbies of theaters following the movie's March 1, 1950 general release. And in at least one theater, the R.K.O. Keith's in Richmond Hill, New York, where my father saw the film, young men were enlisting enthusiastically. Many of them would no doubt go on to serve in Korea.

Like his World War I predecessors—Ernest Hemingway, John Dos Passos, Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen—Kurt Vonnegut has long recognized the power war stories possess to engender additional armed conflicts. Re-viewing his war experiences through the prism of Vietnam, Vonnegut sets out in *Slaughterhouse-Five* not only to fracture American narratives about the "good war," but also to create a different kind of war story—one that will not produce other conflicts. While the novel clearly charts a larger pattern of violence in Western civilization, linking multiple conflicts from the Crusades to the fictional Tralfamadorian-initiated destruction of the universe, Vonnegut's primary goal is a specific revision of World War II narratives.

Vonnegut foregrounds this process of revision in his self-reflexive opening chapter, where the narrator describes the events leading up to creation of his "war book" (14). During a visit to an "old war buddy, Bernard V. O'Hare" (11), the narrator receives a chilly welcome from O'Hare's wife, Mary, who resents the idea of the veterans recalling old war memories. Fearing that the reminiscences will lead to another typical war story, Mary chastises the narrator:

> "You'll pretend that you were men instead of babies, and you'll be played in the movies by Frank Sinatra or John Wayne or some of

> those other glamorous, war-loving, dirty old men. And war will look just wonderful, so we'll have lots of more of them. And they'll be fought by babies like the babies upstairs" (14).

With her references to Frank Sinatra and John Wayne, Mary's remarks are intended as a specific critique of World War II films like *Sands of Iwo Jima* and *From Here to Eternity*, which present rugged, maverick, thoroughly masculine heroes. Reflecting on Mary's comments, the narrator further clarifies the connections between war fictions and actual conflicts: "she thought wars were partly encouraged by books and movies" (15).

Making good on his promise that there "won't be a part for Frank Sinatra or John Wayne" (15), the narrator offers a very different kind of war story—one which combines fact, fiction, and postmodern literary techniques to undermine the conventions of traditional narration itself. Not only does the narrator interrupt the already jumbled fragments of the story with asides about his presence at events or reflections on other characters, but he summarizes the entire story in the first chapter, quoting the opening and closing lines. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, we are told, there will be no "climaxes and thrills and characterization and wonderful dialogue and suspense and confrontations" (5). In short, the novel will provide no fictional material for a glamorous war story.

To reinforce the importance of undermining traditional war narratives, Vonnegut mocks ideals of heroism and honor through his scenes describing the British POWs. In a rather Heller-esque passage, filled with dark humor, absurdity, and startling contrasts, the reader encounters a group of English officers in the middle of a concentration camp for Russian prisoners. Although it is late in the war and people all over Europe are starving, the Englishmen are "clean and enthusiastic and decent and strong" (94). (Because of clerical error, they are receiving five hundred Red Cross parcels of supplies each month instead of fifty). For the Englishmen, the war is another game, to be mastered like "checkers and chess and cribbage and dominoes and anagrams and charades" (94).[4] It is also, like the play they put on, a scripted performance that involves "manly blather," "brotherly rodomontades," and other forms of male bonding (95). Although the Englishmen are themselves rendered absurd in their Cinderella costumes and half battle-half croquet dress, they clearly embody pre–World War I ideals. They even have *The Red Badge of Courage* in their library for authenticity. As the narrator explains, "They were adored by the Germans who thought they were exactly what Englishmen ought to be. They made war look stylish and reasonable, and fun" (94). Through this quote Vonnegut once again reveals the power of self-generating war fictions. The Englishmen perform gallant war roles from the past while simultaneously creating new ones for future wars.

While reconfiguring war narratives generally, *Slaughterhouse-Five* also revisions World War II specifically by linking it explicitly to events in Vietnam. By employing the vehicle of time travel and a fractured narrative that juxtaposes the firebombing of Dresden with reference to Vietnam, the narrator's story of World War II presents a narrative primarily about civilian deaths and concentration camps—not heroic assaults and flag raisings. Vonnegut utilizes the morally ambiguous, fragmented lens of Vietnam to highlight the seedier, incomprehensible elements of the "good war."

At first glance, references to the Vietnam War in *Slaughterhouse-Five* seem to serve as signposts for historicizing Billy Pilgrim's position in time/space travel or as vague specters of the then-current conflict. When examined more carefully, however, they reveal particular parallels and continuities between the wars. In the narrator's description of Billy's trip to and luncheon at the Lions Club, for example, World War II and Vietnam are linked in several important ways. Vonnegut first establishes the parallels between the wars by noting the odd results of Billy's time travel: "Billy's smile as he came out of the shrubbery was at least as peculiar as Mona Lisa's, for he was simultaneously on foot in Germany in 1944 and riding in his Cadillac in 1967" (58). Not only are the two wars linked through Billy's presence in both time/space dimensions, but the reassembled fragments of narration create a new narrative in which World War II flows directly into Vietnam. On his way to the Lions Club meeting, Billy drives through the burned-out, wrecked neighborhood of "Illium's black ghetto" (59). Invoking race riots of the 1960s generally and the D.C. riots following King's assassination more specifically, the scene of destruction reminds Billy of "Dresden after it was fire-bombed—[when it looked] like the surface of the moon" (59).[5] Immediately following this depiction of a firebombed Dresden, the narrator describes the speaker's keynote address at the Lions Club, offering the following summary:

> He said that Americans had no choice but to keep fighting in Vietnam until they achieved victory or until the Communists realized that they could not force their way of life on weak countries. . . . He told of many terrible and wonderful things he had seen. He was in favor of increased bombings, of bombing North Vietnam back into the Stone Age, if it refused to see reason. (59–60)

Although supposedly a Marine major, the speaker is a thinly disguised Curtis LeMay, the general and commander of the Air Force who originally suggested that the U.S. should bomb the North Vietnamese "back to the Stone Age" (qtd. in Karnow 41, 400). With the allusion to LeMay, Vonnegut

sets up multiple parallels and continuities between World War II and Vietnam. "A pioneer in strategic air warfare," LeMay played a key role in Allied bombing campaigns during the Second World War; he started the combined RAF and U.S. daylight bombing plan, "developed pattern bombing from lower altitudes . . . [and] the Norden bomb sight," and turned bombing raids on Japan "from nuisance to catastrophe" (Boatner 315–16). Credited with starting incendiary runs in the Pacific Theater, LeMay ordered the bombings of some 66 Japanese cities, including the firebombing of Tokyo.[6] Moreover, along with other top Air Force commanders, LeMay selected the targets for the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and later advocated the use of nuclear weapons in Vietnam. Like Billy's earlier moment of straddling two time/space dimensions, the LeMay figure embodies continuities between World War II and Vietnam. Perhaps more than any other military figure, LeMay and his actions symbolize the trend of incorporating civilian targets in waging war. Through strategic "innovations" like LeMay's, civilian casualties comprised forty-four percent of war deaths in World War II (up from five percent in World War I) and ninety-one percent of war-related fatalities in Vietnam.[7]

The LeMay figure offers Vonnegut an ideal vehicle for graying America's black-and-white, clear-cut narratives about the Second World War. Once associated with his 1968 suggestion to "use anything that we could dream up, including nuclear weapons" to win a decisive victory in Vietnam, LeMay's earlier World War II actions seem morally suspect and cruel.[8] To reinforce parallels between the wars established in the Lions Club scene, Vonnegut scatters other references to Vietnam throughout *Slaughterhouse-Five*, allowing additional connections between Dresden and bombings in South East Asia to emerge in the cut-and-paste narrative. We are told, for instance, that Billy treats a boy whose father had been killed in the "battle for Hill 875 near Dakto" (135) just before we hear of Billy's arrival in Dresden (136). Dakto, of course, was site of "the largest engagement of the war to date" in 1967 and the target of over "two thousand fighter-bomber assaults" (Karnow 539). Through artillery shells and chemical weapons, the area was turned into "a bleak landscape of crater and charred tree stumps" (Karnow 538–9). This reference to destroyed jungle terrain in Vietnam once again blurs the space/time boundaries between the craters of Dakto and lunar-like surface of Dresden.[9] Other allusions to Vietnam, like the napalm-dropping robot in Kilgore Trout's *The Gutless Wonder* reinforce these connections, further exposing the reprehensible burning of civilian bodies and buildings in both wars.

Perhaps one of the most important links between wars in the novels, though, is the familial connection between Billy and his son Robert, "a sergeant in the Green Berets—in Vietnam" (61). Realistic in the sense that many

men who fought in Vietnam were sons of World War II veterans, the familial connection also symbolically represents the cycle of one war engendering another. Vonnegut emphasizes this cycle of war begetting war in the description of Robert's conception on Billy and Valencia's honeymoon. After consummating their marriage, Valencia asks Billy to tell her his war stories. As the narrator explains, "It was a simple-minded thing for a female Earthling to do, to associate sex and glamour with war" (121) because her expectations and associations are constructed by war films and books. While Billy tells her a few selected stories from the war, however, the figurative becomes literal. As Billy recounts his war experiences, simultaneously "in a tiny cavity of [Valencia's] great body she was assembling the materials for a Green Beret" (121). Vonnegut seems to suggest that Billy's war fictions contribute as much to Robert's creation as his and Valencia's genetic materials. It is interesting to note, then, that later in 1967—around the same time that Robert goes to Vietnam—Valencia is described as not having "ovaries or a uterus any more" (72). In addition to breaking the cycle of war begetting war, Valencia's sterility introduces other relationships between war and bodies.

Like most war fiction, *Slaughterhouse-Five* explores the impact of modern armed conflict on the body. Departing from conventions established in earlier World War II novels like Norman Mailer's *Naked and the Dead*, James Jones's *The Thin Red Line*, and Heller's *Catch-22*, *Slaughterhouse-Five* does not rely on "realistic" description as a means of presenting the corporeal horrors of the Second World War.[10] The novel offers no detailed accounts of rotting Japanese corpses, wounded American bodies, or the stewed tomatoes an airman had for lunch that are now visible through his wound. Although we do encounter "hundreds of corpse mines" (214) in the novel's final pages describing the destruction at Dresden, *Slaughterhouse-Five* depends primarily on other techniques to dramatize war's terrible effects on bodies. As literary critics Peter Freese, Cremilda Lee, and Peter Reed have observed, Vonnegut recognizes the failures of language to truly capture the horrors of war or to convey a shared "reality" in a postmodern age.[11] After all, "there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre" (19). Moreover, in a world saturated with graphic violence in the media, any narrative accounts of war's impact on bodies either pale in comparison or get lost in a sea of other images.

Not wishing to contribute to this sea of violent images, Vonnegut refuses to detail the spectacle of battle. Instead of re-creating moments of corporeal destruction or recalling the primal space of the wound, which might glamorize war, Vonnegut explores World War II's bodily legacy through already damaged bodies. Naturally, Billy Pilgrim is the locus for this exploration. Through the fantastic vehicle of time travel, Billy is fragmented throughout space and time. Somewhat like a cubist painting, his body exists in multiple

space/time dimensions simultaneously, allowing him to experience his birth, death, and World War II days over and over again. While Billy's body is never literally dismembered or scattered as many bodies at war are, his symbolic fragmentation is manifested in physical and mental ways. When we first encounter Billy behind German lines during World War II, for example, the narrator describes him as "bleakly ready for death" (32). His body is "preposterous—six feet and three inches tall, with a chest and shoulders like a box of kitchen matches" (32). As one of the Englishmen later remarks, it's not the body of "a man[;] It's a broken kite" (97). While the narrator's descriptions of Billy as a tall, lanky, ridiculously clothed figure emphasize his status as an anti-hero, they also provide a fitting state of embodiment for a war-damaged individual. Through references to Billy's stay as a mental patient at a VA hospital in 1948 (99) and the fact that "the war had ruined his stomach" (46), we see that the war has reterritorialized Billy's body, leaving lasting physical and mental legacies. To cope with these war legacies and to unify the fragments of his life, Billy is forced to turn to the numbing, passive philosophies of the Tralfamadorians.

As the novel unfolds, we see that Billy Pilgrim's body is not the only already damaged body in *Slaughterhouse-Five*'s accounts of the war in Europe. Roland Weary's overweight body is also unfit, and though supposedly a fresh replacement, it turns out to be "weary" on the long forced march. Moreover, Paul Lazzaro's gangly, sore-infested body is no better than those of the German soldiers and civilians who are "armed and clothed fragmentarily" (52), starving, and "crippled" (150). Offered as further commentary on the war's widespread impact on soldiers and civilians, this array of marred bodies provides a different cast of characters. With the exception of well-fed Englishmen and their "washboard" stomachs and muscles "like cannonballs" (94), the bodies in *Slaughterhouse-Five* are largely physically incapable of waging war. Thus their destruction seems even more senseless, heightening the cruelty of targeting non-combatants.

The novel's most incisive critique of war's impact on the body, however, is its examination of the dehumanizing lens through which bodies are viewed during war. This vision of bodies is perhaps captured most clearly in the narrator's comment about body counts in Vietnam: "And everyday my Government gives me a count of corpses created by military science in Vietnam" (210). Once again establishing continuities between World War II and Vietnam, *Slaughterhouse-Five* links this contemporary view of bodies with Nazi bureaucracy, racial hygiene theories, and other militaristic conceptionalizations. By offering cool, detached analyses of bodies in terms of their use-value or social worth, the novel enacts the militaristic vision it hopes to critique. Many of the book's descriptions of women, for example, measure

their potential reproductive value. Valencia's hysterectomy is noted because it prevents her from creating additional Green Berets; Montana Wildhack is brought to Tralfamador to have a baby with Billy; and Maggie White is described as "a sensational invitation to make babies" (171). Other women like Billy's mother meanwhile, are characterized in more militaristic terms: "She was a perfectly nice, standard-issue, brown-haired, white woman with a high school education" (102). We hear little about these women, in part because the novel resists offering any "real characters," but also because of the vision of bodies *Slaughterhouse-Five* enacts.

The most striking examples of militaristic, wartime views of bodies occur in the scenes depicting Billy's experiences as a POW. In these descriptions of German extermination camps, individual bodies blur into one another, becoming part of a larger, Nazi death-making machine. Describing American POWs on a train bound for the concentration camps, the narrator remarks:

> To the guards who walked up and down outside, each car became a single organism which ate and drank and excreted through its ventilators. It talked or yelled sometimes through ventilators, too. In went water and loaves of black-bread and sausage and cheese, and out came shit and language. (70)

This de-individualized, dehumanizing view of bodies is further reinforced by the Nazi guards at the extermination camp for Russian prisoners of war. These guards, we are told, "had never dealt with Americans before, but they surely understood this general sort of freight" (80). By reducing the American POWs to a single "it" comprised of biological functions, a flow of human "freight," the narrator recreates the militaristic vision that led to the Holocaust and other mass death scenes of World War II. Like the bodies being counted in Vietnam, these people are reduced to numbers, who can be rendered "legally alive" (91) or "theoretically dead" (31) through military records or war games.[12]

As part of his process of Vietnamizing World War II, Vonnegut demonstrates that these dehumanizing views of bodies were not unique to the Nazis. Through excerpts from historical texts and speeches, Vonnegut reminds his readers of the mass civilian deaths caused by Allied bombings at Dresden, Tokyo, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and their necessary role in "hasten[ing] the end of the war" (180). Bertram Rumfoord's opinions about war and the expendability of certain lives are perhaps the greatest example of American militaristic conceptions of bodies. Following his 1967 plane crash, Billy wakes up in a hospital room with Rumfoord, "a retired brigadier general in the Air Force [and] the official Air Force Historian" (184). As the narrator explains,

Rumfoord not only views the bombing of Dresden as "a howling success" (191), but he thinks "in a military manner" (192), which allows him to see certain lives as disposable. Blurring the lines between the Nazi ideology and militaristic conceptions of bodies, Rumfoord often remarks to Billy and his companion Lily "that people who are weak deserve to die" (193). German or American, Second World War or Vietnam, militaristic conceptions of bodies are integral to the wholesale slaughter of civilians.

While Vonnegut's tools for telling his "war story"—his fragmented narrative, self-reflexivity, parody, pastiche, and black humor—are decidedly postmodern, his anti-war vision is distinctly humanist. Throughout *Slaughterhouse-Five* he contrasts militaristic views of bodies with frequent reminders that these bodies are indeed "human beings." And although he employs modernist and postmodern conceptions of bodies, in the end, he rejects metaphors that envision the body as a machine or as a cog in a larger social or military system. When human beings are envisioned in mechanistic ways, they become "targets" for napalm-dropping robots or fragmented, passive bodies like Billy's that take delight in "feel[ing] nothing and still get[ting] full credit for being alive" (105).

Redefining History/Rethinking the Body: *Gravity's Rainbow*

Published four years after *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* offers a more extensive Vietnamization of the Second World War as well as a more in-depth exploration of relationships between war, bodies, and technology. Whereas Vonnegut's project of Vietnamization concerns itself primarily with breaking the cycle of armed conflict engendered by war narratives and reframing World War II as an event that killed millions of civilians, Pynchon's novel reconfigures multiple aspects of the "good war." Set primarily in Europe during the final months of the war and early postwar period, *Gravity's Rainbow* weaves together historical "fact," fiction, and the utterly fantastic to create a text that is at once encyclopedic and anarchistic. Often described as the postmodern novel par excellence, *Gravity's Rainbow* problematizes notions of history (along with other master narratives) while simultaneously offering a provisional revisionist account of World War II. The text not only explores the seeds of the Cold War sown in treaties, conferences, and the race for German technologies, but it also examines almost every facet of the war—from racial tensions and propaganda to the complex flows of capital, information, and technology that bridged national boarders. This reexamination of World War II, however, is not merely a product of temporal distance; it is a specific reexamination of the Second World War through the prism of Vietnam.

As literary critics Fredericke Ashe and Eric Meyer have noted, despite its meticulously researched and historically accurate treatment of World War II, *Gravity's Rainbow* "is a novel of 'The '60s'—not only because it is *about* that now mythic period, but because it is demonstrably of it as well" (Meyer 81). Indeed, one can find echoes of the American youth, black power, and feminist movements as well as the "disparate discourses" of the 1960s "social text" (Meyer 81).[13] What has been largely glossed over in these examinations of *Gravity's Rainbow* as a novel of the 1960s, though, is the haunting presence of Vietnam. While many scholars have noted the novel's passing references to prisoners "back from Indo-China" (132) and the "eyes from Burma, from Tonkin" (132) in a description of London during the Blitz, few critics have seen these as anything but vague allusions to the war in South East Asia. Even Myer, who offers the most extended treatment of references to Vietnam, still views the war in South East Asia as the "Absent War" in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Meyer argues that Vietnam's status as the "Absent War" in Pynchon's text speaks to "the difficulty activists had in making Vietnam a reality to a mediatized public" as well as to "the generalized derealization of cultural production in the postmodern period" (92). I would contend, however, that the Vietnam War is *quite* present in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Like a "second shadow" in Gerhardt's *Alpdrücken*, Vietnam serves as World War II's double or surrogate in the novel, complicating its narratives and reconfiguring its representations.[14]

Because evocations of Vietnam are often subtle and because, as Steven Weisenburger and Khachig Tololyan have noted, *Gravity's Rainbow* fastidiously reconstructs details from events during the final stages of the war in Europe, it is worth examining the ways in which Vietnam is present in the novel.[15] I would suggest that we must examine the text's anachronistic elements closely because they offer such radical departures from the otherwise carefully woven fabric of late war and postwar periods. While the first overt reference to Vietnam does not occur until the mention of prisoners "back from Indo-China" and eyes "from Tonkin" (132), the novel's opening epigraph recalling Von Braun's remarks before the 1969 Apollo 11 launch helps establish a more contemporary lens through which to view the war. The epigraph coupled with the late war setting, which itself suggests a narrative about the Cold War rather than the "action" of World War II, prepare us for the more specific evocations of Vietnam in part one. During the seance scene in Snoxall, for example, the reader encounters a war in which ghosts are participants and the enemy is ambiguous. As the narrator remarks, many of the seance participants are from "the agency known as PISCES—Psychological Intelligence Schemes for Expediting Surrender. Whose surrender is not made clear" (34). Although the ghosts and unclear enemy and war aims speak to

other motifs in the novel such as trafficking in the occult, conspiracies, and general paranoia, these characterizations of "the enemy" are more in keeping with Vietnam than World War II and its Frank Capraesque framing. In Vietnam the Viet Cong were not only physically indistinguishable from their South Vietnamese counterparts, they were often invisible, "ghosts" that moved through the jungles and attacked unseen. Roger Mexico's reflection in the following episode that he should be "graphing Standardized Kill Rates Per Ton for the bomber groups" (40), is likewise more appropriate to Vietnam and its concepts of body counts and kill ratios.

The most compelling evidence for Vietnam's presence as a shadow or surrogate for World War II in *Gravity's Rainbow*, though, lies in Pynchon's October 8, 1969 letter to Thomas Hirsch, a graduate student interested in Sudwest material in *V*. Commenting on the role of the Herero in "the novel I'm writing now," Pynchon remarks:

> But I feel personally that the number done on the Herero head by the Germans is the same number done on the American Indian head by our own colonists and what is now being done on the Buddhist head in Vietnam by the Christianity minority in Saigon and their advisors . . . I don't like to use the word but I think what went on back in Sudwest is archtypical of every clash between the west and non-west, clashes that are still going on right now in South East Asia" (qtd. in Seed 241–2)

Given the parallels Pynchon draws between the situations in South West Africa and Vietnam here, it is hardly surprising that *Gravity's Rainbow* depicts the Zone Hereros as living "down in abandoned mine shafts" (315) and as the victims of "Search-and-destroy missions" (362) both in Sudwest and Europe. Invoking U.S. military raids on South Vietnamese villages and the elaborate networks of tunnels used by the VC and NVA, these references further reinforce Vietnam's shadowy presence in the book. In many ways the amorphous "Zone" of the novel is more like the "free fire zones" of Vietnam than the clearly demarcated occupations zones of World War II. As various episodes in the Zone make clear, the Herero are open targets for Americans, Germans, and Russians alike despite the fact that there are no clear political motivations for these assaults.

The novel's more obvious anachronisms—the rampant drug use among members of the military, the Counterforce spokesman's reference to "the years of grease and passage, 1966–1971" (739), allusions to Nixon's "Silent Majority" speech, and numerous other late 1960s and early 1970s details in the final episode—likewise provide connections to Vietnam. As Pynchon scholars

have widely noted, the use of pot, hash, acid, cocaine, hallucinogenic mushrooms, opium, and numerous other drugs along with characters with names like "Geli Tripping" and "Acid Bummer" all highlight an element of "sixties radicalism" woven into the novel's "narrative fabric" (Ashe 69). Narcotics use in the novel, however, is especially reminiscent of the latter part of Vietnam, where drugs became an inoculation against the war. Faced with an increasingly unpopular and morally ambiguous war, in 1969 over half the soldiers serving in Vietnam admitted to using marijuana. By 1971, drugs like heroin, pot, and opium were claiming four times as many casualties as the war.[16] Given Vietnam's shadowy presence in the novel, then, it is not surprising that images of "human bodies" in "carefully tagged GI" body bags (368) and "big white bundles" that look "like Graves Registration back there" (643) are linked to drug use and that companies like Du Pont are working to dull the "real pain" produced by wars (348).

As *Gravity's Rainbow*'s final section highlights, Vietnam is also present through suggestions of the domestic conflicts and anti-war movements that occurred in the U.S. The most obvious embodiment of these conflicts is, of course, the textual opposition between The Counterforce and Richard M. Zhlubb, a thinly disguised Nixon described as "fiftyish and jowled, with a permanent five-o'clock shadow" (754). Depicted as activists trying to jam the corporate machinery of The Force, Counterforce members Pirate, Roger, and Bodine use their bodies, wit, and language (with all their abject imaginings) instead of violence as oppositional strategies. It is no wonder that Bodine has kept a fragment of Dillinger's bloody shirt as a "relic" to remind the Counterforce of the "blood of our friends" (739). While John Dillinger certainly signifies in his own right as an outlaw figure, one cannot help but hear echoes of David Dellinger, a leading anti-war activist and member of the Chicago Seven, who was also "ambushed" in Chicago for his involvement in the 1968 Democratic Convention anti-war demonstration. Like their Vietnam counterparts, the Counterforce is also characterized as "only a small but loud minority" (755). An allusion to Nixon's famous November 3, 1969 "Silent Majority" speech, this reference evokes the political rhetoric that clouded any clear understanding of the war in Vietnam.

But what do all these evocations of Vietnam in *Gravity's Rainbow* mean? One could argue that with its hard-to-determine plot, countless flashbacks and anachronisms, Pynchon's text speaks to the broader poststructuralist project of decentering master narratives. Certainly "history" becomes but one of many fragmented narratives, a set of discourses and practices better understood in terms of Foucault's notions of archeology and genealogy. *Gravity's Rainbow* is, after all, filled with comments about "the end of history" (56), history/war as a "set of points" (645), "human palimpsests" (50), and the dis-

ruption of history as a "the idea of cause and effect" (56). Within Pynchon's broader project of exploring the general constructedness and process of history, however, there is also a narrower task of re-visioning World War II, of creating a provisional "history" of that war to make sense of Vietnam's madness. While Pynchon does not seem to suggest as Vonnegut does that a reframing of the "good war" and its cultural narratives can prevent future Vietnams, he does recognize the importance of re-visioning World War II in order to come to terms with the present.

Pynchon registers the inadequacies of World War II's binary framing early in the novel through one of Roger's facetious reflections on "The War," "the great struggle of good and evil the wireless reports everyday" (54). Writing during the conflict in Vietnam, where not only were enemies and objectives unclear but the beginning and ending dates of the war were as well, Pynchon recognizes the problems of trying to frame any war in binary terms. To combat singular or monolithic framings, *Gravity's Rainbow* constantly shifts its characterizations of "the War." World War II is variously described as: "a *laboratory*" (49), "a celebration of markets" (105), "a long-time schiz . . . who believes that *he* is World War II" (131), a larger force "reconfiguring time and space into its own image" (257), "theater" (326), "fucking . . . done on paper" (616), a "set of points" (645), "Roger's mother" (39), etc. These shifting definitions highlight World War II's complex dimensions and establish a more fitting precursor to Vietnam—a conflict that still isn't universally recognized as a war or considered to be over by certain Americans.

Pynchon's reference to the Frank Capraesque framing of the war likewise highlights the carefully controlled flows of information present during World War II. Although efforts were taken to curtail negative coverage of U.S. involvement in Vietnam, the sea of lies surrounding the war and its atrocities came to light through television coverage and a freer press in the 1960s. Reviewing World War II though Vietnam's hazy and fractured lens, Pynchon exposes the fact that "the Home Front [was] something of a fiction and a lie" (41). In one stinging indictment of home front portrayals of World War II, for example, the narrator describes the bodily costs behind the propaganda:

> Maybe [you] just left behind your heart at the Stage Door Canteen, where they're counting the night's take, the NAAFI girls, the girls named Eileen, carefully sorting into refrigerated compartments the rubbery maroon organs with their yellow garnishes of fat . . . Everybody you don't suspect is in on this, everybody but you: the chaplain, the doctor, your mother hoping to hang that Gold Star . . . the lads in Hollywood telling us how grand it all is over there, how much fun Walt Disney had causing Dumbo the elephant to

> clutch to that feather like how many carcasses under the snow tonight among the white-painted tanks (134–135, ellipses mine)

With its allusions to Disney's propaganda cartoons, USO events, the Gold Star program, and Hollywood interpretations of the war, the passage highlights the ways in which World War II was turned into a "children's story" (135) in the 1940s. What *Gravity's Rainbow* makes abundantly (and sometimes nauseatingly) clear is that the Second World War was anything but a "children's story." Like Vietnam, Pynchon's version of the World War II is for "Adults Only"; his war is a series of pornographies—both literal and figurative.

In addition to exposing how World War II propaganda often hid the bodily costs of war, *Gravity's Rainbow* emphasizes the ways in which it concealed domestic racial tensions and contributed to racist perceptions of the Japanese enemy. One of the more overt examples of Vietnam's haunting presence in the narrative, the novel's reexamination of racial issues recasts the Holocaust as one part of a larger pattern of racial conflict during World War II. While the novel seems to establish the "archtypical" clash between white, westerners and racially marked non-westerners that Pynchon forecasts in his letter, *Gravity's Rainbow* also specifically examines the dynamics of American racial tensions. In a description of America's involvement in Operation Black Wing, a propaganda campaign designed to undermine Nazi racial theories by showing Germany's "dark, secret children" (75), for example, the narrator reminds readers that the program will have an added benefit: "Black Wing has even found an American, a Lieutenant Slothrop, willing to go under light narcosis to help illuminate racial problems in his own country" (75). American involvement in Operation Black Wing highlights the complex and contradictory elements of U.S. homefront racial discourses. During the war, the U.S. government presented pluralistic, ethnically diverse images of itself—especially in contrast to the hateful, racist Nazi enemy—while it was simultaneously imprisoning Japanese Americans and maintaining a Jim Crow military. Re-viewing World War II from a late 1960s perspective, *Gravity's Rainbow* constantly reveals the shortcomings of the Office of War Information's "strategy of truth" (74) policy. Not only does Pynchon's text recall the Zoot Suit riots of 1943 and weave figures like Malcolm X and Ishmael Reed into its narrative, but it also calls attention to the intense racism surrounding the Pacific War. Sardonically recalling U.S. wartime popular culture, the narrator asks, "Who can ever forget the enormously popular juicy Jap, the doll that you fill with ketchup then bayonet through any of several access slots" (558). Shortly after this passage, the narrator reminds us that it was "100,000 little yellow folks" (588) who were

killed at Hiroshima. Once again, the novel fractures cultural narratives of the "good war," creating a more fitting precursor to "American Death" and the "death-colonies" (722) in Vietnam.

Perhaps the most important rewriting of World War II that Pynchon's late 1960s perspective provides is *Gravity's Rainbow*'s examination of war's impact on the body. Like most World War II fiction, *Gravity's Rainbow* records the war's tremendous destruction of human bodies. As we have seen so far, the novel exposes the countless corpses left out of Owl presentations of the war as well as the human costs of genocide programs in Nazi Germany and colonial situations. *Gravity's Rainbow* moves beyond this focus on human corporeality and broadens the very concept of a "body" in war. In Pynchon's text the increasingly fragmented late modernist body becomes "scattered," assuming the form of what Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari have called the "body without organs" (BwO).

Drawing on their earlier notions of "desiring machines" and Antonin Artaud's writings, Deleuze and Guattari suggest in *A Thousand Plateaus* that we must move beyond notions of the body as an organic, unified entity. They offer instead a conception of the body, emptied of its interiorities (organs), in which it becomes a surface "populated only by intensities" (153). As Elizabeth Grosz explains, this "notion of the body as a discontinuous, nontotalizable series of processes, organs, flows, corporeal substances and incorporeal events" forces us to imagine body in terms of "its connections with other bodies, both human and nonhuman, animate and inanimate, linking organs and biological processes to material objects and social practices" (165). In short, the body becomes a site establishing links with other "bodies." Always in the process of "becoming"—forming assemblages with other entities—the BwO is understood in terms of what it can do rather than what it is. While Deleuze and Guattari posit the BwO as a locus of a "positive libidinal driving force," they nonetheless acknowledge that the body is "the surface of intersection between libidinal forces . . . and 'external' social forces" (Lash 277).[17]

More so than any World War II novel before it, *Gravity's Rainbow* undermines a relationship between war and bodies in which the forces of the former act on the latter. While earlier works suggest, often in passing, that war dissolves lines between soldiers and their weapons and machines, *Gravity's Rainbow* provides a web of complex assemblages and flows between organic and non-organic bodies.[18] "The White Visitation," for instance, creates in the name of war, an odd alliance that includes spirit mediums, Pavlovian scientists, a statistician, a senile masochistic World War I general, clairvoyants, a man who thinks he is World War II, a patient who can change the pigmentation of his skin, stolen dogs, an octopus, and countless other beings. Many of the members of this agency, we learn, are

valued primarily for their ability to form linkages with other bodies. As we discover early in the novel, Pirate Prentice has a career in the agency as "a fantasist-surrogate" (12). He can get "inside the fantasies of others," experience their emotions, "get their erections for them" (12), dream their dreams. Like a BwO, Pirate's body becomes a surface of physical and psychological intensities and flows; he is no longer a separate entity but part of a larger systems of bodies connected through dreams and emotions. These connections, however, are not always full of freeing libidinal energies. The scene involving Pirate's decoding of a message written in "Kryptoplasm" (an invisible substance made discernible through seminal fluid) serves as a reminder that even "private" sexual desires are still shaped by the movies, pornography, and other cultural images.[19]

As the novel goes on to explore, many of the linkages between bodies are not restricted to human surfaces. The "schiz" who believes that he is the war, for example, becomes a site of intensities linked to the battles in Europe. "He gets no newspapers, refuses to listen to the wireless," the narrator informs us, "but still, the day of the Normandy invasion somehow his temperature shot up to 104°" (131). And whenever rockets fall, "he smiles, turns out to pace the ward, tears about to splash from the corners of his merry eyes" (131). Emptied out of a normal organizing system, his body becomes a surface on which the ebbs and flows of the war speed up and slow down. Other sites of "becoming" in the novel offer more concrete connections between organic and non-organic bodies. In the "Byron the Bulb" story, for example, we see numerous flows and connections between assholes, light bulbs, flows of shit and power, revealing an array of strange assemblages.[20] Nevertheless, these assemblages are overshadowed by the novel's central connection between animate and inanimate bodies—the attempts to "become rocket."

From Enzian's wet dream about coupling with the rocket to fraternity boys' jokes to Rocket limericks, *Gravity's Rainbow* is littered with men's desires to fuse bodies and machinery. These collective desires culminate, of course, in the novel's final description of the launch of the 00000 rocket. Encased in Imipolex and attached to the rocket, Gottfried is the only character to achieve a true (though short-lived) merging with the rocket. The novel's treatment of this linkage is hardly celebratory, though. Gottfried does not ride to the moon, as Franz and others have hoped, but instead falls back to earth like "a bright angel of death" (760). Once again, *Gravity's Rainbow* provides a more fitting version of World War II to suit the present situation in Vietnam. As Susan Jeffords, Arnold Isaacs, and others have noted, one of World War II's chief legacies for the Vietnam generation was a blind confidence in and association with American technology. World War II was "such a triumph of American resources, technology, and industrial and mili-

tary genius," Isaacs contends, that "Americans came to think the success of their society was guaranteed" (7). Indeed, "It was almost as if Americans were technology" (14) (Phillips qtd. in Jeffords 8).

Behind this "intense fascination with technology," Jeffords argues, is a desire to unify the fragments of the male body through weapons and technology (14). Jeffords writes, "In Vietnam representation, technology does not 'stand in for' the (male) body but is that body, because the body has ceased to have meaning as a whole and has instead become a fragmented collection of disconnected parts that achieve the illusion of coherence only through their display as spectacle" (14). Moreover, "because technology is the (male) body, that body achieves not only the illusion of coherence, but its power as well." (Jeffords 14). In keeping with its Vietnam-centered revisioning of World War II, *Gravity's Rainbow* captures this overwhelming male desire to unify the body through technology generally and the rocket specifically. Enzian speaks for most of the central male characters when he reflects, "He was led to believe that by understanding the Rocket, he would come to understand truly his manhood" (324). Indeed, throughout *Gravity's Rainbow* men from various nations literally and figuratively converge around the 00000 rocket, striving to "belong to the Rocket" (325).

Although *Gravity's Rainbow* generally resists assigning values or positing clear enemies, it is difficult to read the novel without viewing this particular coupling between masculinity and technology as harmful. Not only does the process of "becoming rocket" foreclose other possibilities of connection by unifying and sealing up the phallic male body, but it reifies binaries between male/female and technology/nature. Whether discussing the Rocket's "victory" "over the feminine darkness" (324), the triumph of plastics because "chemists were no longer to be at the mercy of nature" (249), or Major Marvy's obsession with "thrust, impact, penetration, and such other military values" (606), the novel highlights the negative effects these relationships produce. This is not to say, however, that Pynchon's text offers a broad indictment of technology. There are after all at least two Rockets, "a good Rocket to take us to the stars, and an evil Rocket for the World's suicide, the two perpetually in struggle." (727). Like Pynchon's provisional notion of history, the values of technology are never fixed.

Nonetheless, the question of the body's status in a technologized, postmodern world still remains. Whereas Vonnegut seemingly advocates rejecting late modernist notions of the body and adopting individualized, humanist conceptions instead, Pynchon finds potential within postmodern discourses. Although subject to widespread surveillance and cultural conditioning, Slothrop finds a way to empty himself of the desire to become rocket and de/reterritorialize his body. In addition to changing his identity repeatedly, Slothrop becomes a BwO through his drug-enhanced encounter with Trudi. The narrator describes their encounter:

> Trudi is kissing him into an amazing comfort, it's an open house here, no favored senses or organs, all equally at play . . . for possibly the first time in his life Slothrop does not feel obliged to have a hardon, which is just as well because it does not seem to be happening with his penis so much as with . . . oh mercy, this is embarrassing but . . . well his *nose* actually seems to be erecting, the mucus beginning to flow yes a nasal hardon." (439)

While perhaps a bit revolting to our own culturally conditioned desires, Slothrop's ability to reinscribe the site of his pleasures and desires from his penis to his nose offers an important instance of agency in the novel. Because Slothrop's body has been the culturally conditioned, heterosexually territorialized body par excellence, his ability to divest his body of these territorializations offers the hope of alternative libidinal economies and nondestructive becomings. Likewise, we can read Slothrop's later scattering as another site of possibility. As Jeffrey Nealon suggests, "Slothrop's scattering disrupts a kind of subjectivity that is part and parcel of the contemporary war state" (126). Instead of unifying his body through the rocket or other forms of destructive technology, Slothrop is "scattered all over the Zone" (712), assuming a form that is no longer recognizable "in the conventional sense" (712). In his new form of fragments, Slothrop survives well into the future, and we learn that he has appeared as "The Fool" on a Rolling Stones' album cover. The exact status of Slothrop's body is never pinned down. The text offers speculations ("Some believe that fragments of Slothrop have grown into consistent personae of their own" 742), but it resists offering a firm description of Slothrop's new embodied subjectivity. What *Gravity's Rainbow* seems to imply is that we need not determine what Slothrop is, what's more important is focusing on what his body can do. The potential for developing more positive relationships between bodies and technologies lies not in denying relationships or rejecting modernist and postmodern conceptions of the body but in thinking differently about them.

Many who fought in or experienced the war first-hand have long understood that World War II can not be neatly summed up in binary terms like good/evil, combatant/noncombatant, and truth/propaganda. Nevertheless, despite the unfathomable and terrifying elements of the war such as the Holocaust, the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the large-scale destruction of lives and property worldwide, a general binary framing of the war persisted as America moved into the postwar period. In fact, as the Cold War heated up in Korea and Vietnam, World War II seemed to become even more clear-cut and emblematic of American success. Soldiers, politicians, and civilians alike nostalgically looked to "the last good war" as the lack of moral purpose and clear goals in Vietnam tore the nation apart instead of unifying

it. While Vietnam in many ways reified World War II's mythical status in the national imagination, it also opened the door for important revisions of the "good war"—revisions that showed there are no "good" wars, no matter what the spoils of victory are. Through their amalgam of fantasy, fiction, and history, *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Gravity's Rainbow* offer two such important revisions. The novels not only address the idea of war as a way of seeing and the power of war narratives to engender other conflicts, but they open new doors for envisioning different relationships between bodies and technologies.

Notes

1. As George Herring has pointed out, Nixon's "new" plan for the Vietnamization of the war was not so cutting edge; by November 3, 1969, "the program had been in effect for more than a year and a half" (230). The tenn itself was not Nixon's invention either; Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird coined the term in March 1969 as a euphemism for American troop withdrawals. For additional background on Nixon's policy of Vietnamization, see Peter Carroll's *It Seemed Like Nothing Happened*, George Herring's *America's Longest War*, Stanley Karnow's *Vietnam: A History*, and William O'Neill's *Coming Apart*.

2. Johnson's famous remark of 1964, turned out to be one of a web of lies that led to the famous "credibility gap" that haunted his and later administrations. See O'Neill's *Coming Apart*, pages 120–122, for the full text of Johnson's campaign quote.

3. Quoted in Herring's *America's Longest War*, page 236. See Herring and Nixon's public papers for additional background on these quotes and speeches.

4. Clearly, Vonnegut seems to be playing with the idea of the "war game" here as well.

5. Although the scene is supposedly set in 1967, the destruction from the riots and the intervention of "National Guard tanks" is far more characteristic of riots in 1968.

6. The damage caused by LeMay's incendiary runs on Japanese cities was immense. As Mark Boatner details, "some 100,000 tons of incendiaries on 66 cities killed about 260,000 people, injured more than 412,000, left 9,200,000 homeless, and destroyed an estimated 2,210,000 dwellings" (316).

7. This figure comes from page 1 of David Craig and Michael Egan's *Extreme Situations* (1).

8. LeMay made this remark during a televised press conference on October 3, 1968 while explaining his goals as George Wallace's running mate on the American Independent Party ticket.

9. Throughout *Slaughterhouse-Five* the key simile for illustrating the destruction at Dresden is that it "looked like the moon" (179).

10. I am not suggesting, of course, that *Catch-22* relies on conventionally realistic narration.

11. See Peter Freese's "Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* or, How to Storify an Atrocity," Cremilda Lee's "Fantasy and Reality in Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*," and Peter Reed's "Authenticity and Relevance: Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*."

12. The novel also highlights the "use value" of bodies in German concentration camps. Describing the candles and soap in the British compound, the narrator

remarks, "The British had no way of knowing it, but the candles and soap were made from the fat of rendered Jews and Gypsies and fairies and communists, and other enemies of the State" (96).

13. See Eric Meyer's "Oppositional Discourses, Unnatural Practices: Gravity's History and 'The '60s' and Frederick Ashe's "Anachronism Intended: *Gravity's Rainbow* in the Sociopolitical Sixties" for further study of 1960s cultural elements in Pynchon's text.

14. While the "lighting scheme of the two shadows" in *Alpdrücken* is designed to give each character specific shadows—Cain and Abel—the pattern of doubling it presents reoccurs throughout the novel. The multiple pairings of the Franz/Schlepzig/Slothrop, Greta/Leni/Katje, and Bianca/Ilse/Gottfried relationships, for example, demonstrate a broader scheme of shadowing—one in which the "shadows of shadows" begin to double back on themselves (429). In terns of The War, I would argue that World War II likewise has two shadows in the *Gravity's Rainbow*, Vietnam and World War I. Because of the scope of this essay, however, I will only examine the former of these shadows. Please see Paul Fussell's conclusion to *The Great War and Modern Memory* for a discussion of World War I's legacy in the novel.

15. Both Khachig Tololyan and Steven Weisenburger provide excellent, thorough examinations of the complex web of texts used to recreate details from the late war period. See Tololyan's "War as Background in *Gravity's Rainbow*," Weisenburger's *A Gravity's Rainbow Companion*, and McLaughlin's "IG Farben's Synthetic War Crimes and Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*" for further study.

16. In 1971, for example, only 5,000 U.S. servicemen were treated for wounds while approximately 20,000 were hospitalized for drug addiction. This figure is cited in Peter Arnett's *Vietnam: The Ten Thousand Day War*.

17. Elizabeth Grosz's chapter "Intensities and Flows" in *Volatile Bodies* and Scott Lash's "Genealogy and the Body: Foucault/Deleuze/Neitzsche" provide excellent analyses of Deleuze's writings on bodies.

18. Mailer's *Naked and the Dead*, for example, contains several comments about the extension of men's bodily surfaces to incorporate their weapons or gear into notions of "self." The narrator comments that Croft "could not have said at that moment where his hands ended and the machine gun began" (122) and, describing a march, remarks "the weight of their packs was crushing, but they considered there as part of their bodies, a boulder lodged in their backs" (393).

19. The cultural programming of desire and sexuality is a recurring motif in the novel. While Slothrop's conditioned erections provide the most notable example, the text calls attention to other instances of culturally managed desire and sexual response. Katje's careful applications of cosmetics to make her look like "the reigning beauties of thirty or forty years ago" (233) for her encounters with Brigadier Pudding and remarks like "How the penises of Western men have leapt, for a century, to the sight of this singular point at the top of a lady's stocking, this transition from silk to bare skin and suspender!" (396) are just two of many examples. For further discussion of Pirate's sexual conditioning see Timothy Melley's "Bodies Incorporated: Scenes of Agency Panic in *Gravity's Rainbow*."

20. Because so much scholarship on *Gravity's Rainbow* describes the flows of technology and capital between nations before and during the war, I will not discuss them here. See Weisenburger, McLaughlin, Tololyan.

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DONALD E. MORSE

Breaking the Silence

> Art can only manage so much repair against annihilation.
> —Arthur M. Saltzman (98)

Vonnegut wrote *Slaughterhouse-Five*—the crucial novel in his imagining being an American—against the background of the moral confusion occasioned by World War II's brutal, excessive destruction done in the name of goodness, justice, and Mom's apple pie. Like Lot's wife, whom he applauds for daring to witness the fiery destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah at the price of being turned into a pillar of salt, Vonnegut, too, "because it was so human" looked back at the conflagration of Dresden (*Slaughterhouse-Five* 22). And he did so in light of Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and Vietnam. Unlike God's destruction of "the cities of the plain," Vonnegut insists that the ferocious devastation of Dresden in all its horror resulted not from God's eradicating Evil, as occurred with Sodom and Gomorrah, but from human beings slaughtering other human beings. Moreover, the moral poison caused by viewing the wartime enemy as absolutely evil, rather than as ambiguously human, persisted long after the war was over: "If for years you fancy that you are engaged in fighting utter evil, if every element and impulse of society is busy eradicating wickedness, before long you will come to believe that therefore you yourself must incarnate pure goodness," insists Paul Fussell ("Writing" 76).

From *The Novels of Kurt Vonnegut: Imagining Being an American,* pp. 79–94.

The devastation wrecked on Dresden from the air corresponds in kind but not in scale to the arrest, trial, and senseless execution of Edgar Derby in *Slaughterhouse-Five*.[1] To ensure that readers keep this juxtaposition in mind, Vonnegut mentions continually the cause and event of Derby's death beginning as early as the novel's fifteenth word. Within the first few pages he expatiates on Derby's fate regaling his old wartime buddy, Bernard V. O'Hare with his plans for the novel's climax, which will be Derby's death. Vonnegut focuses on the blatant irony of a famous, major city being incinerated with tens of thousands dead in the rubble, while an American soldier picks up a teapot out of the ruins, is placed under arrest, put on trial, sentenced, and executed on the spot. "Derby's crime is so minuscule in comparison with the larger crime of destroying an undefended city that if death is the proper punishment for his actions, what punishment should be given to those responsible for burning Dresden?" rightly asks Tom Hearron (190). This event thus raises acute moral questions about the justice both of Derby's execution and the leveling of Dresden.

Looking back at these events, Vonnegut raises anew Job's questions: "Why do the innocent suffer?" "Why do the evil prosper?" and "Where is justice to be found?" But he hears no answers. The answers Job himself finally heard from out of the whirlwind puzzled him for they explained nothing. God's words implied that a person's goodness does not guarantee that he or she will escape evil nor that he or she is incapable of doing evil and—most important of all—that if there exists an ultimate justice in the universe then it lies beyond human comprehension. Job's expectation, that evil would not be visited upon a good or an innocent person, was as ill-founded as the widely held American belief that the end justifies the means and, therefore, no evil will be committed in a good cause—such as the good cause of defeating Hitler and Japan in World War II. Vonnegut demurs suggesting that the destruction of the innocent was as common during that war as it was when Job bewailed his fate.

For much of his career as a writer and for half his career as a novelist, Vonnegut wrestled with the attendant Joban issue of why he personally survived while 135,000 people died during the Dresden firestorm in which "[t]he city appeared to boil" (*Palm Sunday* 302). "Surviving the annihilation of 135,000 civilians not only sharpened awareness of his own death but also brought home his relationship to collective death on a nearly unimaginative scale" (Greiner 41). Returning home after being repatriated as a Prisoner of War (POW), he discovered although he could share interesting stories about the war and the comradery he experienced, that he failed again and again to find the right words with which to describe the massacre, its aftermath, and its meaning—if any. Unable to accept passively such destruction, he asked the survivor's ques-

tions, "Why was I allowed to survive when so many innocent, good people perished?" "How could this terrible destruction have been allowed to happen?" "How could human beings do such awful things to one another?"

In novel after novel Vonnegut tried to deal with these difficult questions either directly or indirectly. In *The Sirens of Titan*, for example, he probed into human history for the answers, but found nothing there but absurdity. In *Mother Night* he examined the possibility of good collaborating with the forces of evil in order to subvert and ultimately destroy such forces, but concluded that this kind of naivete was no match for a truly powerful evil force, such as Fascism. In *Cat's Cradle*, he explored stoic cynicism as a possible answer to the moral dilemma through his splendid creation of Bokonon and Bokononism. If human beings are so hell-bent on their own destruction, then, suggests *Cat's Cradle*, no one or nothing can stop them, and all the novelist can do is warn against the impending disaster by becoming the proverbial canary in a coal mine.

In *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, Vonnegut took the opposite tack from *Cat's Cradle*, examining the possibility of doing good works as a way of stopping or at least retarding the forces of evil. "Sell all you have and give it to the poor," Jesus admonished his followers in the first century, and in the twentieth Eliot Rosewater uses his foundation to give money away in the hope that money might solace those who call for help. But good works ultimately do not appear to slow evil down. Instead, they actually may encourage it to greater extravagances of connivance and fraud. Evil itself worms its way into the very heart of Rosewater's good works and threatens to destroy the Rosewater Foundation until Eliot thwarts it by giving away all he has.

When Vonnegut finally came in *Slaughterhouse-Five* to write directly about surviving the Dresden massacre he discovered that dwelling on such massive destruction had a profound impact on the novel's style, especially on its most famous or, for some, most notorious phrase "So it goes." Vonnegut confesses that he felt compelled to repeat "So it goes" after any death mentioned in the novel whether of a person, animal, plant, or thing (such as champagne). "It was a clumsy way of saying . . . 'death and suffering can't matter nearly as much as I think they do. Since they are so common, my taking them so seriously must mean that I am insane. I must try to be saner'" (*Palm Sunday* 296). The significant achievement of *Slaughterhouse-Five* lies then in Vonnegut's discovering artistically (in the novel's form and style) and personally (with his feelings and thoughts) how to deal with commonplace death and suffering on a horrific scale.[2] And scale is crucial here where a distinction in size does prove a distinction with a difference.

In American literature, probably the best-known confrontation of an individual with commonplace death on the battlescape occurs in Stephen

Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895). Henry Fleming running away from battle races headlong into "a dead man who was seated with his back against a columnlike tree. . . . The dead man and the living man exchanged a long look" (36).[3] Returning to the battlescape, Fleming encounters other dead men and meets the maimed whose "torn bodies expressed the awful machinery in which the men had been entangled" (39). Vonnegut in *Slaughterhouse-Five* attempts to capture Fleming's experience of confronting individual death and his confronting aggregate or mass death in battle to which he then adds the hideous distortion caused by the sheer scale of obliterating a city of 135,000 in two nights.[4] The result is a duty dance with omnipresent death.

By introducing the Tralfamadorians—those now-famous visitors from another galaxy—Vonnegut shifts the novel's perspective from a human one, such as found in *The Red Badge of Courage* or in most of the Book of Job, to a godlike one, such as found in the conclusion of the Book of Job. For instance, when Billy Pilgrim discovers himself in a Tralfamadorian zoo, he asks the obvious human question: "Why me?" (76). The Tralfamadorian answer he receives both puzzles and instructs him:

> "That is a very *Earthling* question . . . Mr. Pilgrim. Why *you*? Why *us* for that matter? Why *anything?* Because this moment simply *is*. Have you ever seen bugs trapped in amber? . . .
>
> "Well, here we are, Mr. Pilgrim, trapped in the amber of this moment. There is no *why*." (76–77)

Hundreds of years before Billy Pilgrim, Job asked the same question, "Why me?" in the prologue to the Book of Job (chapters 1 and 2). A series of messengers arrived bringing him news not of family members being captured by strange beings in a flying saucer, but of appalling destruction. The first messenger reveals that all of Job's servants have been killed; the second that his sheep have been destroyed by fire from heaven; the third that nomads have carried off his camels and slaughtered his herdsmen; and the fourth brings the worst news of all, that a hurricane has suddenly killed all his sons and daughters. Naturally Job is heart-stricken. He rends his clothes and goes and sits on the village dunghill in deep mourning.

Job's tragedy consists in being a good man who, although he has done no evil, nevertheless experiences great loss. Similarly, Dresden was a good city—that is, an open, undefended civilian city whose architectural beauty was legendary. "I am one of the few persons on Earth who saw an Atlantis before it disappeared forever beneath the waves," Vonnegut wrote several decades after the event (*Bagombo* [1999] 3). Dresden, the "Florence of the Elbe" was "reduced . . . to a jagged moonscape" (*Bagombo* 2), destroyed for

a good purpose says the conventional wisdom, which Vonnegut satirically quotes without comment in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. The purpose behind all this carnage was "to hasten the end of the war" (180). One of Job's most complacent friends likewise maintains that Job's innocent sons and daughters were destroyed to "teach Job a lesson." (Both Vonnegut and Job suggest that the price paid in innocent deaths for such instruction is far too high.) One of most unsympathetically treated characters in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Harvard history professor Bertram Copeland Rumfoord, believes that destroying Dresden was absolutely necessary and, therefore, it is pointless to expend emotion over it because "That's war" (198). Rumfoord may gain authority from his writing a one-volume history of the United States Army Air Force in World War II, but he remains justly despised by doctors and nurses who themselves prove to be the novel's most sympathetic characters (193). "Bertram Copeland Rumfoord . . . becomes the fictitious caricature of official historiography which is less interested in the human dimension of an historic event than in construing versions of the world 'according to the Ford Motor Car Company and Walt Disney'" argues Joseph C. Schöpp (339). Robert Merrill and Peter Scholl, after reviewing dozens of incomplete readings and/or misreading of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, conclude:

> The scene involving Rumfoord and Billy Pilgrim is positioned at the end of *Slaughterhouse-Five* because it is the real climax to Vonnegut's complex protest novel. The object of satiric attack turns out to be a complacent response to the horrors of the age. The horror of Dresden is not just that it could happen here, in an enlightened twentieth century. The real horror is that events such as Dresden continue to occur and no one seems appalled. (148–49)

By the end of the Book of Job, still dismayed by the loss of life and material possessions, Job nonetheless accepts the imperfection of the world and his inability to account for the evil present in it. As a man of faith, he also comes to accept the goodness of his Creator, although that goodness may not always be apparent in the less than perfect world in which he must live. In effect, he says "I believe—help Thou mine unbelief." Vonnegut, as a rational atheist, derives no such consolation from the answers of traditional faith[5] He can and does, however, find some consolation in accepting an imperfect world where the power to destroy is real and often terrifying, whether the agent be human beings in wars, assassinations, riots, or natural forces such as hurricanes, tornadoes, mud slides, or earthquakes.

Occasionally the power of human reason and goodness does, however, momentarily prevail over evil. So Eliot Rosewater in *God Bless You, Mr. Rose-*

water gives all he has away to frustrate the unscrupulous young lawyer, Norman Mushari, and Malachi Constant in *The Sirens of Titan* at long last learns to love. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, there may well be such a momentary triumph of goodness, but if so it is fleeting and fairly complex. Billy Pilgrim and Montana Wildhack are put on exhibit as interesting specimens of an endangered species in an extra-galactic Tralfamadorian zoo. Although their captors have long ago concluded, based upon thousands of years of observation, that the most prominent characteristic of human beings appears to be their ability to self-destruct, these two humans copulate and produce an offspring. Their action illustrates humanity's drive to continue the race that may somewhat counterbalance that same humanity's drive to destroy it.[6]

This modest hopefulness is a far cry from the near-total despair of Cat's *Cradle's* conclusion, when Mona, the phenomenally beautiful woman of the Sunday supplements, refuses to make love to Jonah-John as the world ends, because "that's the way little babies are made" (178). After all, no sane person would want to have a child under such hopeless circumstances. But Montana Wildhack and Billy Pilgrim, less worldly-wise and far more childlike, under much less favorable conditions in the Tralfamadorian zoo amidst their Sears Roebuck furnishings, reproduce to the delight and glee of their audience. Perhaps they represent humanity's ultimate function in the universe: to puzzle and delight extra-terrestrial on-lookers by presenting them with the paradox of beings who both reproduce and destroy themselves at one and the same time.

Pointing to this human penchant for self-destruction through war and brutality becomes part of Vonnegut's role as a latter-day Joban messenger who brings the news of the commonness of death. "The Dresden experience forced home to Vonnegut the truth that appropriate responses to death do not exist," claims Donald J. Greiner (48). To help account—at least in part—for unmerited human suffering he examines the accidental nature of life. Some of this reasoning is already familiar from *The Sirens of Titan*, where the Space Traveler proclaims "I WAS A VICTIM OF A SERIES OF ACCIDENTS, AS ARE WE ALL" (229). There is an important difference between the novels, however. In *The Sirens of Titan* the accidents are caused by visitors from Tralfamadore who manipulate all human history for their own ends. Worse, as Salo their messenger points out, these visitors are not even human beings or sentient creatures, but machines. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, on the other hand, there appears no purpose whatsoever in human history nor is anything or anyone in control. Like Voltaire, who wrote *Candide* at least in part as a reaction to the Lisbon earthquake's shocking toll in human life, Vonnegut writes *Slaughterhouse-Five* in reaction to the massacre of Dresden. Like Voltaire, Vonnegut also invents a character who simply accepts everything for the best. "*Everything* is all right" becomes Billy Pilgrim's refrain (198) as "Everything

is for the best in the best of all possible worlds" became that of Dr. Pangloss in *Candide*.[7]

In replacing the question, "Why me?" with its twin "Why not you?"—to which there can be no reply—Vonnegut echoes the conclusion of the Book of Job where first Elihu then God pose exactly the same pair of questions. Each asks Job in turn: Why did you expect that your goodness would give you immunity from the effects of evil or from accidents of nature? Human beings do not enjoy such immunity. Good people suffer and bad people suffer—"the rain falls on the just and the unjust." Suffering, by itself, is no measure either of a person's evil—as Job's three friends mistakenly maintain—or of a person's goodness—as Job had assumed. Suffering simply happens irrespective of person. It is simply a part of all human experience. As Vonnegut suggests through his epigraph from Martin Luther's Christmas carol, "Away in a Manger," suffering is part of the human but not part of the divine condition and no divine force will intervene in human history to modify much less to stop it:

> The cattle are lowing,
> The Baby awakes.
> But the little Lord Jesus
> No crying He makes.

Vonnegut says he chose these four lines from Luther's carol because Billy rarely cried "though he often saw things worth crying about, and in *that* respect, at least, he resembled the Christ of the carol" (197). (The only time Billy cries in the novel is over the sorrowful plight of some horses [197].) Vonnegut carefully limits his comparison of Billy with Christ unlike some of his critics who favor a full and complete identification, such as "Billy, the new Christ, preaches that human beings do have eternal life—even if there is no life after death" (Allen, *Understanding* 88). One critic even reads the novel as a rewriting of the New Testament! (see Allen, especially 85–88). But doing so ignores the obvious falsehood of Billy's "*Everything* is all right." Whatever truth such an expression may hold for Tralfamadorians, it remains for humans at best a harmless lie. While Billy's beliefs may console him, they bring small comfort to others and hardly qualify as the New Gospel.[8] Moreover, Billy's response to Rumfoord's assertion "That's war" is far removed from either Christ's values or Vonnegut's. "I know. I'm not complaining" is all Billy has to say (198).[9] His lack of tears, his inability to weep over human tragedy contrasts with Vonnegut's shedding tears as, like Lot's wife, he finds much to weep over both in *Slaughterhouse-Five* and in life generally.[10]

Informing *Slaughterhouse-Five*, therefore, is what might be called a fairly orthodox form of Judeo-Christian theology that nevertheless has often

proven too challenging for some narrow-minded Americans, especially those who serve on school boards and other official bodies. Like Job's three friends, such people hold a simpler, safer view of human beings and their relation to the deity. They have many times attempted to ban, censor, or otherwise destroy the novel.[11] In a "Dear Friend" letter written to solicit funds for the ACLU (the American Civil Liberties Union), Vonnegut reveals that *Slaughterhouse-Five* is among the ten "most frequently censored [and banned] books" in American public schools and libraries. (Others in the top ten include John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* and Of *Mice and Men*, Judy Blume, *Forever*, and Mark Twain, *Huckleberry Finn* [2–3].)

Much of the book's perceived threat stems from its morality, which challenges orthodoxy by asserting that terms, such as "punishment" and "reward" along with the values they embody do not make a lot of sense from a human, but only from a divine or at least a godlike perspective. The unnerving implications of such a position are clear. If human beings cannot perceive, much less receive rewards or punishments, then why should anyone do good rather than do evil? According to the Book of Job and much of Judeo-Christian belief, a good person is a person who does good for its own sake rather than out of hope of reward or from fear of punishment. Good people are good rather than evil because that is who and what good people are. When people do good that becomes their reward. Someone who does evil, on the other hand, is simply someone who does evil and that in turn becomes its own punishment.[12]

None of Vonnegut's characters, including those in *Slaughterhouse-Five* is fundamentally evil and some, such as the nurses and doctors do much good. Most are innocent. Vonnegut's father once shrewdly observed that there was a marked absence of villains in his son's stories and novels, but then his son had survived the worst civilian massacre in modern European history. "Surviving an apocalyptic experience diminishes the need to affix blame or to divide the victims into allies and enemies" (Greiner 42). Billy Pilgrim is neither John Wayne, riding into town to save Western civilization from the Fascists, nor Jesus preaching the necessity of "doing good to those who do evil to you." He is instead an unremarkable, passive individual. C. S. Lewis, discussing characters such as Billy Pilgrim, argues that "[e]very good writer knows that the more unusual the scenes and events of his story are, the slighter, the more ordinary, the more typical his persons should be. Hence Gulliver is a commonplace little man and Alice a commonplace little girl. If they had been more remarkable they would have wrecked their books" (60). Similarly, Billy Pilgrim is a most ordinary, commonplace person and no Christ figure—unless he is seen as an ironic Christ figure preaching his "complacent gospel" (Louis 173). Additionally, there are, as the narrator of *Slaughterhouse-Five* affirms,

"almost no characters in this story, and almost no dramatic confrontations, because most of the people in it are so sick and so much the listless playthings of enormous forces. One of the main effects of war . . . [is to discourage people] from being characters" (164).

Unlike Billy Pilgrim, Kurt Vonnegut himself is anyone but "a commonplace little man" as exemplified by his war experiences. On 29 May, 1945 just three days after being repatriated, Pfc. K. Vonnegut, Jr. wrote home catching his family up on how "our division was cut to ribbons . . . [by] seven fanatical Panzer Divisions" ("50 Years Later" 44). He went on to describe how he became a prisoner of war subjected to brutal inhuman conditions that killed many fellow prisoners. How he and his fellow prisoners were "bombed and strafed" by the Royal Air Force which "killed about one-hundred-and-fifty of us." Of the remaining hundred and fifty privates "shipped to a Dresden work camp . . . I was their leader by virtue of the little German I spoke," he writes (44). But the conditions were so bad, the guards so sadistic and fanatical, the food ration so miserable that Vonnegut, "after desperately trying to improve our situation for two months," told off the guards, was beaten for his trouble, and "fired as group leader" (44). There is nothing in this letter to his family describing his plight as soldier and prisoner of war that remotely corresponds to Billy Pilgrim's activities, actions, inaction, or personality. Clearly, Billy is not Vonnegut's "alter ego" as several critics have claimed[13]—such an identification is simply too easy and fails to fit the facts. Nor is Billy by any stretch of the imagination "a modern Everyman" (McNelly 193) or a "contemporary Everyman confronted with and overwhelmed by the cruelties of war" (Freese, "Invented Religions" 155). Billy accommodates to his Dresden experience and accepts without qualm the ubiquity of death. Vonnegut emphasizes that Billy's reactions are *negative* and juxtaposed to those of the hospital staff who believed that "weak people should be helped as much as possible, that nobody should die" (193). Throughout the novel, and explicitly in its introduction, Vonnegut rejects Billy's quietism (19). Dolores K. Gros Louis perceptively notes that Vonnegut rejects Billy's complacency:

> his writing of this novel with its overt pacificism show[s] that for him everything is not all right. Unlike the Tralfamadorians, Vonnegut the narrator looks back at many *horrible* moments: the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the drowning or enslavement of the thousands of children in the Children's Crusade, the 1760 devastation of Dresden by the Prussians, the extermination of millions of Jews by the Nazis, the firebombing of Dresden, the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, the bombing of North Vietnam, the napalm burning of the Vietnamese, the assassination of Robert

> Kennedy, the assassination of Martin Luther King [, Jr.], the daily body count from Vietnam. (173–74)[14]

In that same May 1945 letter home to his parents from Le Havre POW (Prisoner of War) Repatriation Camp, he recounts how tens, hundreds, and hundreds of thousands of people died in his vicinity from British, American, and Russian planes, "but not me" (44). The tone of the letter is that of the survivor's understated wonder at being alive. The contents of the letter reflect a soldier who actively takes charge of whatever possibilities come his way—something Billy could never do. When it is necessary to surrender, Vonnegut surrenders; when it is necessary to challenge the all-powerful labor camp guards, he does so. When he must hide and avoid bombs and bullets, he hides. When he must risk beatings or death to steal that vitamin-rich malt extract intended for the mothers of the Master Race, he takes the risk and so survives. In *Fates Worse Than Death* Vonnegut discloses that rather than using himself as the model for Billy Pilgrim he chose instead a hapless young man, Joe Crone, who was never able to catch on to how to become a soldier. Nor did Joe Crone make it to the Tralfamadorian zoo to be with Ms. Wildhack. Instead, he committed the ultimate passive act in committing suicide by starvation before the Dresden conflagration occurred. Joe remained buried there in Dresden but Vonnegut brought him back home where he became a successful, wealthy optometrist in *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

As a young soldier in war and a child in peace Billy Pilgrim illustrates Céline's observation—quoted with approval by Vonnegut—that "When not actually busy killing, your soldier's a child" (Céline 118). Vonnegut incorporates Céline's identification of soldiers as children through the novel's alternate title *The Children's Crusade* that also alludes to General Dwight D. Eisenhower's best-selling account of World War II, *Crusade in Europe*. Vonnegut's subtitle, in turn, links the great war to end all wars with one of the most futile, exploitive, cynical events in all of Western European history—the thirteenth-century Children's Crusade—a crusade that never went anywhere and never accomplished anything, except to provide ample prey for all kinds of human vultures to feed upon. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the soldiers in World War II, like the children on their crusade and unlike General Eisenhower, have little or no idea what they are doing and often do not know even where they are. The child is, of course, not morally responsible, as an adult would be. Someone else besides the child-soldier must be in charge and that person or persons can be held morally accountable for what happens. It was the generals acting as adults who planned such glorious operations as the destruction of Dresden (*Slaughterhouse–Five* 186–88).

The reduction of a monument of human civilization, such as the lovely city on the Elbe, to a pile of rubble overnight or the metamorphosis of over 100,000 unarmed people into a corpse factory can, and, indeed, has happened in a world where everything is permitted. In such a world, says Ivan Karamazov in *The Brothers Karamazov*, the issue is not whether or not to believe in God, because the sheer overwhelming horror of the power of evil makes such a question irrelevant. Eliot Rosewater, also suffering from discovering the meaninglessness of life, in part because of his war experiences, assures Billy Pilgrim that "everything there was to know about life was in *The Brothers Karamazov*. . . . But that isn't *enough* any more" (101). Perhaps all anyone can do under such circumstances is to follow Theodore Roethke's advice, which Vonnegut quotes with approval, to "learn by going where I have to go" ("The Waking" line 3). But what of the child-soldiers and others who somehow survived the massacre? Next noontime after the Dresden firestorm, the American POWs together with their German guards appeared above ground: "the sky was black with smoke. The sun was an angry little pinhead. Dresden was like the moon now, nothing but minerals. The stones were hot. Everybody else in the neighborhood was dead" (178). What do you say about a massacre? "[T]here is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre" (19). Massacres simply cannot be comprehended and there are no words to express what lies beyond human comprehension. "Everybody is supposed to be dead. . . . Everything is supposed to be very quiet after a massacre . . . except for the birds. . . . [W]hat do the birds say? All there is to say about a massacre, things like "*Poo-tee-weet*?" (19)

"The belated publication of *Slaughterhouse-Five* seems . . . to indicate that all is not well with writing in our time, that there is hardly an adequate way of responding to the atrocities which defy description. The activity of the mind seems to fail 'before the incommunicability of man's suffering,'" Lionel Trilling concluded eloquently, if somewhat hyperbolically (*The Liberal Imagination* 265 quoted in Schöpp 335). But other critics have badly erred in misreading the bleakness of the end of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. One maintains, for instance, that "the final statement of *Slaughterhouse-Five* is not one of death and its concomitant 'So it goes.' Rather it is a statement of rebirth, the cyclic return of springtime and singing birds that tell Billy Pilgrim 'Poo-tee-weet'" (McNelly 198). But such sentimentality proves at marked variance with the bleak moonscape of Dresden after the firestorm (*Slaughterhouse-Five* 179–80) and with the narrator's (215) and Vonnegut's (19) inability to find anything coherent or intelligent to say in the face of humanity's brutal inhumanity. Placed in the context of the end of the novel, that bird song—if it can be described as song—becomes a meaningless cry testifying to the indifference of nature over the worst human massacre in modern European history.

Like the writer of the Book of Job—who affirms the goodness of creation as an article of faith made possible only by believing in the goodness of the Creator—Vonnegut affirms the essential goodness of *all* creation but ironically and most importantly also from a *nonhuman*; that is, from a Tralfamadorian perspective. "Everything was beautiful, and nothing hurt" is an appropriate Tralfamadorian epitaph for Billy Pilgrim or anyone else *able* fantastically to "come unstuck in time." Paul Davies in *About Time* describes Billy Pilgrim's fantastic situation as a "sort of immortality . . . restricted to a fixed set of events" (41). Davies recounts a childhood fantasy he had where he pressed a series of imagined buttons to jump forward into the future or backward into the past. His fantasy is remarkably similar to Billy's reality:

> With these buttons, gone would be the orderly precession of events that apparently constitutes my life. I could simply jump hither and thither at random, back and forth in time, rapidly moving on from any unpleasant episodes, frequently repeating the good times, always avoiding death, of course, and continuing *ad infinitum*. . . . It is but a small step from this wild fantasy to the suspicion that maybe someone else . . . is pressing those buttons on my behalf, and I, poor fool, am totally oblivious to the trickery. On the other hand, so long as the mysterious button-pusher keeps at it, it seems as if I will enjoy some sort of immortality, though one restricted to a fixed set of events. (40–41)

Still there are a few readers who either ignore or argue away this fantastic premise of the novel—a premise that becomes essential if Billy is to experience then adopt his inhuman Tralfamadorian view of time. One critic, for example, rather than accepting Billy's ability to move within time into the future, asserts that: "Billy Pilgrim . . . takes refuge in an intense fantasy life, which involves his being captured and sent to a remote planet. . . . He also comes 'unstuck in time' and present moments during the war may either give way to an intense re-experiencing of moments from the past or unexpected hallucinations of life in the future" (Tanner, *City* 195; see also McGinnis 115).[15] But this description appears closer to Paul Davies's childhood fantasy than to Billy Pilgrim's reality. From beginning to end *Slaughterhouse-Five* establishes and maintains that "Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time" (23)—one might as well suggest that Gregor Samsa only hallucinates being a cockroach in Franz Kafka's "The Metamorphosis." Neither Kafka's story nor Vonnegut's novel makes much sense either as an intense personal fantasy or an hallucination (see Morse, "Gaudi"). Yet this view typifies those who read *Slaughterhouse-Five* as a realistic novel with a hero who fantasizes.[16] Such

readers deny the fantastic premise of Vonnegut's novel that Billy Pilgrim does come unstuck, that he does indeed move forward and backward in time.

One of the more aggressive readings of *Slaughterhouse-Five* as a realistic novel, belongs to a critic who, after accusing others of "not understand[ing] the narrative viewpoint" and having a "simplistic concept of narrative viewpoint" (Blackford, "Physics" 38), proceeds to construct his own reading of the novel as the product of Billy Pilgrim's brain damage suffered when "Roland Weary shakes him and hits his head against a tree. Earlier in the novel, the narrator tells us that this was the very moment when Billy first came unstuck in time" (Blackford 40). Unfortunately for this reading, neither assumption proves correct. First, this incident of the supposed head bashing is clearly downplayed in *Slaughterhouse-Five* as not terribly significant. The narrator reports that "Weary . . . banged Billy against a tree, then pulled him away from it, flung him in the direction he was supposed to . . . [go]" (*Slaughterhouse-Five* 47; compare 156 where Weary's actions are also described). No serious consequences result from this incident. Later, after the war, Billy will fracture his skull in an airplane crash in New Hampshire (156). Apparently, this critic conflated the two events because they are interleaved in the story through Billy's time-tripping (156–57). Second, and more important, Billy's first time traveling described in extensive detail (43–47) occurs *before* the occasion where Weary shakes him (41). The shaking incident brings Billy *back* to the forest and back to Roland Weary from time-tripping rather than the other way around (compare *Slaughterhouse-Five* 47 and Blackford 40). Billy does not hallucinate; instead, as Vonnegut tells us repeatedly, he simply, if fantastically, comes "unstuck in time" and is, therefore, able to move in time forward as well as backward. As a result, Billy enjoys the nonhuman consolation of seeing time and events as God sees them or as—the equally nonhuman—Tralfamadorians see them; that is, all at once. "Tralfamadore . . . by abolishing time, abolishes hope and change, development and free will," as Joseph C. Schöpp shrewdly observes (345). Similarly, Billy's ability to escape suffering by viewing only those good moments in his life where "nothing hurt" becomes appropriate if—ultimately—self-defeating for this utterly passive victim of other people and events.

As an alternative to Billy's adopted nonhuman perspective, Vonnegut offers a more human, less Godlike one through the many references to Reinhold Neibuhr's famous prayer that Montana Wildhack carries in a locket about her neck and that Billy keeps framed on his office wall for the benefit of his patients. "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom always to tell the difference." The prayer asks for divine help in viewing the human situation in light of each person's individual abilities to cope with suffering and loss. Familiar to many

Americans as the prayer of Alcoholics Anonymous, Neibuhr's words describe the end point of Vonnegut's moral odyssey through his first six novels.[17] Like Job, he moves from anger through disbelief to rebellion before finally coming to accept what is and what must be—all of which must include the omnipresent fact of human suffering and death.

Such a change comes about through Vonnegut's acceptance in *Slaughterhouse-Five* of the central place of suffering in human experience whether that suffering is caused by the firebombing of Dresden or by natural or human-made disasters. Along with accepting the mystery of human suffering, Vonnegut also recognizes the presence of evil in the world for which there is not now and can never be a fully satisfactory human explanation. *Slaughterhouse-Five* thus raises acutely the profound moral issues with which Vonnegut has had to wrestle as an adult human being and as a writer. "Vonnegut's fiction," Marc Leeds contends, "demands all his protagonists relive the central moment of his life: the entombment within the slaughterhouse meatlocker during the firebombing of Dresden" ("Reading" 91–92). Vonnegut himself believes that *Slaughterhouse-Five* results at least in part from what Céline calls his "duty dance with death" without which, he believed, no art is possible. Perhaps the rigors of this duty dance help account for the difficulties that he encountered in writing the novel as well as the relief that he experienced in concluding it. Having at last completed *Slaughterhouse-Five* Vonnegut felt that he "didn't have to write at all anymore" that he had reached the end of "some, sort of career" (*Wampeters, Foma & Granfalloons* 280). After wrestling with some of the most profound and some of the most difficult human questions in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut promised himself that his next book would "be fun" (*Slaughterhouse-Five* 22), which proved true in the comedy of *Breakfast of Champions*.

It would be almost twenty years after the completion of *Slaughterhouse-Five* before Vonnegut would return in *Bluebeard* to the war's end in Europe. In that later novel, the end is pictured as a field crowded with people (268, 270–76, 282–85 compare *Slaughterhouse-Five* 5–6)—the lunatics, refugees, prisoners of war, victims of the concentration camps—all the ragged remnants of an exhausted world and—most important—all survivors. These are living human beings, rather than the stacked corpses of the Hospital of Hope and Mercy in *Cat's Cradle* or the bodies found in the "corpse mine" of the desolate Dresden landscape. But *Bluebeard* with its happy ending in praise of human creativity and community will appear only four decades after the end of World War II and almost twenty years after *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

Several hundred years after the Book of Job's composition, an editor, unable to accept the work's stark vision of the power of evil and the central

role of unmerited suffering in human life, added a happy ending. In the amended story, Job received back everything he had lost and more—except, of course, his dead children. Vonnegut, like Job's editor, also tacks on an equally fantastic, equally happy ending in Billy Pilgrim's epitaph: "Everything was beautiful, and nothing hurt." This Tralfamadorian expression far from being a "stoical, hopeful acceptance" (McNelly 198) is quite simply foma. Such harmless untruths that fill *The Books of Bokonon* in *Cat's Cradle* enable Billy and others like him, who have no hope of ever escaping from the miseries of this life, to nevertheless be "brave and kind and healthy and happy" (epigraph to *Cat's Cradle* from *The Books of Bokonon* 4). As Merrill and Scholl persuasively conclude "the Billy Pilgrims of this world *are* better off saying that everything is beautiful and nothing hurts, for they truly cannot change the past, the present, or the future. All they can do is survive" (146).

Not so Vonnegut. Although he appears, like Billy, a messenger who "alone . . . escaped to tell you," the message he brings through his fiction, especially through the narrator-persona in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, proves far different from Billy's message of quietism and reassurance. Instead, the emphasis falls on the necessity of accepting suffering with neither the comfort that "everything is beautiful" nor the dream that "nothing hurt" but with the attendant obligation to attempt courageously to change the present and thereby change the future. So Vonnegut reports that he has admonished his sons never to participate in, rejoice over, or feel satisfied by reports that enemies have been massacred. "I have also told them not to work for companies which make massacre machinery, . . . [while expressing] contempt for people who think we need [such] machinery" (*Slaughterhouse-Five* 19).

If a major difference between mature and immature adults lies in the immature letting "other people clean up the mess they had made," as Daisy and Tom Buchanan most conspicuously did in *The Great Gatsby* (170), then mature adults will assume responsibility for mistakes, accidents, crimes, evil acts, and so forth. Billy Pilgrim remains the immature child who refuses to take responsibility for anything—after all he's only an exhibit in a zoo! But as Doris Lessing pointed out in her review of *Mother Night*: "What Vonnegut deals with, always, is responsibility: Whose fault was it all—the gas chambers, the camps, the degradations and the debasements of all our standards? Whose? Well, *ours* as much as *theirs*" (46). As the faithful messenger, Vonnegut in *Slaughterhouse-Five* delivers his crucial, if unwelcome, message: "We have met the enemy and he is us."[18]

The slaughterhouse from which the novel takes its title was once a house of death. It became, paradoxically during the inferno of the Dresden firebombing, a house of salvation when it gave oxygen to its occupants rather than to the firestorm. Vonnegut's novel is, in part, an account of a house of death—of

the massacre of unarmed civilians—but it itself becomes also a house of salvation through its plea for a change in values and attitudes that would make other such massacres impossible. Vonnegut accomplishes his dual purpose in breaking the silence by making the massacre itself public knowledge. The novel thus thrust back into living memory, in a way that could not be ignored, a portion of American history which had never officially been acknowledged, and which had been either inadvertently or deliberately concealed. According to Vonnegut, in the whole twenty-seven volumes of the *Official History of the Army Air Force in World War Two*, for instance, little had been reported about the Dresden raid and ensuing fire-storm despite the fact that it had been judged a "howling success." But the huge size of that success remained hidden from the American public (*Slaughterhouse-Five* 191).

Having looked into the depths of the physical and moral firestorm, Vonnegut brings news of disaster. But he also insists on the necessity of examining the profound moral, social, and theological issues raised by the disaster—issues such as the power of evil, the awareness of inhuman destruction, the omnipresence of suffering, and the issue of responsibility. In some cultures when a messenger brought such an unwelcome message he was quickly killed—preferably before he could officially deliver the message. In the United States—somewhat more cynically, but perhaps equally effectively—the messenger may become transformed into a celebrity and grow fabulously rich, thus distracting people's attention away from his message—a message that no one really wanted to hear anyway.

Notes

1. "Like *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut's *Deadeye Dick* counterpoints a massive catastrophe, the destruction of Midland City, for which no one is punished, with a smaller event that is punished severely: Rudy Waltz's accidental shooting of Eloise Metzger" (Hearron 190).

2. Martin Amis favorably appraises Vonnegut's achievement in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, if in a somewhat patronizing manner, as "a cunning novella, synthesizing all the elements of Vonnegut's earlier work: fact, fantasy, ironic realism, and comic *SF*. In my view, *Slaughterhouse-Five* will retain its status as a dazzling minor classic," but he remains puzzled by its wide readership since, according to Amis, "quality alone can hardly explain its spectacular popularity" (135). Donald J. Greiner, on the other hand, speaks for many readers in believing that the book's distinctive accomplishment derives from Vonnegut's "successful expression of . . . deeply felt personal emotion without sentimentality" (43). Amis suggests that "perhaps the answer is, in some sense, demographic," and postulates an American audience reading from *Slaughterhouse-Five* to Vietnam by way of World War II (135). (Amis found the plot for his own novella, *Time's Arrow or The Nature of the Offense* [1991] while reading *Slaughterhouse-Five*.) The most extravagant praise of *Slaughterhouse-Five* may well have been Stanley Schatt's, when he claimed that "*Slaughterhouse-Five* is a vision, a dream, Vonnegut's version of James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* in which he and the

reader both learn by 'going where I have to go'" (84). Such a claim would be difficult to substantiate.

3. Compare Edgar Derby reading *The Red Badge of Courage* while Billy enters his morphine heaven (99).

4. Schöpp suggests a clear qualification for the parallel between *The Red Badge of Courage* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*. He claims persuasively that Crane's novel "fails as a model. Dresden rules out maturation" of the kind that Fleming experiences as he confronts death and returns to the battlescape (339).

5. Vonnegut in *Timequake* describes his faith as that of a Humanist. "Humanists try to behave decently and honorably without any expectation of rewards or punishments in an afterlife. The creator of the Universe has been to us unknowable so far. We serve as well as we can the highest abstraction of which we have some understanding, which is our community" (72).

6. The film of *Slaughterhouse-Five* ignored the darker side of this pairing of destruction and procreation by emphasizing Billy, Montana Wildhack, and their new baby in its happy ending. Compare such sentimentality to *Deadeye Dick's* hard-edged realism where Rudy considers "having the voice of God from the back of the theater" announce that the purpose of humanity is "to reproduce. Nothing else really interests Me. All the rest is frippery" (185).

7. James J. Napier may have been one of the first to recognize this parallel.

8. See Allen, *Understanding* 85–88. Allen also appears to be rewriting Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time* when claiming that Hawking was "becoming more convinced that there is no reason why under some circumstances the 'arrow of time' might point from future to past rather than from past to future" (81). But, all of Hawking's book resists this thought (see especially, Chapter 9, "The Arrow of Time" [143–53]). Paul Davies submits that "[I]n the 1980s, Stephen Hawking also toyed with the idea of a time-reversing universe for a while, only to drop it with the admission that it was his 'greatest mistake'" (*Last Three Minutes* 147).

9. Maurice J. O'Sullivan, Jr. puts it well: "Billy Pilgrim represents a standard—an essentially negative although often sympathetic standard—against which the persona [which O'Sullivan defines as "the authorial persona who dominates the first chapter and appears periodically thereafter"] measures himself" (245).

10. When Vonnegut draws his self-portrait in *Breakfast of Champions*, for instance, he includes tears streaming from his eye (296). The epigraph of *Breakfast of Champions* is taken from the Book of Job: "*When he hath tried me, / I shall come forth as gold*" (emphasis in the original).

11. At least once in Drake, North Dakota the local school board ordered a school janitor to burn a copy of *Slaughterhouse-Five* in the school furnace (*Palm Sunday* 4, see also 3–17). Clearly the members of that school committee were attempting to protect the young from the contents of this novel, which they believed threatens their view of the world and the sterility of their religion. Vonnegut's book thereby takes its place in an honorable company of disturbing texts that includes the Book of Job, the Old Testament Prophets, and Jesus's Sermon on the Mount—all of which have at various times threatened the calcified beliefs of those in authority. See the prologue to Vonnegut's *Jailbird*, especially 18–20.

12. Compare Emerson's equally disquieting notion of evil as "merely privative" in his "Divinity School Address."

13. See, for example, McGinnis (114). But the only alter ego Vonnegut acknowledges in his fiction is the character of Kilgore Trout (*Timequake* xiii).

14. See also Greiner (49) and Merrill and Scholl (149–50).

15. Tanner gives a similar misreading of Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* when he declares that Huck's "compassion . . . takes in not only Jim, but a drunk at a circus (while others laugh)" (*Reign of Wonder* 169). But the others laugh because, unlike Huck, they are "in" on the joke that the "drunk" is actually a clever clown performing his "act." Twain's point is not Huck's compassion but his literal-mindedness about people and events, unless he is producing the "stretchers."

16. For example, "Billy imagines himself on a Tralfamadorian space ship" (Burhans 180), "*Slaughterhouse-Five* with its mad [sic] protagonist" (Godshallk 105), "the Tralfamadorians, those mythical creatures who live on a distant planet in Billy Pilgrim's mind" (McGinnis 115), "one must sympathize with Billy's need to create Tralfamadore" (Merrill and Scholl 146), "Billy . . . forg[ing] his illusory trip into outer space. . . . His hallucinations must . . . become his reality, making him a permanent dreamer" (Mustazza, *Genesis* 103), and "every element of Billy's 'sci-fi fantasy' can be explained in realistic, psychological terms" (Edelstein 129).

17. Vonnegut says, "In the Soviet Union they imagine that I've made up that prayer" ("Serenity" 23, reprint 15). Sanford Pinsker unaccountably attributes the prayer to St. Francis (97).

18. The phrasing is Walt Kelley's from his comic strip, *Pogo*, but the sentiment is pure Vonnegut. For a diametrically opposite reading, see Edelstein, especially 135–39.

JEROME KLINKOWITZ

Speaking Personally: Slaughterhouse-Five *and the Essays*

"The Hyannis Port Story" is more than Kurt Vonnegut's last piece of fiction for the *Saturday Evening Post*. That it never appeared there, waiting for publication five years later in *Welcome to the Monkey House*, makes it fit into the author's canon all the more comfortably, for in this narrative he looks forward to the next stage in his career. As a short story it uses a formula Vonnegut had exploited from his start with the family magazines, the theme of homely simplicity triumphing over wealth and pretension. But the device is played out with several major differences. The wealth and fame are immensely greater than in "Custom-Made Bride" and any of the other earlier tales. As well they should be, for these trappings belong not to fictive creations but to actual people, the family of President John F. Kennedy living in Hyannis Port. It is the third distinguishing element of this story that shows the method Vonnegut began using at that time and which would bring him his greatest success: the story's events, as richly fabulous yet historically true as they are, get measured from the narrator's highly personal point of view. In "The Hyannis Port Story" President Kennedy is much like the actual sitting president, and the narrator is much like Kurt Vonnegut In bringing the two together a refreshing perspective is gained, one that the author would exploit for the rest of his career, propelling himself to great fame with *Slaughterhouse-Five* and sustaining his role of public spokesmanship ever after.

From *The Vonnegut Effect,* pp. 75–97.

In terms of short-story salesmanship this Kennedy piece was surely a last-gasp effort. Already having reduced its fiction, the *Post* would soon go the way of *Collier's*, Vonnegut's other big market, and cease publication. To fill this gap in his income the author turned to something new, writing highly personal essays on current topics for other popular magazines, among them *Esquire*, *McCall's*, and *Life*. In need of money, he took on book reviews, especially tough ones such as covering the new *Random House Dictionary*, personalizing the experience as best he could. This personalization drew the notice of publisher Seymour Lawrence, who figured that anyone who could write so engagingly about a dictionary would surely be interesting as a novelist. In the meantime Vonnegut had taken an instructorship in creative writing at the University of Iowa, earning less than eight thousand dollars per year. A twenty-five-thousand-dollar advance from Lawrence let him quit and work full time on *Slaughterhouse-Five*, a novel whose structure shows the effects of all this personal essay writing. Yet before the novel and before the first essay stands "The Hyannis Port Story," evidence that Vonnegut was developing in this direction well in advance of economic need. If as a *Saturday Evening Post* story it marked the end of one road, its narrative method signposted a grand new avenue toward the ultimate Vonnegut effect.

The current events of this piece are as solid and as necessary as those in any essay. Its readership in 1963 would not just remember Dwight D. Eisenhower's recent presidency but would also know that this two-time winner had never been accepted by the Republican Right, which made a conservative hero of Sen. Robert Taft from Ohio. They would also know more about Walter Reuther than that he was president of the United Auto Workers, for at the time this man was even more important for his involvement with Kennedy politics. Because the Kennedys had such starlike popularity even *Post* readers could be trusted to know such particulars as the fate of Adlai Stevenson, beaten out for the nomination and given an awkward ambassadorship to the United Nations instead. All of this information would be crucial for an essay, but for his special purposes Vonnegut uses them as key elements in his fiction. Why fiction? Because he has noted that by 1963 the Kennedy fame has become as fabulative as any piece of creative writing, with both legendary narratives and literary references—the PT-109 war story, for example, and the constant comparisons of the Kennedy style to life in King Arthur's Camelot. Why not mix in some fiction of his own, particularly from the plain and simple world outside? This was the world, after all, that was real. The Kennedy hysteria was something else indeed.

"The farthest away from home I ever sold a storm window was in Hyannis Port, Massachusetts, practically in the front yard of President Kennedy's summer home" (*WMH*, 133)—these opening words make reference to the

famous scene but measure things from a much more humble source, the narrator's own. Everything in the narrative will be valued from this point of view, which spans the simple and the fabulous. In the process *Post* readers are brought into the equation, for the storyteller's perspective is much closer to their own than to that of the Kennedys. The posture is really Vonnegut's own. The North Crawford, New Hampshire, from which the narrator travels is as homely a place as West Barnstable, Massachusetts, seven miles away from Hyannis Port but light years in distance from the Kennedy glamor. On his humbler part of Cape Cod, Kurt Vonnegut has run his short-story business in the same style as this narrator's trade in storm windows and bathtub enclosures, so it is appropriate that the Kennedy business takes less prominence in his life than simply getting the job done. Having a business matter confused with politics has prompted a Kennedy neighbor, Commodore Rumfoord, to order a full set of storms and screens, rewarding the narrator for right-wing sentiments the man does not have—he has already wisely advised his magazine readers that he has yet to decide between Kennedy and Goldwater for the next year's election. But a sale's a sale, and taking it gets him caught up in the Hyannis Port turmoil.

Dealing with this turmoil constitutes the story's action. For all the Kennedy notoriety, this simple tradesman is the person who faces most of it, but in his reaction is a clue for understanding the president. It is summer 1963, and the Cape is awash with gawkers drawn by the Kennedy fame. In a traffic jam, the narrator finds himself stalled next to Ambassador Stevenson. The two get out and walk around a bit. "I took the opportunity to ask him how the United Nations was getting along. He told me they were getting along about as well as could be expected. That wasn't anything I didn't already know" (*WMH*, 136), readers learn. If this sounds like a good-natured but banal exchange between neighbors, so be it; in the ultimate democracy of a traffic jam the Ambassador's limousine is getting no farther than the narrator's van. For the second time now the standard is affirmed: a job is a job.

When UN ambassador and storm-window salesman meet, it is on the level of the latter. In a similar way Vonnegut's narrator brings the whole Kennedy hullabaloo to his own level, where he can deal with it as an honest workman. He will have to do this to survive the installation, given the determination of these rich folks to drag him into their own stories. But the pattern is clear just from his drive into town. Unsnared from traffic, he finds himself on the commercial strip where everything has become thematic, from the Presidential Motor Inn and the First Family Waffle Shop to the PT-109 Cocktail Lounge and a miniature golf course called the New Frontier. Needing lunch, he stops for a waffle, but he is faced with an equally corny menu with entrees named after Kennedys and their entourage. "A waffle with

strawberries and cream was a *Jackie*," he reports, and "a waffle with a scoop of ice cream was a *Caroline*" (*WMH*, 136). And so forth? No, it is even worse, for "they even had a waffle named Arthur Schlesinger, Jr." But here is how he not only makes the best of it but also brings the whole affair into a more reasonable orbit: "I had a thing called a *Teddy*," which mercifully is left undescribed, "and a cup of *Joe*" (137).

The *Post* readership of 1963 could be expected to know how appropriate these menu names were and even that the Harvard historian was a top administration adviser. Such identifications were signs of Kennedy notoriety—everyone at the time knew them, and as a writer Vonnegut was able to manipulate them in narrative play. In a few years literary critics would begin using such terminology, finding that such cultural signs worked together like syntactic forms in a generative grammar—*semiotics* will become fashionable in America about the same time as Kurt Vonnegut's fiction. And popular readers certainly knew what a sign was—perhaps not in deconstructive terms but definitely in the way this story uses the device. For as he approaches his customer's property the narrator notices something to the Rumfoord house besides its towers and parapets. "On a second-floor balcony was a huge portrait of Barry Goldwater" (*WMH*, 137), the conservative Republican likely to face Kennedy in the 1964 election. "It had bicycle reflectors in the pupils of its eyes." Is this not odd for a property right next door to the president's home? Such is the point: "Those eyes stared right through the Kennedy gate. There were floodlights all around, so I could tell it was lit up at night. And the floodlights were rigged with blinkers."

This remarkable line is followed by one in which the narrator pauses to draw a breath. "A man who sells storm windows can never really be sure about what class he belongs to," he tells his readers and reminds himself, "especially if he installs the windows too" (*WMH*, 137). Given the crazy semiology at hand, he judges it best to keep out of the way, getting the job done quickly so that he can return to the calmer world of North Crawford. But his customer, Commodore Rumfoord, insists on chatting with him through the job, in the process drawing the poor man into the rarified world of presidential politics. In the process there is much fun with, the contrasts between the old money style of Rumfoord's Republicanism and the Kennedy ambience—one wonders which is worse, their liberal politics or nouveau status in this yacht club community. But a serious theme emerges. Mocked by a guide on a sight-seeing boat as an unproductive member of the idle rich, the commodore begins doubting himself after all, with the tradesman quietly observing, he has seen his beloved son fall in love with a Kennedy cousin and plan for marriage into the clan.

Has the old man's life amounted to nothing? Here is where the story begins resembling a classic Vonnegut *Post* composition, as the narrator's quiet

example of steady work provides an antidotal example for Rumfoord. He can redeem himself, his wife points out, by simply doing something *useful* (his commodore's title dates from having captained the Hyannis Port yacht club for one year a generation earlier). The entire atmosphere becomes nicer as the house quiets down and everyone can enjoy the peace that lies beyond blustering politics and the pretensions of old money.

But Vonnegut cannot let his story end just yet. This is, after all, his new style of work, in which historical reality becomes integrated with the structure of fiction—and the narrative's most famous figure, President John Fitzgerald Kennedy, has yet to appear. One guesses that he would like to keep out of it, given his neighbor's adversarial politics and flamboyant habits of self-expression. But in the quiet of the story's nightfall a familiar voice comes across the lawn: that of the president asking the commodore why his Goldwater sign is dark—the son-in-law of Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev is visiting and would like to see it. Khrushchev? Half a day earlier this name would have sent Commodore Rumfoord into fits, but in his new mood he just complies respectfully. "He turned it on," the narrator reports, and "the whole neighborhood was bathed in flashing lights." Especially in the visitor's presence, and right in the president's face, is this not the greatest insult of all? These have been the reader's worries all along, but now the homely truth is revealed. Would the commodore please leave the sign on? the president requests. "That way I can find my way home" (*WMH*, 145). Far from taking it as a sign of political animosity, President Kennedy has been using the display for what it is literally: a sign marking the way to where he lives. What could be more neighborly?

Turning the great and the famous into the comfortably familiar and ordinary would be Kurt Vonnegut's method for the personal essays he would begin writing about this time. With a method much like that of "The Hyannis Port Story," the narratives of these pieces—and they were heavily anecdotal—would approach some currently challenging event and, by measuring it against the author's experience, reduce it to manageable size. A mass murderer on Cape Cod, the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, genocidal warfare in Biafra, the extravagances of America's space program—these and other topics generated a steady stream of essays that replaced Vonnegut's lost short-story income. More importantly, they deepened an autobiographical strain that began appearing in his fiction at this same time, typified by the prefaces he wrote for the 1966 hardcover edition of *Mother Night* and the 1968 collection of his short stories, *Welcome to the Monkey House*, that implicated his own life in his otherwise creative writing. At this point the *Vonnegut* effect seems to be as much "Vonnegut" as "effect," especially when integrated into such a major work as *Slaughterhouse-Five*. For the previously unwriteable material

of the author's World War II experience at Dresden this new manner proves critically helpful; if there is indeed nothing to say about a massacre, the author would have to talk about something else—namely himself. This is precisely what he does in a book review sufficiently anecdotal to merit *inclusion* in his short-story collection. What does one say about a dictionary? Lexicology defies popular comment, even when there is a conflict to its story, as *Vonnegut* finds in the debate between prescriptive and descriptive linguistics. And so he characterizes the argument as it seems to him: "Prescriptive, as nearly as I could tell, was like an honest cop, and descriptive was like a boozed-up war buddy from Mobile, Ala." (*WMH*, 108). This is the style that would not just get the hungry writer more assignments but would also draw publisher Seymour Lawrence to his work.

There is more to this method than the inclusion of self as a point of reference. The nature of Vonnegut's personality also generates a unique structure, one that would be instrumental in getting the difficult matter of Dresden expressed. Here too the essays are a helpful guide for seeing the methodology take shape. "Science Fiction" is an essay written for the *New York Times Book Review* of 5 September 1965 and collected as the lead piece in *Wampeters, Foma & Granfalloons*. Its message is a serious one: that Vonnegut has never liked being called a science-fiction writer because such categorization relegates his work to triviality. For this, science-fiction buffs are partly to blame, given their insistence that everything they like be qualified as sci-fi. More important than this complaint, however, is the way Vonnegut structures it, taking off from readers who find futuristic tendencies in *1984*, *Invisible Man*, and even *Madame Bovary*: "They are particularly hot for Kafka. Boomers of science fiction might reply, 'Ha! Orwell and Ellison and Flaubert and Kafka are science-fiction writers, too!' They often say things like that. Some are crazy enough to try to capture Tolstoy. It is as though I were to claim that everybody of note belonged fundamentally to Delta Upsilon, my own lodge, incidentally, whether he knew it or not. Kafka would have been a desperately unhappy D.U." (*WFG*, 4). Franz Kafka in a fraternity rush at Cornell University? The image is preposterous—and funny because of that. But most effective is the way Vonnegut gets such diverse terms together, using the rhetorical fallacy of the excluded middle to suggest that if science fiction is to Franz Kafka as Franz Kafka is to Delta Upsilon fraternity life, then Herr Kafka is suffering as a D.U. brother. Yes, he surely would have. But allowing such an image to discredit the claims of science-fiction buffs involves a deliberate misuse of rhetoric, thus getting Vonnegut's narrative to a point it might not otherwise be able to reach.

This and almost every other essay Kurt Vonnegut would publish in the late 1960s uses his own personality to force a comic issue that seals his

otherwise conventionally expressed argument. These instances usually are positioned like a punch line in a joke: after a serious question has been posed, and after the listener has made some serious mental effort to answer it, at which point the joker springs the trap, providing the relief of laughter that comes with the happy dismissal from hard, serious thought. In the science-fiction essay the author has made his point by the time Franz Kafka comes along; the D.U. story is just some icing on the cake, letting readers leave with a happily complicit attitude—they have gotten the joke. Vonnegut's essay on the Maharishi, who was all the rage at the time as a guru to the stars who preached a self-improvement doctrine so easy that anyone could master it in a few quick lessons, forecasts its joke in the title! "Yes, We Have No Nirvanas," a play on the old novelty song "Yes, We Have No Bananas" that joked with linguistic patterns of reason (and of nonreason!). The writer starts off by making fun of himself, mocking his own irritation that his wife and daughter have invested seventy dollars of his money in the Maharishi's program. But the punch line comes when Vonnegut, supposedly a religious skeptic, leaves the *flimflam* of a transcendental meditation session in search of something quite surprising: "I went outside the hotel after that, liking Jesus better than I had ever before liked Him. I wanted to see a crucifix, so I could say to it, 'You know why You're up there? It's Your own fault. You should have practiced Transcendental Meditation, which is easy as pie. You would also have been a better carpenter" (*WFG*, 39–40). Appraising the U.S. space program, Vonnegut plays the same trick he does for explaining astrophysics in *The Sirens of Titan*, quoting a children's book on the subject but using the device to make fun of himself. "'We are flying through space. Our craft is the earth, which orbits the sun at a speed of 67,000 miles an hour. As it orbits the sun, it spins on its axis. The sun is a star.' If I were drunk, I might cry about that" (78). The message is that to ignore human needs on earth while wasting billions on space is even more irresponsible than alcoholism. "Earth is a pretty blue and pink and white pearl in the pictures NASA sent me," he writes, adding that on his way down to Cape Canaveral he flew over Appalachia. "Life is said to be horrible down there in many places, but it looked like the Garden of Eden to me," he confesses. "I was a rich guy, way up in the sky, munching dry-roasted peanuts and sipping gin" (84).

The space program as a drinker's buzz, the Maharishi teaching transcendental meditation to Christ crucified, Franz Kafka as a terribly unhappy D.U.—these are jokes against logic, using logic's own terms, that help Kurt Vonnegut find ways to articulate the otherwise unspeakable aspects of a massacre. Attempting to write a book about Dresden coincides with the great critical debate over whether a novel could be "about" anything. The 1960s had begun with novelists such as Philip Roth and Stanley Elkin worrying that the per-

sonal extravagances and public idiocies of current life were eclipsing even satirists' abilities to make fun of the American scene—the scene was simply doing too good a job of it itself. At the same time theorists debated the referentiality of fictive language, or of any language at all; deconstructionists argued that any linguistic system operated not on identities but on differences.

The currency of these debates registers within *Slaughterhouse-Five* when during his trip to New York City, Vonnegut's protagonist, Billy Pilgrim, gets himself involved with a radio show's panel discussion of the presumed death of the novel. For all of his trouble at making a living with the genre Kurt Vonnegut might well have agreed; but when Billy ignores the critical dialogue taking place and just launches into his explanation of life on Tralfamadore, he is giving hints at how, in the author's hands, the form has been reinvented. Tralfamadore—the distant world several galaxies away from which the flying-saucer pilot Salo had come in *The Sirens of Titan* to determine (through no fault or effort of his own) several thousand years of world history—is for Billy a parallel universe, where the problematic aspects of his earthly existence are all nicely resolved. When considered as a creation of science-fiction writer Kilgore Trout, a significant character in this novel as well as in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* (and in other Vonnegut narratives afterward), Tralfamadore becomes just as much a resolution of human problems as Trout's social philosophies are in the previous work. And so it stands to reason that in the Tralfamadorians' world, which resolves so much trouble, there would be a solution to the death of the novel.

What are the problems with fiction in Billy Pilgrim's earthly world? Probably the same ones that have frustrated Kurt Vonnegut in his attempt to write the book he has wanted to write since coming home from the war. It is the limitation of temporal and spatial causality that makes it so hard to wrestle the matter of Dresden into the conventional format of a novel, one observing the traditional unities of time, space, and action and the consequences that result when insisting a story have a beginning, a middle, and an end. On Tralfamadore novels have none of these. In fact they do not look like novels at all, as Billy observes to the disembodied voice that is his mentor on the distant planet:

> Billy couldn't read Tralfamadorian, of course, but he could at least see how the books were laid out—in brief clumps of symbols separated by stars. Billy commented that the clumps might be telegrams. "Exactly," said the voice.
>
> "They *are* telegrams?"
>
> "There are no telegrams on Tralfamadore. But you're right: each clump of symbols is a brief, urgent message—describing

> a situation, a scene. We Tralfamadorians read them all at once, not one after the other. There isn't any particular relationship between all the messages, except that the author has chosen them carefully, so that, when seen all at one time, they produce an image of life that is beautiful and surprising and deep. There is no beginning, no middle, no end, no suspense, no moral, no causes, no effects. What we love in our books are the depths of many marvelous moments seen all at one time." (*SF*, 76)

It is not surprising that Tralfamadorian fiction answers objections from deconstructionists and death-of-the-novel critics alike. There is nothing here of conventional fiction's attempt at a totalizing effect, a fraudulent impression that life is orderly and that unities of character and idea will, by virtue of systematic study, accrete themselves into some conclusive meaning. It is the false rhetoric of such practices, critics argue, that lets the truly important products of fiction—those "marvelous moments" seen in all their depths slip away, never to be articulated. It is the reason why, in other words, there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre, just when a witness of such an event is struggling to say everything: to say everything *all at once* because imposing conditions of time and space steal meaning from the event.

In earthly terms, of course, there are reasons why the depths of many moments cannot be seen all at one time. Even single words must be read, and sentences must be read in sequence for them to make sense. Linearity forces its demands on the reader in just one line of print; expand this demand to the length of a page, let alone that of a chapter or several chapters, and the material confines of a printed novel are obvious. But what if an author could devise a way of writing that did not depend on the reader's steady accumulation of data in any progressive sense, a way that instead let items be noted and then held in abeyance from any need for meaning, until one came to the book's end—and at that point everything suddenly became meaningful all at once? This is the strategy Vonnegut uses for *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Similar to what he is accomplishing at this time in his personal essays, the method involves interposing himself between the troublesome nature of his material and the reader's need to have that material explained. There is, of course, no logical reason for such involvement. That is why the images of Kurt Vonnegut's relation to the Maharishi (seventy dollars of his hard-earned money that his wife and daughter have blown on transcendental meditation sessions) and to the space program (with references to his own inebriation) are so funny. They simply do not belong with the otherwise serious subject matter. But by putting himself in, the author at once upsets the logical structure that keeps things so serious (and so unsolvable) and introduces a comic element

that yields the relief of a solution. Vonnegut, and his way of making matters humorous, thus opens a crack in the confinements of convention that have withheld the liberating knowledge he and his readers can now celebrate.

"All this happened, more or less"—so begins this novel that really does not look like one. Fiction traditionally asks its readers to suspend their disbelief, but here they are not required to make such a willing act. There is no reason to, as the story to come is factual with no need to pretend that it is real because it actually is. That is the first rule to be broken. The second is that the author identifies himself with the "I" doing the narration—just as the events of this World War II story truly happened, the person talking about them is the real Kurt Vonnegut. A lifetime of instruction that the narrator of a novel is not the author thus flies out the window. But there is more. Just as in his Maharishi and U.S. space program essays, Vonnegut does something else unconventional: he talks about his writing even as he does it. Thus all the objections that might be raised about the novel in the discussion session Billy Pilgrim attends are answered even as *Slaughterhouse-Five* begins. In an age when fiction cannot be "about" something, this novel is not "about" anything other than itself, an object existing quite firmly in the reader's hands.

There are also some practical reasons why Vonnegut begins in this manner. His is by no means the first war story to come out of the events of 1941–45. Indeed by 1969, when *Slaughterhouse-Five* appeared, there had been many thousands in print and on film, with narratives from subsequent wars in Korea and Vietnam making their own contributions to the literature of present-day warfare. As part of his storyteller's autobiography that forms chapter 1, he lets himself be reminded of this fact when visiting the home of his war buddy Bernard O'Hare. O'Hare's wife, Mary, interrupts the old friends' visit to object to all these texts, complaining how the conventions of fiction virtually demand that the soldiers in such narratives be commanding, heroic, adult figures—roles suitable to be played by John Wayne, Frank Sinatra, and the like. In truth, World War II was fought by young persons such as her husband and Kurt, who from her point of view were little more than children at the time. But children make poor actors in war movies and weak images in war novels. Hence workable models for such action become older. Soon the models replace reality, and war gets portrayed as something adults can handle in an adult way—which inspires children to go off and fight in even more wars.

In chapter 1 of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Mary O'Hare makes Kurt Vonnegut promise that he will not write his novel this way. Another meeting, with its own lesson about the structures of war and peace, also influences the way this novel will be written. The author and his war buddy make a trip to Dresden to see how things look more than two decades after the bombing.

A taxi driver named Gerhard Müller shows them the rebuilt city, and they learn his story, from being a prisoner of war (of the Americans) himself to putting together a happy life in Dresden afterward. Amid all the details of this past quarter century comes one more: that his mother was incinerated in the Dresden firestorm. "So it goes," the author notes, the first of one hundred times that he says this in the novel, spoken each time someone or something dies. Afterward, Müller commemorates their meeting with a Christmas card that Vonnegut quotes in full: "I wish you and your family also as to your friend Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year and I hope that we'll meet again in a world of peace and freedom in the taxi cab if the accident will" (*SF*, 2). The grammar is comically if understandably fractured, which Vonnegut appreciates for the way it runs everything together in serial manner, the only qualifier being an open-ended aside, "if the accident will." Müller's syntax is just what the author of this novel needs, for it throws what others try to discern as history's grand plan into undiscriminating chaos so random that the only principle of order is the fact of no order at all.

The text of this postcard is one of several in chapter 1 that argue against conclusive narrative structure. A limerick turns back on itself, mocking any hopes the author has of benefiting from long experience; a song progresses to a last line that is a repeat of its first, generating repetition after repetition with no advancement. Professionals in the entertainment business warn Vonnegut that writing an antiwar book is about as effective as authoring an antiglacier book or as resisting death itself. Yet resisting death is what every living organism does every day right up to the end. And so like life, *Slaughterhouse-Five* goes on, detailing how hard it has been to write *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

The quarter century it took to produce this book had given Vonnegut plenty of stories to tell in this first chapter. There is his experience as a graduate student at the University of Chicago, where any reports about the Dresden atrocity pale in comparison to news of the Holocaust. At the same time in these immediately postwar years the author also works as a pool reporter for Chicago's City News Bureau, where he is confronted with more death and more dispassionate ways of handling it. Readers hear about his attempts to gather facts about the raid and the frustration that it is still considered secret, and they hear also about how detours in his writing career have taken him to the University of Iowa, where as a teacher in the Writers' Workshop he is no better able to get his war book written. Then publisher Seymour Lawrence comes through with a generous contract, Vonnegut takes off for Dresden with Bernie O'Hare, and the novel gets written—but it is such a short and jumbled and jangled affair that the author is apologetic when he turns it in for publication. Why? Because there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre, at least nothing that adds up in a coherent, conclusive sense of order.

That has been the coherent, conclusive message Vonnegut has broken all the rules of novel writing to clarify in this first, atypical chapter.

Yet looking back on it, chapter 1 of *Slaughterhouse-Five* is as jumbled and as jangled as anything that follows in the book, though readers must have their attention called to all the structural deviations to see it because for two dozen pages they have been carried along quite comfortably. Carried by an orderly chronology? Not at all. From a starting point in 1967, when Vonnegut and O'Hare meet Müller, the action jumps back to 1964, when Vonnegut tracks down his old friend via long distance telephone. Their conversation takes the narrative back to 1945 and from there to the author's various post-war experiences. Readers eventually learn about the publishing contract and the fact that the novel has been written, but only to jump back two years to the 1967 Dresden trip—and not even to Dresden but rather to the night before in a fog-bound Boston airport, where the author puts his sleeplessness to use by reading two more texts, a collection of poetry by Theodore Roethke and a critical study of the French novelist Louis-Ferdinand Céline. If time travel becomes a theme later in the novel and if spatial jumps serve as Vonnegut's way of propelling his narrative across such vast distances, the method for each has been demonstrated right off in chapter 1, a chapter that any reader can follow with ease. Why so? Because the organizing principle has not been spatial unity or temporal progression but rather the inviting presence of Kurt Vonnegut.

Any human being is more interesting than physical models. The story Vonnegut tells in his "Address to the American Physical Society," collected in *Wampeters, Foma & Granfalloons*, is about how concerns of humanism overpower all the interests of a zoo, even for the author's pet dog. In this first chapter of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Kurt Vonnegut has managed to make *himself* more interesting to readers than any compensatory satisfactions with unities of time and space would be, particularly because his own problems with these unities have made his life this past quarter century such an intriguing adventure. Having tried without success to map out a chronological story line, he turns to a different line, that of the long distance telephone, to prompt some action—and from there it weaves in and out, backward and forward, until the novel he wants to write gets written. Along the way readers learn many things about the author that will help shape their understanding of his narrative to come. He is a veteran of the war, a POW at Dresden who saw the city destroyed in a firestorm. But that alone cannot generate a novel. For *Slaughterhouse-Five* to be written, much more must take place in this man's life, from studying anthropology and reporting small tragedies in Chicago to working for GE in the 1940s, living on Cape Cod in the 1950s, and teaching in Iowa for two academic years a decade later. All that will figure in the novel

Vonnegut writes, as will the texts he and the reader peruse in this same first chapter: Gerhard Müller's Christmas card, the limerick about the young man from Stamboul, Yon Yonson's song from Wisconsin, Mary O'Hare's synopses of war movies, Charles Mackay's account of the Crusades, a history of Dresden, Ted Roethke's poem, and Erika Ostrovsky's book on Céline.

Thus in the first chapter of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Kurt Vonnegut manipulates the structure that will let his protagonist, Billy Pilgrim, understand what life means. Trying to write his novel the conventional way has brought the author nowhere, just as Billy's attempts to bring the world into focus fail. To be successful each must find a different way of transcending the limits of conventional time and space in order to comprehend what these factors hide. Just sitting at his writer's desk on Cape Cod using the techniques that the tradition of the novel make available to him is not productive for Vonnegut, just as trying to do his duty in the army (as a hapless chaplain's assistant) and follow a worthwhile profession back home (as an optometrist married to the boss's daughter) has not given poor Billy much of a clue to existence. Granted, Billy's salvation will be a deus ex machina of sorts, a raisonneur's explanation of things delivered from outside the action and above the intelligence of those taking part in it. But Vonnegut has used such devices before—each of his previous novels has them in one form or another—and always with a double proof worked into the narrative. In *Slaughterhouse-Five* the correlation to Billy's time travel and adventures on Tralfamadore is Vonnegut's own experience in wishing to write about his Dresden experience, being frustrated in trying to do so the conventional way and finally breaking those conventions in order to get the job done. For this, chapter 1 is the model as the author transcends time and space with the long distance telephone calls to old friends, transatlantic travel to places from the past, and a library of reading that makes the temporal and spatial leaps of phones and jet seem child's play.

The author ends chapter 1 with another breaking of conventions, telling readers not just how the story begins but also how it ends. Why then should anyone spend time with the book's many pages knowing how things will turn out? The answer lies in the description of a Tralfamadorian novel Billy's mentor provides: not for any sense of progressive, accumulating knowledge (less at the beginning, more in the middle, and complete at the end) but rather for the depth of many beautiful moments seen all at the same time. Throughout the novel Vonnegut will arrange his narrative to provide this sensation; Billy's time travel lets the author juxtapose elements from different times and places in a way that creates the sense of a third time, the reader's, existing independently from the march of events and the confinements of space. Doing so solves Vonnegut's problems as a writer and Billy's as a human being. In structuring his novel the author emphasizes how he and his character are not

the same person. Three times within the novel as Billy goes about his own business Vonnegut distinguishes himself as a different person in the scene: climbing aboard the POW train, relieving himself in the British prisoners' latrine, and remarking on Dresden's architectural beauty as the prison train rolls in. Note how Billy and Kurt are thus different persons but occupying the same time and place. The two are also sympathetic to each other's aims. Billy's response to Dresden is not to write a novel, but he does type letters to the newspaper and speak his piece on talk radio. His subject is Tralfamadore and its different way of viewing reality, a disposition quite similar to the invention of novelistic form; and of course the Tralfamadorian novel Billy Pilgrim is shown appears to be a structural equivalent to the book Kurt Vonnegut is writing and which his readers now read.

Above all, Vonnegut and his protagonist find themselves conventionally speechless in the face of ultimate but unanswerable questions, unanswerable at least within the limits working to confine them. Here is where the frequently cited novels of Kilgore Trout join the two quests together. One of Trout's works, *Maniacs in the Fourth Dimension*, takes the familiar sci-fi theme of an added level of existence to pose a medical possibility: perhaps supposedly incurable diseases are cases of being sick in a fourth dimension where treatments must wait until physicians from our own 3-D world can cross the barrier and do their work to make the patients better. As a sci-fi device this fourth-dimensionality might bring to mind Vonnegut's similar use of time travel. But in fact it pertains even more closely to an experience Billy has had: getting drunk at a party and being unable to find the steering wheel in his car when he tries to drive home. Vonnegut takes pleasure in letting Billy run through every style of test, from randomly windmilling his arms to starting on the left side and working carefully, inch by inch, all the way over to the right. When no steering wheel is discovered anywhere, the poor drunk assumes that someone has stolen it. Is this true? No, the steering wheel exists but in a different dimension; Billy is sitting in the backseat of his car.

A more important question both Kurt and Billy struggle to answer involves death. Billy faces it when visiting his mother in a nursing home. The woman suffers from pneumonia and can speak only with difficulty, but she struggles with a question. Billy is just as eager to answer it until after several promptings she finally gets it out, leaving her son with nothing to say. Her question is, "How did I get so *old*?" (*SF*, 38). How does someone answer a question like this? It poses the same difficulty that Vonnegut, as author of the novel, must face when trying to write about Dresden: what do you say about a massacre? Billy's example dramatizes this problem, letting readers share the frustration. But being unable to answer it does not discredit the query or lessen the need to respond. That there is no possible answer produces the

empty feeling Vonnegut confronts with Dresden, a narrative strategy that manages to articulate an absence without attempting to fill it, as conventional fiction might. Silence is thus empowered with a voice beyond the talents of physical articulation.

In this way author, character, and reader share the same experience. None of it is exotic. Kurt Vonnegut is as simple and straightforward a person as can be: chapter I makes his efforts to write a novel as familiar as the task of anyone trying to get a job done. Billy Pilgrim, as almost every critic studying the novel says, is a virtual Everyman; with nothing heroic about him, his fate is simply to have survived World War II and the Dresden firebombing—and to wonder why. As far as what's required of the reader, no more is demanded than the humanism Kurt Vonnegut has found in his pet dog: a simple interest in people and their doings. Readers of this novel do not need the knowledge of science that Thomas Pynchon demands in *Gravity's Rainbow*, the facility with interweaving plots from world mythology that John Barth expects in *Giles Goat-Boy*, or the mastery of stylistics, that William H. Gass requires for an appreciation of any of his works. Kurt Vonnegut is not one of critic Tom LeClair's self-confidant practitioners of fictive mastery, a writer of the novel of excess that intentionally smothers the reader in intellectual overkill. Far from it—*Slaughterhouse-Five* reads at times with the simplicity of a primer for early grades' reading. Everything, from the way Billy searches for the steering wheel in the backseat of his car to how American prisoners of war react to their captivity, is explained in simple, follow-the-instructions form. As well these events should be because their author considers them ungraspable in any conventional way and falsified by the earlier attempts of conventional fiction to do the job. Avoiding deep thought and fancy style in favor of speaking plainly is for Vonnegut at least a way to begin.

This simplicity is not a dumbing down or in any sense a pandering to vulgar tastes. Instead there is a common dignity to what author, character, and reader do. Vonnegut portrays himself not as a precious or precocious writer but rather as a familiar, middle-class American with habits no more extreme than any other married men his age (and likely to get in the same type of trouble with his wife when he makes such typical mistakes as staying up too late and drinking too much). In similar manner Billy Pilgrim is a simple, familiar type: no war hero (lest Mary O'Hare object), just as Vonnegut is seen as no great towering success as a writer (something reputationally true at the moment though soon to be remedied by high sales and critical acclaim for the first time in his twenty years in the business). Of equal importance, the novel's readers are not expected to share the mastery needed to fully appreciate something by Pynchon, Barth, or Gass. But neither is their intelligence insulted. Any space opera present comes in the guise of fiction

by Kilgore Trout, whom Vonnegut does not have to characterize as a pathetic failure—Trout does so himself. These sci-fi plots can be taken for what they are, oddball but usually insightful musings that are trapped in the humiliating form of science-fiction pulp. No reader is expected to believe in any of Trout's preposterous fictive situations, but everyone sees them played out—not as the novel itself but as part of its larger ongoing action, ways that the readers can be informed of things as if flipping through a magazine or skimming items on a newsstand. Meanwhile, as Vonnegut and Pilgrim do their sincere best to perform their tasks as novelist and soldier respectively, the reader is asked to do no more than can be reasonably expected: to watch the author struggling with the material of Dresden and witness Billy reduced to muteness at his dying mother's bedside, appreciating how no one is immune to such trauma, given how death, whether on a grand scale or so closely personal, is an inevitable fact of life.

As for Billy Pilgrim's situation, it is much more than having witnessed the destruction of Dresden and survived the event. At the beginning of chapter 2 when he is introduced, we learn that he has become "unstuck in time," living in a "constant state of stage fright" because "he never knows what part of his life he is going to have to act in next" (*SF*, 20). Readers of *Cat's Cradle* will recognize Billy's condition as an inversion of the happy state provided by Bokononism, in which the people of San Lorenzo, otherwise so deprived, were given easily performed roles to play in a drama whose purposes they understood. He would seem a perfect candidate for the teachings of the Caribbean holy man, but by this point there are alternatives: not just the Tralfamadorian ethic from *The Sirens of Titan* but Eliot Rosewater and his favorite writer, Kilgore Trout, still in residence from Vonnegut's previous novel. For Eliot, traumatized by World War II, science fiction makes better sense of the world than do either the higher arts or science, and Trout is the perfect source for articulating his problems—and Billy's, too, once the two men meet. To this system of beliefs Billy becomes a convert and acts energetically to proselytize the world. Time, he teaches (in letters to newspaper editors and ramblings to his concerned family), is a spatial, not temporal entity, it exists not from one moment to the next but in a solid continuum, like the full stretch of the Rocky Mountains visible from on high, with the observer able to look at this or that peak at will. Bad moments that cause people so much trouble are just like one particular segment of the mountain range. "When a Tralfamadorian sees a corpse," Billy explains, "all he thinks is that the dead person is in a bad condition in that particular moment, but that the same person is just fine in plenty of other moments" (23). Therefore he can say something about death while other people remain speechless: "I simply shrug and say what the Tralfamadorians say about dead people, which is 'So it goes.'"

The ethic Billy adopts, of course, is one of simple perspective. Ignore the bad moments and concentrate on the good ones—by itself so banal but when voiced as Tralfamadorian physics having the dignity of the anthropological relativism Vonnegut employs in most of his work. As a cultural description these words beg to be taken seriously, just as in their science-fiction trappings they provide entertainment. In Billy's hands these sentiments become a metaphorical extension of his optometrist's work, letting him do "nothing less, now, he thought, than prescribing corrective lenses for Earthling souls. Many of those souls were lost and wretched, Billy believed, because they could not see as well as his little green friends on Tralfamadore" (*SF*, 25). Time, readers may come to believe, is not a physical absolute but just a cultural description. Regarding it as an absolute can be just as self-destructive as regarding religion that way, a point Kilgore Trout makes in one of his many novels quoted as the narrative proceeds. Trout's *The Gospel from Outer Space*, for example, suggests that in Christian liturgy the Crucifixion story is not properly an absolute axiom of belief but rather is something that can be improved on—the notion that gets Kurt Vonnegut in much trouble with religious fundamentalists who have lobbied that *Slaughterhouse-Five* be banned from libraries and school curricula. For Trout the story of Christ's death as presently told is ineffective because all it teaches is that great trouble will result if the person crucified has big-time connections. Far better, the writer suggests, to reshape the tale so that the crucifieds are condemned for having killed a perfectly average guy. If this were the case, Christianity would be more humanely beneficial.

As teachers, however, Billy and Trout are considered laughable (as is Vonnegut at times) and are scorned (as happens with Vonnegut among the fundamentalists). But this is the way they can make their corrections to impaired vision: not as authorities against whom a wary culture's guard will be up but rather as trickster figures who beguile their readers with entertainments that quietly subvert the standards of belief. Vonnegut had introduced this subliminal technique in *Mother Night*, in which absurdities rebound in multiples of three and names of otherwise exotic characters have a kitchen-cupboard familiarity to them, all of which help make an apparently disorganized novel seem to cohere. In *Slaughterhouse-Five* the trick is clinically subliminal as the linkages are thematically unimportant and technically random. There is no reason, for example, why during Billy's childhood visit to Mammoth Cave the otherwise total darkness is pierced by the glowing face of his father's radium watch dial and that then as a POW in Germany the same young man sees Russian prisoners with faces glowing exactly this way. Nor is there a reason why Billy's POW train is painted with the same orange and black stripes that decorate the caterer's tent at a wedding reception. Many other correspondences can be found throughout the novel. Unrelated to plot

or theme or character development, and in most cases not even noted consciously by the reader, they nevertheless pull an otherwise diverse narrative together, making discrete events from many different times and places appear unified. When they work best they allow the reader to time travel, the commonality of the stripes or the radium faces letting attention span the many pages in between—a typically Tralfamadorian effect.

Throughout all this Billy remains almost deadeningly simple. With his Ronald Reagan bumper sticker, big suburban house, and lucrative optometry practice (based less on genuine caregiving than on factory orders for safety glasses and overpriced frames), the man is as solidly middle class as can be imagined. He is not a science-fiction nut or an extraterrestrial enthusiast—Rosewater, Trout, and the Tralfamadorians are just new sources of information for him, practicalities that seem to help with his problems relating to life and finding meaning in it. Billy is, after all, an essentially passive person, and so he has been able to absorb all these new ideas without experiencing a violent change. In this same way the novel in which he is the protagonist manages to be thoroughly postmodern while never putting popular readers off, as works by Ronald Sukenick, Steve Katz, or others of the radical experimentalists might do. Like his outer-space creatures who look like plain old plumbers' helpers, Vonnegut's innovative techniques are drawn from common enough sources so that the book he writes seems more a part of everyday life than a revolt against it.

Revolt against convention, especially in terms of commonly overworked themes, is left to Kilgore Trout, a character easily distanced from Billy's guy-next-door familiarity. As Billy's time travels bring readers to a new awareness by forcing juxtapositions of incidents that would otherwise remain safely insulated from each other by conventions of time and space, Trout's somewhat madcap fictive materials expand Vonnegut's narrative from within. Citations of his many books, undertaken in the manner of Jorge Luis Borges drawing on an imaginary library, make *Slaughterhouse-Five* read like something much greater than the sum of its parts. The great Argentine fictionist had fashioned a rich strategy of imagining all of the books he would like to have written and then quoting them as if they existed. This is precisely what Vonnegut does with Kilgore Trout, with the added benefit of putting in some stinkers he would never dream of writing yet that can be cited for the fun of it. Vonnegut's own sentences and paragraphs are disarmingly simple, but when he is quoting Trout an entire universe of references is provided for readers.

Trout's flesh-and-blood appearance in the novel—after all the flashbacks and flashforwards in Billy's life over the five decades of action scrambled together in its time-travel plot—is itself a matter of fictive structure. It comes in chapter 8, which begins with another character from Vonnegut's earlier

fiction: Howard W. Campbell, Jr., who visits Billy's POW camp to recruit American volunteers for the war against Russia. That night Dresden is firebombed and Billy (time traveling) dreams of Kilgore Trout. The next scenes, which in a conventional novel would happen in the immediate aftermath of the bombing, take place in 1964, when Billy talks with Trout in Ilium, New York. Thus the sci-fi writer appears within the context of what would be a conventional novel's climax: the bombing of Dresden. His behavior here accomplishes in structural terms what a realistic account of the bombing (not a part of *Slaughterhouse-Five*) would otherwise provide: a portrayal of conclusive theme. How does he behave? For the first time in his life he acts like a novelist, having learned something he had never before known or even imagined: that his work, written for next to nothing and published as pulp, has a reader.

At the anniversary party to which Billy invites him Trout is so giddy with success that he parodies what fictionists do. The guests are gullible, and so he pours it on, suggesting that all the things that happen in novels are omnisciently true, just as at this very minute "God is listening, too. And on Judgment Day he's going to tell you all the things you said and did" (*SF*, 147), followed by severe punishments for bad actions. This, of course, is a preposterous view of fiction, but it in fact exaggerates the type of readings given so naively to traditional novels whose conventions are never questioned. Trout's listener is terrified by this news and becomes "petrified" (148), the way Vonnegut has described himself at the end of chapter 1, becoming (like Lot's wife) a pillar of salt for looking back at the destruction of Dresden. It also looks forward to Billy's posture on the next page when, after listening to a barbershop quartet singing at his party, he nearly collapses, having been turned as rigid as a ghost. What has happened is that in Trout's presence Billy has finally been put in touch with the heart of his Dresden experience, the truth of which has been eluding him for this whole novel that Kurt Vonnegut, for similar reasons, has been having a hard time writing. As the quartet pulls together for some close harmony about "that old gang of mine," Billy suddenly sees four of his guards at Dresden grouped tightly with their mouths similarly open—except in their case it is with the speechless horror of having witnessed the apocalyptic destruction of all they have ever known. It is Trout's presence that for the first time articulates this connection and confirms the meaning of connections between disparate points in time. As with his parody of fiction's truthful nature, Trout's description of looking through a time window to see the past comes across as hokey space opera, something only true gulls would believe in. Yet it is just the space opera and not the notion of time that Billy denies, for the same reason he can deny that he has seen a ghost. What *has* happened to him is that by virtue of this specific tem-

poral relation he is able to tell a story, the same talent Vonnegut's efforts with the structure of *Slaughterhouse-Five* have enabled him to do. In this context Trout's own works are given new dignity. He is a fitting guest at the occasion, which now celebrates not just Billy's eighteen years of marriage but also his newfound ability to put together the truth of his life in 1964 and 1945, the two events combining to produce a meaningfulness that it is storytelling's task to accomplish.

Through it all Billy remains thoroughly normal. The device of time travel (which by this point appears nothing more exotic than an ability to adjust one's self to the multidimensionality of life) lets him live on Tralfamadore (with a kidnapped pornographic movie starlet, no less) while still fulfilling his duties as husband, father, civic figure, and optometrist on Earth. In becoming a storyteller of his own life Billy is no more removed from normality than is Kurt Vonnegut, who takes center stage once more in chapter 10 to conclude the novel. Here readers learn that *Slaughterhouse-Five* is being completed at a point in time they have shared: when newscasts announce the assassination of Sen. Robert Kennedy, one of those occurrences that people customarily can associate with where they were when they heard the news. His attempt has paralleled Billy's, and the words for it have come in a similar way. The Dresden book, like Billy's Dresden experience, is articulated by an intimately expressed characterization of silence, the testimony of four prison guards "who, in their astonishment and grief, resembled a barbershop quartet" (*SF*, 154). Like Vonnegut at the start of this book and like Billy Pilgrim through all of it to this point, they are speechless in the face of such enormity. But now the temporal and spatial juxtapositions of the human mind provide the words. Yes, they are sung decades later in a completely different context. But Billy's imagination helps the language of 1964 articulate the meaning of 1945. Imagination is what novels are made of, Vonnegut knows. But he also recognizes the more important fact that imagination is one of the talents that distinguish human beings from other living creatures.

There are good structures that the human imagination can devise and also structures that work less effectively. Mary O'Hare has warned Vonnegut against the ones that falsify, and in the course of his narrative he finds characters facing the war's events who do the same thing. On the one hand, Paul Lazzaro, for example, is an American POW who interprets everything that happens as a call for personal revenge, to the point that his being is consumed by it. On the other hand, British POWs have turned their camp into a fairyland that denies the war's reality—which is fine for them personally but a great cruelty for their neighboring Russian prisoners, whose starvation they ignore. Yet the imagination shows promise for making things better, even wars. At one point long after the events of Dresden, Billy watches a World

War II movie on television, his technical abilities with time and space letting it run backward. It is a simple enough procedure, one that the most basic home movie projector of the era could provide; yet it is replete with such wondrous effects that Vonnegut devotes nearly a page to the happy result:

> American planes, full of holes and wounded men and corpses, took off backwards from an airfield in England. Over France, a few German fighter planes flew at them backwards, sucked bullets and shell fragments from some of the planes and crewmen. They did the same for wrecked American bombers on the ground, and those planes flew up backwards to join the formation.
>
> The formation flew backwards over a German city that was in flames. The bombers opened their bomb bay doors, exerted a miraculous magnetism which shrunk the fires, gathered them into cylindrical steel containers, and lifted the containers into the bellies of the planes. The Germans below had miraculous devices of their own, which were long steel tubes. They used them to suck more fragments from the crewmen and planes. But there were still a few wounded Americans, though, and some of the bombers were in bad repair. Over France, though, German fighters came up again, made everything and everybody as good as new.
>
> When the bombers got back to their bases, the steel cylinders were taken from the racks and shipped back to the United States of America, where factories were operating night and day, dismantling the cylinders, separating the dangerous contents into minerals. Touchingly, it was mainly women who did this work. The minerals were then shipped to specialists in remote areas. It was their business to put them into the ground, to hide them cleverly, so they would never hurt anybody ever again. (*SF*, 63)

Impractical for real life? Certainly, but this is not Vonnegut's point. The idea of bombing raids going the other way, the usual way, is something that had to be devised at some point. The challenge is motivating the human imagination to work in a more beneficial manner. In *Slaughterhouse-Five* this is what the author's method does. As an effect it is as improvisatory as running a war movie backward, yet as practical as the act of the mechanical handyman who first tried reversing the processes of furnaces and air conditioners to produce the heat pump. There are always temptations to be meanly selfish (Paul Lazzaro) and blithely unaware (the British POWs), and there are also easier ways to write war novels (the examples Mary O'Hare abhors). *Slaughterhouse-*

Five does not ignore these possibilities. Instead it engages them as models to demonstrate their ineffectiveness. Their failures contrast with Billy's success in life and Vonnegut's achievement in portraying it, a way of articulating the unspeakable by letting silence have its proper voice.

ALBERTO CACICEDO

"You must remember this": Trauma and Memory in Catch-22 *and* Slaughterhouse-Five

A central issue that World War II raises for novelists is how to represent the ultimately inexpressible horrors of that war and, at the same time, engage the reader in a dialogue that might produce the *saeva indignatio* (savage indignation) that Jonathan Swift, for example, considered the affective preliminary to ethical social action. Scholars are convinced that Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* leads to such a vision of human responsibility issuing from indignation. As Robert Merrill puts it, "Yossarian deserts because he finally realizes there are greater horrors than physical pain and death" (50). In Heller's own estimate, those greater horrors are "the guilt and responsibility for never intervening in the injustices he [Yossarian] knows exist everywhere" (qtd. in Merrill 51). At the end of the novel, when Yossarian decides to go to Sweden, he does so specifically to run to his responsibilities: "Let the bastards thrive," says Yossarian, "since I can't do a thing to stop them but embarrass them by running away" (Heller 462). In this case, the ethical decision is to estimate what one can credibly do to work against a mad, destructive system and then do it.

Critics of Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, on the other hand, are not unanimously so willing to grant the ethical engagement of the novel. *Slaughterhouse-Five* has produced two very different schools of thought on Vonnegut's ethical focus. On the one hand, Tony Tanner argues that the

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novel leads to quietism, which springs from a sense of hopelessness (128). Sharon Seiber appears to associate that hopelessness with predestination and fatalism (148). James Lundquist connects that hopelessness to black humor and argues that such humor is, in effect, an expression of human inadequacy in the face of the complexities of the universe (18–19).[1] Such inadequacy, Seiber suggests, can produce only a sort of impotent, uneasy chuckle at Billy's expense but most decidedly not the savage indignation of Swift (152). Robert Merrill and Peter A. Scholl, on the contrary, vehemently oppose the idea that the novel advocates quietism. To be sure, they say, Billy Pilgrim escapes into a quietistic fantasy world (146), but for them, Billy himself is an object of satire. His serenity, they say, is bought at the price of complicity in the "indifference to moral problems which is the ultimate 'cause' of events like Dresden" (148). By contrast, the narrator of the novel, whom Merrill and Scholl take to be Vonnegut, inserts himself into the narrative again and again to demonstrate precisely the distance between Billy's serenity and his own restless, inevitable grappling with the evil of the world. Stanley Schatt differs from Merrill and Scholl to the extent that he makes Billy ultimately as incapable of serenity as Vonnegut himself. Whatever serenity seems to be present in the novel, says Schatt, belongs to a disembodied narrator who sympathizes with the Tralfamadorian view of things, quietistic in the sense that it sanitizes existence by encouraging one to avert the gaze from unpleasant events (87–88). More complex is Tim Woods's argument, derived from Derrida's treatment of history as supplement or "other," that the novel is "a dramatization of Vonnegut's deeply felt need and commitment to justice and ethical responsibility in opening oneself to the other, in recognizing one's indebtedness to the other" (117).

Leaving aside specific points of disagreement, I concur with those critics who see in Vonnegut, as in Heller, an impulse toward ethical, responsible behavior. However, I argue that the central issue with which the two novels concern themselves is not so much taking responsibility as getting to the point at which responsible action is possible. As I see it, to be ethical requires that one develop Swift's indignation against the injustices of the world and, in the context of these two novels, against the complacencies that lead to depravity and world war. To do that, one must squarely and unblinkingly face the memories of what one must fight against. As an instance of what I mean, consider the decisive moment in *Casablanca*, when Rick is converted from a self-indulgent cynic to a loving, committed one. At that moment he asks Sam to play—not to play again, but just to play—"As Time Goes By," a song that for Rick opens the doors of memory on a past that had been too painful to remember consciously. As the flashback to that past transpires and Rick, along with the audience, revisits Paris on the verge

of German occupation, it becomes increasingly clear that Rick's mutilated emotional life, which we have seen in the first part of the film, is a direct result of the pain of that past. The flashback makes us see that Rick's behavior in *Casablanca* has been poised delicately between leaving his love behind and still feeling his love as an affliction of the heart. I want to emphasize here that the particular circumstances of Rick's pain are romanticized and, ultimately, too sentimental to carry the burden of what I want to address in this paper. But I begin by referring to Rick's plight because in the refrain of Sam's song, "You must remember this," is the kernel of Freud's double-edged insight into the effects of trauma on its victim. Rick's demand that Sam play the song and his effort finally to contend with a past too traumatic to recollect and yet too formative to leave behind is at the center of what I want to consider in regard to *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

These two novels make the effort to recover memory that is central to their narrative structures. In *Catch 22*, Yossarian's decision is ultimately, as he puts it, to stop "running away from my responsibilities. I'm running to them. There's nothing negative about running away to save my life" (461, emphasis in original). But that decision comes in the final chapter of the novel, specifically at a point in the narrative when Yossarian has finally remembered, clearly and with no ambiguities, the death of Snowden, the central traumatic event of his career as bombardier. Heller, in fact once said, "Snowden truly dies throughout *Catch-22*" (qtd. in Merrill, 46). That comment points to the fact that, throughout the entire novel, Yossarian's memory has worked its way around Snowden's death, giving the reader flashes of the event, sometimes as off-handed references but more often as grotesquely comical ones like the sudden eruption of the phrase, "Where are the Snowdens of yesteryear" (Heller 35–36). But until the full revelation of the event in the next-to-last chapter, Snowden's death is never actually recollected or enacted in its full horror. To the extent that they puzzle the reader and make Yossarian seem bizarre beyond understanding, one result of those sometimes comical prefigurements of the horror is that they serve as "a kind of trap," as Merrill puts it, that makes the reader complicit in the carelessness of the General Dreedles and Colonel Cathcarts of this world. Then, when the horror becomes clear, the recurrence of the references to the event effects a conversion in which "we come to feel something like shame for our indifference" (Merrill 47, 53). Thus, the indignation that we felt at the horrors produced by self-interested officers turns inward and prompts in us a desire to act against those horrors. It is, however, important to recognize that throughout the novel Yossarian is as much in the dark as is the reader about the actuality of Snowden's death. The novel circles around and around the death precisely because Yossarian can neither remember it nor forget it.

In that sense, Snowden's death is for Yossarian like Ilsa's abandonment for Rick—although the implications of Snowden's death are much more serious. David Seed has analyzed the lesson of Snowden's death, as finally recollected by Yossarian. At that moment, as Seed reminds us, Yossarian quotes Edgar's remark in *King Lear*, "the ripeness is all." But Seed points out that the circumstance of Snowden's death "blocks off" the sense that the passage has in *Lear*, the attempt to induce a philosophical acceptance of death. On the contrary,

> One important metaphysical theme of *Catch-22* is the physical vulnerability of man. [. . .] Death in this novel is presented as a conversion process whereby human beings become mere matter and are assimilated into the non-human. [. . .] Snowden [. . .] spills his guts, which happen to be full of ripe tomatoes, and so Heller implies that man may become no more than the fruit, vegetables and meat he consumes. Where Edgar pleads for acquiescence, however, Heller sets up Yossarian as a voice of refusal, of resistance to the inevitability of death. (Seed 41)

As Merrill concludes, Snowden's secret is that "[i]t is the spirit that counts, not 'matter'" (52)—and Yossarian's acceptance of the responsibility to stay alive is, in effect, a paradoxical affirmation of the spirit's capacity to transcend the limits of matter. Thus, Yossarian's remembering becomes the impetus for the ethical challenge that he takes up in the final chapter. In that regard, it is worth noticing that in a book in which, for the most part, the names of characters are the titles of chapters, not until Yossarian remembers Snowden's death is a chapter titled "Yossarian"—the final chapter in some sense, because Yossarian finally acts rather than reacts.

One could argue that the first chapter of *Slaughterhouse-Five* begins where the final chapter of *Catch-22* ends. The subject of that first chapter is precisely the real, biographical difficulty that Vonnegut encounters in attempting to remember the bombing of Dresden, the central traumatic event of his novel. The chapter is really pure autobiography. In a 1973 interview with David Standish, Vonnegut acknowledged that for some time he was unable to remember the actual bombing of Dresden: "[T]here was a complete forgetting of what it was like [. . .] the center had been pulled right out of the story" (70). Not until that failure of memory is made good can Vonnegut write *Slaughterhouse-Five*—and, Merrill and Scholl argue, precisely because Vonnegut can write such a book, he takes an ethically responsible stance that denies the quietism of Tralfamadorian philosophy. In a literal contradiction of the Tralfamadorian ethos, he pointedly looks at those "unpleasant" moments,

not because he revels in them but because they so powerfully determine who he is and what he does. Vonnegut's admiration for Lot's wife, who does look back (21–22), underscores the point. The first chapter of *Slaughterhouse-Five* makes clear that, as with Rick's and Yossarian's, Vonnegut's memory of trauma had not disappeared. On the contrary, if the absent presence of trauma produces Rick's cynicism and Yossarian's madness—for I think one has to agree with Seed that until the moment of remembering, Yossarian is indeed mad (33)—then the repressed memory of the bombing of Dresden produces in Vonnegut a "disease," as he calls it in the novel:

> I have this disease late at night sometimes, involving alcohol and the telephone. I get drunk, and I drive my wife away with a breath like mustard gas and roses. And then, speaking gravely and elegantly into the telephone, I ask the telephone operators to connect me with this friend or that one, from whom I have not heard in years. (4)

The symptoms of Vonnegut's disease reproduce the dynamic of trauma: the alcohol deadens the memory that the phone calls seek to arouse. If one takes Merrill and Scholl's position that Vonnegut, as he inserts himself into the novel, is a man with "greater resources" than weak, quietistic Billy Pilgrim in *Slaughterhouse-Five* (146)—in effect, that Vonnegut is like Yossarian at the end of *Catch-22*—then one must also acknowledge that Vonnegut's recovery of the memories that will enable ethical action is a mighty struggle against the impulse to suppress and repress.[2]

Addressing the symptomatology of trauma in his book, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud describes the case of a little boy who, traumatized by being abandoned by his mother, reenacted the scene of the trauma over and over and over again. So striking was the event for Freud that it forced him to reconsider his original, relatively unproblematic idea of the pleasure principle, which had indicated that people who experienced traumatic events would avoid them or any object that might recollect the trauma (9). Working through the implications of the little boy's reenactments, Freud concluded that, for a child, such repetitions may reflect a self-conscious effort to dominate the traumatic event, for, he said, children "can master a powerful impression far more thoroughly by being active than by merely experiencing it passively" (29). But when the repetition is not a conscious reenactment of the traumatic event, the fact of repetition points toward neurosis (30). And, said Freud, the more powerful the trauma-precipitating event, the more likely that the conscious memory will be repressed as too dangerous for the psychic well-being of the individual, and the more likely that those

repressed memories will express themselves in unconscious reenactments of the traumatic event (14–15).

Yossarian's behavior before recollecting Snowden's death and Vonnegut's behavior in trying to remember the bombing of Dresden duplicate the symptomatology of trauma that Freud described. The fictional character and the real novelist must revisit the traumatic event over and over again precisely because it has determined their lives in profound ways; yet, because of its horrific power, the event has also erased itself from their consciousness. The narrative structure of *Catch-22*, like that of Vonnegut's own life, is determined by vertiginous circlings around their respective central traumatic events. As James Mellard says of Yossarian, "[I]t is the protagonist's *moral* life, his *inner*-life, his *psychological* needs that account for the novel's delaying tactics" (36, emphasis in original). Once having achieved a clear memory, the result for the traumatized person is therapeutic in the sense that it enables him to confront the horror that he has endured and to act on that knowledge. So too, about his own experience Vonnegut says that writing the novel "was a therapeutic thing. I'm a different person now. I got rid of a lot of crap" (qtd. in McGinnis 56). Freud said that the task of the therapist who is treating trauma is "to force as much as possible into the channel of memory and to allow as little as possible to emerge as repetition" (13). I am not confusing the therapy that Freud and Vonnegut mean with the "don't worry, be happy" school of latter-day psychobabble. The Tralfamadorians speak from the position of psychobabble therapy: Don't dwell on bad moments; don't worry, be happy. On the contrary, as Merrill and Scholl make clear, the therapeutic aspect of Vonnegut's experience in remembering Dresden is to arouse the indignation that makes it possible to write *Slaughterhouse-Five*, a self-consciously, relentlessly antiwar book, written at the height of the Vietnam War, and geared to argue specifically against that war as well as against war generally (147 and passim).

In his book on the Holocaust, Dominick LaCapra considers the motivation to tell and retell the story of so horrible an event and concludes that "one may entertain the possibility of modes of historicity in which trauma and the need to act out (or compulsively repeat) may never be fully transcended but in which they may to some viable extent be worked through and different relations or modes of articulation enabled" (14n10). To paraphrase LaCapra's terminology, retelling the story need not be neurosis and is positively therapeutic if it works toward making the teller or the reader conscious of the past and therefore able to work against the cause of the trauma—in the case of LaCapra's book, the Holocaust; in the case of Heller and Vonnegut, the horrors of World War II generally. From that point of view, the writing of *Slaughterhouse-Five* is like Yossarian's taking off for Sweden, not a running

away from responsibility but an acceptance of responsibility according to the capability and limitations of the individual concerned.

On the other hand, it is possible, indeed necessary, to hear a "don't worry, be happy" turn to what seems to be the philosophy of Billy Pilgrim or of the Tralfamadorians that he echoes or of Kilgore Trout, the science-fiction writer from whose stories the Tralfamadorians may be derived: the diffuse source of the quietism, for which no one in particular seems ultimately responsible, is itself an indictment of the behavior it makes possible. At the heart of that philosophy is the idea that time travel is available to human beings and because it is possible to travel from one point in time to another, it is silly to remain at a point that is in any way unpleasant. As a Tralfamadorian says to Billy, "That's one thing Earthlings might learn to do, if they tried hard enough: Ignore the awful times, and concentrate on the good ones" (117). One consequence of that perspective on time, however, is that all events and occurrences are always already determined. The Tralfamadorians even know that one of their own kind will one day push a button that will destroy the universe; when Billy asks why they do nothing to prevent that event, his Tralfamadorian guide tells him that it would be impossible to do so: "He has *always* pressed it, and he always *will*. We *always* let him and we always *will* let him. The moment is *structured* that way" (117, emphasis in original). As Woods argues, despite the temporal freedom that the Tralfamadorians enjoy, they also affirm that "time is linear too" (107). The determinism of the Tralfamadorian system is therefore absolute: They can visit and revisit particular points of time, but they cannot alter the linear causality of time. Indeed, the Tralfamadorians are completely puzzled by two characteristics of human beings: first, that human beings ask "why" things happen (76–77); second, that human beings believe in free will (85–86). Their acceptance of the inevitability of events is conveyed in the phrase "so it goes," which becomes something of a refrain in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, appearing after every instance of a death of any sort, whether it be the end of the universe or the desiccation of the bunch of flowers in Billy's hospital room.

In that phrase is encapsulated the quietism of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, which critics such as Tanner and Sieber attribute to Billy. According to Tanner, Billy "abandons the worried ethical, tragical point of view of Western man and adopts a serene, conscienceless passivity. If anything, he views the world aesthetically" (128). For Sieber, Billy's "time travel" liberates "Billy's imagination; no longer subject to the serial constraints of time and space, Billy is free to create a kind of dream landscape in his imagination where anything is possible" (148). One might add that a specifically structuralist aesthetic is at work in the Tralfamadorian point of view. As Louis Althusser says about his structuralist approach to ideology, ideology always has the

same function: to interpellate subjects. The particularities of an ideology are really irrelevant, therefore, because the effect of ideology is always already the same. At the level of functionality, at least, one can make no real distinctions among any particular ideological systems: communism and fascism, Christianity and Islam, capitalism and feudalism—all are exactly equivalent in forming subject positions (127–86). In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, it does not matter whether the universe or the flower dies. In either case, "So it goes." From such a point of view any possibility of savage indignation at the horrors of the world simply disappears.

Tanner's point, I think, seems to hold valid for Billy but, in fact, does not. I prefer to argue that the novel presents Billy as a man who, once he recovers his memories, finds a way to make his indignation work effectively toward ethical action. At any rate, Billy is not an aesthete pure and simple. One of my students asked recently, can Billy control the destination of his flights in time so that he does as the Tralfamadorians urge humans generally to do?[3] On the contrary, Billy often ends up moving from a fairly pleasant situation to a profoundly disturbing one. For instance, Billy's first episode of time travel takes him from the middle of the Battle of the Bulge—admittedly not a pleasant situation—to a very early traumatic experience, in which his father, to teach him how to swim, throws Billy into the deep end of a pool. As the narrator tell us, "It was like an execution" (44). If the point of Tralfamadorian time travel is to gaze only at pleasant spots of time, then Billy must have, at best, an imperfect command of the techniques of time travel. We are told from the first page of Billy's story that he is "spastic in time" (23). He has no control. The result of Billy's lack of control is a narrative structure remarkably like the narrative structure of *Catch-22* and of Vonnegut's life as he tries to recollect his experiences in Dresden. Billy constantly circles around that central traumatic moment, almost recollecting it but, as is typical of traumatic memories, not quite managing to seize on the event. Furthermore, I argue that Billy's time travel—"like Yossarian's involuntary nudism and uncontrollable echolalia, which surfaces in Billy as well when he is in the hospital with Rumfoord, or like Vonnegut's midnight drunkenness—is a symptom of the disease from which he suffers.[4] In effect, Billy Pilgrim is insane, precisely because his time traveling prevents him from coming face to face with the traumatic event around which his whole life has formed itself. Vonnegut gives a good indication of Billy's disease: that he suffers from narcolepsy (56), that he has fits of uncontrollable weeping (61), that he has a nervous breakdown that leads to his hospitalization (24, 100 ff.). These are all indices of the effect of trauma on Billy's life. Billy is, as it were, a guest at his own existence, a "specter" in his own life, incapable of taking responsibility for himself or of acting against the horrors of existence for the same reasons that Yossarian cannot act before he

comes face to face with the traumatic death of Snowden, or that Vonnegut cannot write until he confronts his memories of Dresden.

Billy finally faces up to the trauma of the bombing of Dresden. The recollection takes place in perfectly psychoanalytic fashion, by means of a tree association that begins with a barbershop quartet that is singing at Billy's eighteenth wedding anniversary: "Billy thought hard about the effect the quartet had had on him, and then found an association with an experience he had had long ago. He did not travel in time to the experience. He *remembered* it *shimmeringly*" (177; emphasis added). What Billy remembers is the full horror of the incendiary bombing of Dresden, in the course of which 135,000 people died—more people, Vonnegut tells us, than died in Hiroshima or Nagasaki (188). As in Yossarian's recollection of Snowden's death, the consequences of Billy's non-time-travel memory are profound. Although Yossarian's reaction to the memory of his traumatic experience is to acknowledge his own complicity in the event, Billy cannot do so because, except in the very general sense that Billy is a human being, he is not complicit in the bombing. Billy's whole life, from the moment that his father throws him in the pool to the moment of the airplane crash of which he is the only survivor, has made him a passive observer of his own existence, a fact that he is spastic in time turns into the novel's central trope. And yet, simultaneously, Billy's memory makes him feel complicit so that, for instance his involuntary crying can be traced directly to his post-Dresden experience (197). The effect of Billy's memory of Dresden, in short, is to transform Billy in two opposed and mutually exclusive ways.

On the one hand, for once in his life, he begins to act: hitherto, as he tells his concerned daughter Barbara, "I didn't think the time was *ripe*" (30, emphasis in original). As in Yossarian's anti-Edgardian recognition that "the ripeness is all," Billy's moment of ripeness makes ethical action possible. His first act takes place in a hospital, as he is recovering from the airplane accident. There he meets Bertram Copeland Rumfoord, the official historian of the U.S. Air Force, whose book on World War II has glossed over Dresden "If]or fear that a lot of bleeding hearts [. . .] might not think it was such a wonderful thing to do" (191). Billy's action arises from his position of powerlessness: "There in the hospital, Billy was having an adventure very common among people without power in time of war: He was trying to prove to a willfully deaf and blind enemy that he was interesting to hear and see" (193). Initially, Rumfoord dismisses Billy's efforts to communicate as mere echolalia. If that were true, then Billy would be, like Yossarian naked in the trees and echoing meaningless sounds, still mad. But Billy persists. Billy ultimately forces Rumfoord to recognize that he is interesting to hear and see because he recalls a memory that Rumfoord's history has forgotten: "You must have

had mixed feelings, there on the ground," says Rumfoord (198). On the other hand, although Billy makes what is for him a hitherto unique effort to be recognized and to be deemed authentic, his response to Rumfoord's grudging acceptance of another point of view on Dresden is, to say the least, comforting: "It was all right. [. . .] *everything* is all right, and everybody has to do exactly what he does. I learned that on Tralfamadore" (198; emphasis in original). The passivity, quietism, and determinism of Billy's comfort seems to run completely counter to his effort to be heard by Rumfoord. Once Billy leaves the hospital he will be heard by the whole world: he goes to a radio station to tell the whole world, or as much of it as might be listening, the glad tidings of the new Tralfamadorian gospel that he wants to promulgate. Soon he starts to write letters to editors of newspapers. He becomes so active that by 1976, the year of his death at the hands of Paul Lazzaro, his Judas Iscariot, Billy has founded a new religion, with many followers.

The message of Billy's religion springs from Tralfamadorian ideas of time and determinism. When he predicts his own death to his adoring followers, he argues against their sense of sorrow: "If you protest, if you think that death is a terrible thing, then you have not understood a word I've said" (142). The comment makes explicit the sense of inevitability that makes Tralfamadorians passive, quietistic; but, at the same time, Billy's comment obviously echoes Christ's reprehending the Apostles for forgetting his miracles: "Having eyes, see ye not? and having ears, hear ye not? and do ye not remember?" (Mark 8.18). I argue that in Billy Pilgrim, Vonnegut is representing the complex relation of transcendence to the time-bound immanence of human experience. He is affirming that "linear temporality is *not the only way* that temporality can be thought: linear concepts need to be supplemented with nonlinear concepts" (Woods 107, emphasis in original). In bringing the message of Tralfamadore to human beings, Billy is not urging a detached acceptance of death or of the horrors of war. On the contrary, he is re-presenting the gospel message of Christ to the disciples: remember that every person has duties and responsibilities, which spring from one's time-bound engagement in the world and are to that extent determined for us, but the performance of those takes one beyond the limitations of linear time and of the world. So, as he bids farewell to his disciples, Billy reminds them that "[i]t is time *for you* to go home to your wives and children, and it is time for me to be dead for a little while—and then live again" (142–43; emphasis added). In effect, Billy's comments to his followers are geared to answering the question that Tralfamadorians cannot understand: Why? Unlike the Tralfamadorians, Billy has a hard-won, time-bound, memorial sense of the horrors of life from which human beings cannot escape and in response to which they need tidings of comfort and joy. Billy's message, in other words, is as "quietistic" as the New Testament.

The mocked, scorned, "self-crucified" (80) Billy must be seen as a spiritual pilgrim who follows in the footsteps of Christ. In the metaliterary references that mark his own participation in the passion of Billy, Vonnegut tells us why the parallel must be present in the novel. On the one hand, in the unsavory context of references to the first pornographic photograph ever made, only two years after the invention of photography, Vonnegut reminds us that many myths tell the same story (41). That the time is ripe for a new myth to explain humankind's position in the universe is made clear by the explicit failures of the old myth, the Judeo-Christian tradition that, as one of Kilgore Trout's novels tells us, "was dead as a door nail" (203).[5] By that token, and in the context of the hospital visit during which Billy meets Eliot Rosewater, the man who introduces him to the novels of Kilgore Trout, Vonnegut points out that, given the horrors of the twentieth century, human beings need a whole new mythology: "I think you guys are going to have to come up with a lot of wonderful new lies," says Rosewater to a psychiatrist, "or people just aren't going to want to go on living" (101). What Rosewater calls "lies" are the stories that people tell to make sense of the world around them. In the twentieth century, such "lies" have a scientific cast to them simply because "science" has taken over the explanatory role that religions once had. Rosewater, after all, is talking to a psychiatrist, not a priest. They are lies only in the sense that a religion is a "lie" to a nonbeliever. From the point of view of the believer, the "lies" represent a mythic system under which things fall into place and come to have meaning. That is what a mythology is—"lies" that organize the data of the senses so that we can believe that we have a place in the universe privileged by understanding. In his wonderful book on *The Origins of Knowledge and Imagination*, Jacob Bronowski calls such lies the "metaphors" that, once they are given mathematical form, produce the algorithms that give us a scientific understanding of the universe. Such metaphors and their algorithmic expressions, Bronowski says, must always be lies in the same way that any model must be a fiction, at best only a partial re-presentation of reality, and yet the only access to truth that we have. What Billy invents, then, is the new "lie," the new myth that will make current once again the same old story that all founding myths present: Just as Osiris died and was reborn, or as Adonis died and was reborn, or as Christ died and was reborn, so Billy, too, dies and, he says, will be reborn. Not in terms of pornography, then, Vonnegut reiterates the idea that many myths tell the same story. If we go on to ask why that is the case, why some truth, the same truth, about humans in relation to the universe must always be told in partial, "lying" representations of reality, then we ourselves end up experiencing the paradox of Billy's memory: the transcendent is comforting because it is transhistorical and must always be the same; but how we arrive at that transcendence remains contingent, historical, memorial.

Ultimately, then, Billy's is not a structuralist response to war, but, rather, a profoundly humanistic one. As Vonnegut said to the graduates of Bennington College in 1970, "I beg you to believe in the most ridiculous superstition of all: that humanity is at the center of the universe, the fulfiller or the frustrator of the grandest dreams of God Almighty" (qtd. in Freese 153).

As I see it, the delicacy of Billy's response to Rumfoord is an index of why the twentieth century needed a new myth. For Billy to have convicted Rumfoord of guilt would have served no purpose: Rumfoord would deny his culpability, reiterate his own deterministic analysis of the horror of Dresden—"It had to be done" (198), he says to Billy—and finally just refuse to hear or see Billy at all. Such is the justification for Rumfoord's history, which skips over, actively represses, and censors Dresden because it would be too discomforting. As Vonnegut sets out to recover the memory of Dresden, he discovers that the nation as a whole has done just as Rumfoord has: Vonnegut cannot get information on the bombing because "the information was top secret still." "Secret?" asks Vonnegut in the opening chapter of the novel, "My God—from *whom*?" (11; emphasis in original). Vonnegut suggests that the secret is suppressed from the consciousness of the nation just as trauma is suppressed from the consciousness of the victim. For the nation as a whole, the bombing of Dresden is traumatic: if it cannot be recollected consciously, it will be reenacted, whether in Billy's uncontrollable fits of weeping or in the uncontrollable riots in the ghetto of Ilium or in Vietnam, where Billy's son finds himself a combatant Green Beret. Yet, neither Vonnegut nor Billy can compel his audience to hear and to see. Billy's comforting approach, therefore, is not quietistic; rather it takes the most direct route to opening Rumfoord's eyes, to making him remember. Billy's gospel, in short, is not very different from Yossarian's running away to responsibility or from Vonnegut's story telling, therapeutic for him in particular but also for the nation as a whole. All three men, fictional or not, are negotiating their way around one of the possibilities that the twentieth century, and the experience of World War II in particular, have raised in an unprecedentally forceful manner: that all of us are guest observers of our own existences. In *Casablanca*, Rick puts that idea in a compact way: the lives that he and Ilsa lead do not amount to a hill of beans. Even as he says that, because he has remembered, Rick is moving toward an ethical action that forces one to see that individual choice is much more than a hill of beans. Both *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* present the blockages, material and psychological, to ethical action that we all must navigate; but they also refuse to accept the idea that we are nothing but a hill of beans.

Notes

1. Thus, also Seiber, who suggests that "Billy has been stripped of his humanism through the devastation of war" (149).

2. Woods argues persuasively that later Derrida presents the same case, that simultaneously feeling the present of an alienated past is essential to "justice" and "responsibility." See especially Woods's quotation from Derrida's Specters of Marx: "No justice—let us not say no law and once again we are not speaking here of laws—seems possible or thinkable without the principle of some responsibility, beyond all living present, within that which disjoins the living present, before the ghosts of those who are not yet born or who are already dead. [. . .] Without this non-contemporaneity with itself of the living present [. . .] what sense would there be to ask the question "where?" "where tomorrow?" "whither?'" (qtd. in Woods 119; emphasis in original).

3. Sieber, who says that Billy "is a seasoned time-traveler" (147), seems to answer affirmatively.

4. Although I think that Vonnegut does not make the (fictional) facticity of Billy's time travel clear, nonetheless I generally disagree with Kevin A. Boon's point about time travel, that "the evidence makes the question undecidable" (10).

5. See Freese (145–64) for a comprehensive reading of the variety of "lies" (religions) that Vonnegut creates.

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KEVIN BROWN

"A Launching Pad of Belief": Kurt Vonnegut and Postmodern Humor

Humor critics have argued that satire is not possible any longer, largely due to the horrors of the twentieth century and the postmodern belief in the lack of objective truth, especially in relation to morality. Because of these developments, they argue that no moral stance can be taken through satire; instead, satirists now write merely for pleasure, not to instigate any change in morality. Several postmodern authors, including Kurt Vonnegut, however, still attempt to provide moral messages through their writing. John Gardner, for example, attacked existentialism in *Grendel*. Several critics, though, misread the novel and viewed the narrator and the author as having the same worldview. Because he did not establish a moral norm from which to work, he was misunderstood. Vonnegut, however, did not assume that there is a common set of values held by their readers. Instead, he laid out a moral base from which to work from within the work itself.

Postmodern humor is often characterized as rebelling against the norms of literature and trying to subvert them with no motivation other than pleasure. In *Circus of the Mind in Motion*, Lance Olsen shows the purpose of postmodern humor to be revolutionary in its motivation. Using Duchamp as an illustration of the motivation behind postmodern art (writing included), Olsen writes that "Duchamp had no intention of improving or even changing the critics' minds. Rather, his impulse was to subvert a power structure for

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no other reason than the pleasure of subverting a power structure" (18). Olsen takes this idea farther to do away with any authority and any final interpretation the reader may hope to gather; instead, "the impetus of postmodern humor is to disarm pomposity and power. The postmodern creator becomes aesthetic and metaphysical terrorist, a freeplayer in a universe of intertextuality where no one text has any more or less authority than any other" (18). This lack of authority causes the idea of a final authorial position to be radically thrown into question: "The audience often senses a complexity and subtlety of tone, but because the postmodern creator manipulates a system of private instead of public norms, his or her final position remains uncertain. . . . Because of this, his or her text exists to be interpreted in radically different, even contradictory, ways" (18).

While Olsen's theory destroys all sense of a final meaning, Harry Levin proposes a different view of how one interprets humor. In *Playboys and Killjoys*, Levin proposes that there is a basis that the author draws upon in humor, especially in satire: "Every satirist, negative though he may sound, must project his guided missiles from a launching-pad of belief" (196). What Levin attempts to do here is to illustrate how the satirist creates a set of public norms, as Olsen describes them, by taking his or her private norms and declaring them openly. This approach would be akin to Swift's beginning "A Modest Proposal" with some sort of introduction letting the reader know that eating children is, for one reason or another, morally wrong. He would not even have to do this didactically, but he would have to convey it clearly in order to create a public norm the reader would react to.

Olsen, however, argues that there is no "launching-pad of belief" anymore; he argues that college freshmen misread "A Modest Proposal" because we live in a world where "in fact a portion of the global population *did* believe it right to kill children and turn them into lampshades and gloves" (86–87). However, this approach presupposes that the students in these classes believe that eating children is a moral norm somewhere in the world. Instead, all of my students argue that Swift needs some sort of counseling or punishment, showing that they still do rely on moral norms in their reading. In fact, they believe in these norms so strongly that they cannot imagine anyone suggesting we break them, even satirically, which is why they actually misread Swift.

However, Leonard Feinberg shows other difficulties that arise when one argues that satire relies on moral norms for its effectiveness: "The assumption that satire relies on moral norms is so widely accepted that one hesitates to challenge it. But moral norms are not easy to define. Many satirists consider their work moral even when it contradicts the satire of other writers who also call themselves moralists" (9). Feinberg, however, does admit that satire relies on some type of norm when he writes, "Of course satire relies

on norms. The moment one criticizes and says that something has been done in the wrong way, he is implying that there is a right way to do it" (11). Levin argues that the satirist can persuade his or her reader that something is wrong with an idea and then satirize that idea, thus creating his or her own moral norm:

> Yet the satirist must convince his audience that, when something is rotten or someone goes astray, there has been a departure from a certain ethos. It is simpler for him when the norms of that ethos have already been accepted by convention. Otherwise, it becomes a part of his job to inculcate those norms—in other words, to preach to the unconverted. He must be hortatory before he can wax sardonic, like Bernard Shaw in the prefaces to his plays. (197)

In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Kurt Vonnegut establishes his moral norm by showing the outcome of Billy Pilgrim's philosophy in relation to the bombing of Dresden and the Germans' massacre of the Jews.

Billy Pilgrim learns his philosophy of passive acceptance from the Tralfamadorians, aliens who capture him. They teach him that one should not look for reasons why things happen; he or she should simply allow them to happen. When Billy asks, "How—how did I get here?" they respond, "It would take another Earthling to explain it to you. Earthlings are the great explainers, explaining why this event is structured as it is, telling how other events may be achieved or avoided. I am a Tralfamadorian, seeing all time as you might see a stretch of the Rocky Mountains. All time is all time. It does not change. It does not lend itself to warnings or explanations. It simply *is*" (85–86). Since everything simply is, one does not question what happens or believe that one could change the course of events. When Billy asks how the universe ends, the Tralfamadorians say, "We blow it up, experimenting with new fuels for our flying saucers. A Tralfamadorian test pilot presses a starter button, and the whole Universe disappears." Billy responds, "If you know this . . . isn't there some way you can prevent it? Can't you keep the pilot from *pressing* the button?" The Tralfamadorian guide answers, "He has *always* pressed it, and he always *will*. We *always* let him and we always *will* let him. The moment is *structured* that way" (116–117). This philosophy denies the human capability to prevent any event. Wayne McGinnis comments concerning the Tralfamadorian philosophy, "Their little formula 'so it goes' said ritualistically throughout the novel whenever death, no matter how trivial, is mentioned, is from the human point of view, the height of fatalism" (116). By merely accepting the end of the universe and any other catastrophe, they deny the human potential for change.

Vonnegut ridicules this idea by connecting the Tralfamadorian view to the views of those who defend the bombing of Dresden. When Billy is in the hospital after a plane crash, he shares a room with Professor Rumfoord, who is writing a book on the bombing of Dresden. Rumfoord tells Billy, "It *had* to be done," which echoes the Tralfamadorian view of the end of the universe. Billy accepts this justification because of the philosophy he learned from the Tralfamadorians: "It was all right. . . . *Everything* is all right, and everybody has to do exactly what he does. I learned that on Tralfamadore" (18). Critics' neglect of this connection leads to misinterpretation, as Merrill points out when he writes, "The interpretive problem with *Slaughterhouse-Five* is roughly the same as with the books already discussed. The objective evidence of the text is supposed to persuade us that the Tralfamadorian philosophy, as reflected in such characters as General Rumfoord, is *humanly* unacceptable" (178). Vonnegut's paralleling of Rumfoord's defense of the bombing of Dresden with the quietism practiced by Billy shows the outcome of the Tralfamadorian philosophy.

Vonnegut further mocks the idea of unquestioning acceptance by connecting the Tralfamadorian philosophy with the philosophy of the Germans. When Billy is taken aboard the Tralfamadorian spaceship, he asks, "Why me?" The Tralfamadorians respond, "That is a very *Earthling* question to ask, Mr. Pilgrim. Why *you*? Why *us* for that matter? Why *anything*? Because this moment simply *is*. Have you ever seen bugs trapped in amber? . . . Well, here we are Mr. Pilgrim, trapped in the amber of this moment. There is no *why*" (76–77). This exchange parallels a scene that takes place in a German prison camp. One of the American soldiers makes a comment that a guard does not like; the guard then knocks out two of the American's teeth. The American asks the guard, "Why me?" The guard responds, "Vy you? Vy anybody?" (91). This type of unquestioning acceptance of the status quo leads to a bombing of Dresden or to a slaughter of the Jews, and it is this type of philosophy to which Vonnegut is opposed.

Vonnegut further criticizes Billy's philosophy by presenting him as self-deluded and possibly insane. When Billy commits himself to a mental institution, he meets Eliot Rosewater, who is trying to deal with the same problem Billy has:

> They had both found life meaningless, partly because of what they had seen in the war. Rosewater, for instance, had shot a fourteen-year-old fireman, mistaking him for a German soldier. So it goes. And Billy had seen the greatest massacre in European history, which was the fire-bombing of Dresden. . . . So they were trying to re-invent themselves and their universe. (101)

Rosewater tells Billy at one point that everything there was to know about life was in *The Brothers Karamazov*, adding "But that isn't *enough* any more" (101). Later, Billy hears Rosewater tell the psychiatrist, "I think you guys are going to have to come up with a lot of wonderful new lies, or people aren't going to want to go on living" (101). As Merrill points out, "Like [John] Gardner, Vonnegut creates a sympathetic protagonist who adopts a deterministic philosophy in order to make sense out of life's apparent randomness" (177). Billy, therefore, tries to develop new lies to live his life; but in his attempt, he creates the Tralfamadorians and their philosophy.

Billy develops the Tralfamadorians through Kilgore Trout, a science fiction author whose books Rosewater collects and allows Billy to read while in the hospital. One of these books was *Maniacs in the Fourth Dimension*, which was about "people whose mental diseases couldn't be treated because the causes of the diseases were all in the fourth dimension, and three-dimensional Earthling doctors couldn't see those causes at all, or even imagine them" (104). One of the Tralfamadorians' teachings was that many things, such as other genders, exist in the fourth dimension. Another Kilgore Trout book that influenced his Tralfamadorian experience was *The Big Board*, which was "about an Earthling man and woman who were kidnapped by extraterrestrials. They were put on display in a zoo on a planet called Zircon-212" (201). Billy is supposedly captured by the Tralfamadorians and put on display in a zoo with a woman named Montana Wildhack. His development of the Tralfamadorians is a self-defense mechanism to deal with the horrors he saw at the bombing of Dresden.

Slaughterhouse-Five has been misinterpreted by critics who argue that Vonnegut is advocating a passive stance in view of the horrors of the world. For example, Robert W. Uphaus writes, "To put it another way: people, including Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., are free to self-actualize but they must never expect such self-actualization to alter, fundamentally, the course of human history" (167). Robert Merrill points out this misinterpretation when he comments, "Even such excellent critics as Alfred Kazin and Tony Tanner have agreed that 'The main idea emerging from *Slaughterhouse-Five* seems to be that the proper response to life is one of the rejected acceptance'" (178). Merrill goes on to add,

> As it happens, however, our problems in reading *Grendel* [by John Gardner] are very similar to our difficulties in reading such recent fabulations as John Barth's *The Floating Opera* (1956), Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1961), Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), and many other well-known books in this mode. For reasons I will discuss later, modern fabulators have tended to

> produce works in which it is essential that we perceive the errors of their basically sympathetic protagonists. If we fail to note these errors, or if we interpret them inappropriately, we are in danger not only of misconstruing the author's meaning but of actually reversing it. (162)

The reason for this misinterpretation is that critics believe that Billy Pilgrim's attitudes are synonymous with Vonnegut's; however, Vonnegut distances himself from Pilgrim by showing the hazards of Pilgrim's philosophy and by presenting Pilgrim as a questionable, if not unreliable, narrator.

Another reason that *Slaughterhouse-Five* has been misinterpreted results from a comment that Vonnegut makes in the opening chapter. He relates a conversation he had about *Slaughterhouse-Five*:

> Over the years, people I've met have often asked me what I'm working on, and I've usually replied that the main thing was a book about Dresden. I said that to Harrison Staff, the movie-maker, one time, and he raised his eyebrows and inquired, "Is it an anti-war book?" "Yes," I said, "I guess." "You know what I say to people when I hear they're writing anti-war books?" "No. What do you say, Harrison Star?" "I say, 'Why don't you write an anti-*glacier* book instead?'" What he meant, of course, was that there would always be wars, that they were as easy to stop as glaciers. I believe that, too. And even if wars didn't keep coming like glaciers, there would still be plain old death. (3–4)

This interchange has been seen as a confirmation of the passive acceptance of wars and other such atrocities; however, Vonnegut is merely viewing the situation realistically. Vonnegut has certainly done this in many of his other works and speeches. In an address to the graduating class of Bennington College in 1970, he said, "I know that millions of dollars have been spent to produce this splendid graduating class, and that the main hope of your teachers was, once they got through with you, that you would no longer be superstitious. I'm sorry—I have to undo that now. I beg you to believe in the most ridiculous superstition of all: that humanity is at the center of the universe, the fulfiller or the frustrator of the grandest dreams of God almighty" (163). As John May writes, "There is, it seems to me, considerable evidence that Vonnegut would steer us from one course of action because he has something better in mind, although there is a marked inclination to dwell on the limitations of the possibilities before us. His tendency to limit the humanly possible so severely is, in fact, an almost desperate plea

to the reader to avoid the destructively quixotic" (123). Vonnegut knows that one book is not going to end wars, and even if it did, there would still be death.

This recognition of the effects of satire is reminiscent of Jonathan Swift's comment in the letter from Captain Gulliver to his cousin Sympson at the beginning of *Gulliver's Travels*: "And so it hath proved; for instead of seeing a full Stop put to all Abuses and Corruptions, at least in this little Island, as I had Reason to expect: Behold, after six Months Warning, I cannot learn that my Book hath produced one single Effect according to mine Intentions . . ." (viii). Vonnegut, like Swift, realizes that change will not come in six months, or even more, based on one book. Instead, change happens in individuals long before it happens in societies. John May supports this view: "We may not be able, Vonnegut is saying, to undo the harm that has been done, but we can certainly love, simply because they are people, those who have been made useless by our past stupidity and greed, our previous crimes against our brothers. And if that seems insane, then the better the world for such folly" (125). Vonnegut encourages local action, rather than hoping that society will change in a short period of time.

Not only does he encourage pacifism, he practices it in relation to his own family. In the opening chapter he writes, "I have told my sons that they are not under any circumstances to take part in massacres, and that the news of massacres of enemies is not to fill them with satisfaction or glee. I have also told them not to work for companies which make massacre machinery, and to express contempt for people who think we need machinery like that" (19). Even if no one is changed by this book, Vonnegut promises to try to pass his peaceful philosophy on to his children. He seems to have succeeded at least at this: His son, Mark, is a doctor; his oldest daughter, Edith, is an artist, as is his second daughter, Nanette.

Vonnegut's message in *Slaughterhouse-Five* is not ambivalent, as Olsen argues concerning postmodern humor; instead, the reader must read carefully to separate Billy Pilgrim from Kurt Vonnegut. Vonnegut even clearly states his viewpoint in opposition to Pilgrim in the last chapter of the book when he says, "If what Billy Pilgrim learned from the Tralfamadorians is true, that we will all live forever, no matter how dead we may sometimes seem to be, I am not overjoyed" (211). If it is taken out of context, Billy Pilgrim's viewpoint could be seen as that of Vonnegut; however, when one examines the connections between Pilgrim's views and those of the Germans and the supporters of the bombing of Dresden, Vonnegut's message of working toward peace becomes evident.

The problem Vonnegut faced in 1969 with *Slaughterhouse-Five* is one that continues to plague both writers and readers. Readers are hesitant to

accept any writer's view of the world as true; thus, the writers must establish the view of the world they are taking. In so doing, the reader knows what to expect, preparing the way for norms that can be used to satirize differing opinions. Otherwise, misreading, such as what happened with many critics who commented on *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Grendel*, will continue to happen.

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SCOTT MACFARLANE

Slaughterhouse-Five *(1969): So It Goes*

> For Kurt Vonnegut, there is a deep affinity with American life. His rise to popularity during the sixties was an event itself, taking its place alongside other milestones of popular history during those tumultuous times. Cultural historians already perceive those events as important episodes in the evolution of American culture. But Vonnegut's importance is something more than as the spokesman of a counterculture. It is more like the authentic idiom of a whole culture, with its contradictions, dissonances, and dreams as parts of the full orchestration. There has never been another writer quite like Vonnegut, just as there has never been another decade quite like the sixties [xii].
>
> —From *Vonnegut in America*, Jerome Klinkowitz/Donald Lawler

Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., was born in 1922 and published his short masterpiece, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, in 1969. In the novel, Vonnegut's protagonist, Billy Pilgrim, an American POW being detained in the cellar of a Dresden, Germany slaughterhouse at the end of World War II, survives a firebombing by a squadron of American planes that killed 135,000 German civilians living at ground level above the temporary prison. This event actually happened. The author, as a young soldier, also survived the same bombing raid. Billy's son in the novel became a Green Beret in the Vietnam War. The

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From *The Hippie Narrative: A Literary Perspective on the Counterculture,* pp. 143–57.

author's son, Mark, was not drafted. In 1975, Mark Vonnegut published a memoir called *The Eden Express* about dropping out and joining a hippie commune in British Columbia. It was the father Kurt, despite being from the preceding generation, and not the hippie son Mark, who was a hero of the counterculture.

Slaughterhouse-Five erupted on the literary landscape at the same time that swelling numbers of Americans were seriously questioning the War in Vietnam. This disenchantment extended well beyond the student protesters and those in the counterculture. Through this darkly funny work, Vonnegut questioned human attitudes toward war and death in general. Vonnegut's absurdist sense of irony and experimental form is not unlike Richard Brautigan's in *Trout Fishing in America*, except that the central theme for Vonnegut is not the loss of the pastoral in the United States, but the supreme lack of coherence when it comes to when and why people will die or survive.

At every reference to death in the novel—over one hundred times—the author reflects on the occasion by stating: "so it goes." Initially, the phrase seems to imply that this is just the way it is. Over the, course of the novel, the number of "so it goes" begin to mount like a death toll. The surface breeziness of the mantra sobers, philosophically, into an obtrusive emphasis on how we all must go; it's the when and why of our death that makes no sense in Vonnegut's cosmology. The hobo-soldier on the prisoners' boxcar, dies uncomplainingly. "So it goes." Robert Weary threatens revenge on Billy Pilgrim for his predicament. When captured with Billy, Weary was forced to wear wooden shoes. He dies of gangrene in his mangled feet. "So it goes." At age forty-four on the night after Billy's daughter's wedding, the champagne has gone dead. "So it goes."

Billy Pilgrim's life in the novel is beset, at every major juncture, with the question of why he seems singled out to survive when so many of his fellow soldiers in Germany, his fellow optometrists after a plane crash he is in, or his wife en route to Billy's hospital bed after the crash, all die. Most profoundly, the book hinges on the singular irony that Billy and the author were American POW's, part of the very few survivors in a city that was utterly and unnecessarily destroyed by American bombs. Dresden housed no industry related to war production; the bombing of civilian Germans there didn't impact the outcome of the war, and; the unconditional surrender of Germany took place a few weeks following the massive air raid. The facts surrounding this event were largely concealed from the American public until the publication of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, two-dozen years later.

Vonnegut asserts that this novel "is so short and jangled [. . .] because there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre" (22). With his argument for compression and incomprehensibility, Vonnegut succeeds in setting the

stakes of his novel exceedingly high. In its use of poignantly absurd imagery, *Slaughterhouse-Five* also succeeds masterfully.

Ken Kesey, in *Sometimes a Great Notion*, compressed time and had numerous narrative threads leading toward one culminating event. Yet, by comparison, *Great Notion* is a tome. Early on in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut informs the reader that: "*Billy Pilgrim has come 'unstuck in time*" (25). Both novels are refractory, though *Slaughterhouse-Five* even more so than *Great Notion*. Vonnegut's book is a non-sequential portrait of one man's life, a barrage of the bits and pieces of Billy Pilgrim surviving war, domesticity, and alien abduction. The completed portrait offers a sense of this man, as well as a larger appreciation of how capriciously death affects every human. Billy Pilgrim is not an anti-hero or a fictional persona of Kurt Vonnegut, but, intentionally, an overtly innocent victim of the greater forces at work in the worst war mankind has ever witnessed. Billy, in this regard, was an unheroic hero. At Dresden, the author makes it known that nearly twice as many civilians were killed in this firebombing than were killed in the atomic blast over Nagasaki in Japan.

Kesey's novel employs parallel sequencing where many plot lines lead toward trying to make Hank Stamper give up. Even though there are numerous narrative threads in *Great Notion*, each one adheres to what John Gardner in *The Art of Fiction* refers to as the "uninterruptible fictional dream" (176) and, the result at the end of the novel, is a kaleidoscopic whole, and a full portrait. By comparison, *Slaughterhouse-Five* violates most semblances of an accruing narrative tension when Vonnegut tells the reader what will happen to each significant character and situation in the novel before he develops those scenes. We know from the author's snippets, for example, that Billy has survived the firebombing, that his wife dies in a car accident, that Billy will be the only surviving optometrist when a plane full of optometrists crashes.

Yet, even though narrative suspense is violated and Billy Pilgrim is "unstuck in time" in order to take the reader into many episodes in Billy's life—from childhood to mid-life back to being a man-child at war—Vonnegut deftly holds out the most incomprehensible scene of Billy's survival as the hook to keep the story propelling forward. In chapter one, the author as narrator, tells the reader that he, too, actually escaped the firebombing of Dresden; he mentions how he carried this story around in his head for years before he could begin to fathom the magnitude of it in a way that could be depicted with words. Finally, in the late '60s, Vonnegut discovered a narrative strategy.

In chapter one—conspicuously not a preface or foreword—Vonnegut-the-character goes to visit a fellow veteran who had also survived the massive firebombing. The veteran's wife has them sit in the kitchen at a sparse table to

share their old stories. Vonnegut can tell she's not happy about this reunion of war survivors. Finally, when confronted on this, she declares that her husband and Vonnegut were just babies then. The world does not need more stories about babies pretending to be men, she tells them. To this, Vonnegut declares that he had probably written five thousand pages of this book and thrown them all away. He raises his right hand and promises that if it were ever to be made into a movie, it would not feature Frank Sinatra or John Wayne. Furthermore, it would be called *The Children's Crusade*. By doing this in the opening chapter of the novel, the author-as-autobiographer lets the reader know how difficult this topic had been for him to tackle. "As a trafficker in climaxes and thrills and characterization and wonderful dialogue and suspense and confrontations, I had outlined the Dresden story many times" (10).

Vonnegut kept his word to his friend's wife. The full title of the novel is *Slaughterhouse-Five, or The Children's Crusade: A Duty-Dance with Death* and this woman's name, Mary O'Hare, is in the, dedication. The other name in the dedication is that of a former German soldier whom Vonnegut and his Vet friend met in the mid-1960's driving taxi on a return trip to Dresden shortly after that visit in the kitchen. Vonnegut is a German-American twenty-plus years after the war who empathizes with this German, his age. Due to forces out of their control, they happened to fight on opposite sides. The author humanizes the participants in this war. In 1968, unlike the young anti-war radicals such as Abbie Hoffman, Jerry Rubin or Paul Krassner, author Kurt Vonnegut was a middle-age, mainstream pacifist who had no interest in revolutionary change in America, except for the hope that Americans would embrace his humanist recognition that humans are their own worst enemy when it comes to matters of war, and only humans could do anything about the horror caused by warlike behavior. Mary O'Hare, the mainstream American housewife, was indicative of the growing members of the middle-class of America that, by 1967, shared a strong disdain toward a dubious war. This mainstream dovishness toward American involvement in Vietnam helped expand many countercultural sentiments far beyond the realm of hardcore hippies.

The memories Vonnegut shares with his friend were not very helpful to him as an author, but the perspective of the wife inspires the author to fashion a protagonist who would echo the sentiment of a Children's Crusade, an army of thirty-thousand European children who, in 1213, were recruited to march to Palestine to protect the holy land for Christianity. None of the children made it to Jerusalem, and most were exploited en route; many died or were sold into slavery.

Interestingly, when the hippie phenomenon has been lampooned, it is often by way of referring to it as a romantic Children's Crusade. To become a

hippie was indeed a voluntaristic adaptation to drop out of the mainstream, but it wasn't orchestrated by some larger schemers, and at its most altruistic, there was a desire of its participants to better the world and to find alternative solutions to the institutional ailments of society. However, while the movement had its share of naivety, to characterize its many permutations as a crusade of innocent children is to denude the counterculture of its social potency. The dynamic of this phenomenon did change mainstream American culture. Of course, Kurt Vonnegut's use of the Children's Crusade as a metaphor was not in reference to the counterculture. The author was making a global statement as to the propensity of man to kill his fellow man often without regard to the impact on innocent people or the price on the collective human psyche. As the embodiment of this damaged psyche, Billy Pilgrim is a schizophrenic man-child who survives war and several scrapes with death.

Vonnegut's approach to narrative structure in *Slaughterhouse-Five* is a literary technique that seems spatially configured rather than linear and sequential. Joseph Frank in his article, "Spatial Form in Modern Literature," written in 1945, theorizes that when culture is harmoniously adapted to the environment, novels reflect this by being organized chronologically. However, when men feel threatened by the environment, Frank holds that narratives adopt a more spatial structuring. Vonnegut used bits and pieces of the same set of scenes to create what is actually a temporal (not spatial) fracturing to capture the schizophrenic magnitude of war. One man, Billy Pilgrim, embodies the universal disharmony exacted by man on his fellow man. However, because the reader is taken to the same unstuck-in-time scenes again and again, conceptually, an illusion of spatial fracturing is created.

Throughout the narrative, the reader is told clearly at what point in Billy's life we are being taken during each of the fragments of story-line. The temporal narrative arc of Billy's life may be broken into bits and reordered for effect, and Billy may even be able to foretell his own future, but this man's schizophrenically rendered story eventually makes chronological sense to the reader. By the end of the book, a collage of the many fragments that comprise Billy Pilgrim's mind and experience manifest in a mosaic. The jigsaw puzzle is complete and Billy serves as a metaphor for a universal plight where mankind, by some schizophrenic fortuitousness, has only barely escaped its own self-induced annihilation.

Vonnegut, as a young Army scout, appears selectively throughout the novel. This presence helps dispel any thought that Billy Pilgrim was an autobiographical rendering of the actual author, although both are the same age and shared much of the same war experience, and, presumably, some similar perspectives. Like Vonnegut, Billy is twenty-one when he goes to Germany near the end of the War. Billy, however, is an ill-dressed, ill-prepared, funny-

looking Chaplain's Assistant who survives the last major German offensive in Luxembourg. He hooks up with three other armed and well-dressed soldiers, but Billy barely survives the next few days of bitter winter cold. Ironically, Billy's life is spared when the Nazi soldiers discover them. Two of these American soldiers have already been shot when the Nazis find Billy. So it goes, says Vonnegut.

Vonnegut only ladles out portions of each scene in any one section. Billy Pilgrim is "spastic in time" (26). He can see into the future and the past. The reader travels with Billy on his abduction to the Planet Tralfamadore where he is forced to live in a pressurized atmospheric cage so the extraterrestrials can watch. The Tralfamadorians bring him Montana Wildhack, an earthling porno star so they can watch Billy mate with her. Billy moves forward and backwards in time. His father is killed in a hunting accident while Billy is in bootcamp. He meets the little-known Science Fiction writer, Kilgore Trout. Billy Pilgrim is one of Trout's only fans. Late in the book, in the display window of a Time Square porno shop in Manhattan, Billy finds a dusty copy of one of Trout's novels. In it, the main character is abducted to outer space and made to mate with a beautiful female earthling. Vonnegut establishes early in this novel that all moments—whether past, present, or future—have always existed and will always exist. The chaotic pieces of the puzzle that comprises Billy Pilgrim's mind gravitate through odd confrontations with a death that never quite kills Billy, yet impacts his fragmented psyche. From disaffection to disorientation to disengagement to disillusionment, Vonnegut paints, impressionistically, Billy's near escapes and the mounting toll that death and war extol on the human psyche. The author juxtaposes Billy's fragments of past, present and future experience for optimal irony.

Like *Trout Fishing in America*, the narrative structure of the novel is built on such juxtapositioning of absurdist irony. In this regard, Vonnegut's and Brautigan's works are Postmodernist, not Late Modernist. John Somer in his article "Geodesic Vonnegut; or, If Buckminster Fuller Wrote Novels," uses the geodesic dome as a conceptual device to describe the structure of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. The dome was a structure designed by the eccentric scientist Fuller. It met with great favor in the counterculture because it used the least amount of material to create strong buildings with the most amount of space. This imaginative conceptual application would also apply to *Trout Fishing in America*. The fragments of prose are like the pentagonal units of construction creating a dome of narrative text. In the case of Billy, the temporally unstuck schizophrenia of his personality is a dome where the pentagonal units depict the many episodes of his passive survival; in the case of *Trout Fishing in America*, the dome is a man-made universe where each pentagon is one permutation of trout fishing in America. Taken as a textual whole, these

absurd Trout Fishing in Americas have come to cover, like a surreal dome, the pastoral realities of actual trout fishing in a modernized America.

Somer refers to Vonnegut's geodesic narrative form in *Slaughterhouse-Five* in terms of man being his own salvation:

> Billy weaves his way through time, creating a mosaic pattern in this spatial-form novel, moving artfully so that his movements create "an image of life that is beautiful and surprising and deep," moving carefully under the deft hand of Vonnegut, the narrator, [. . .] through the erratic corridors of Billy's schizophrenic passage through time. [. . .]
>
> Billy's relationship to the narrator structures of this book [demonstrate] the technical significance of dynamic tension. *Slaughterhouse-Five* is a framed novel; that is, a story within a story—or more accurately, a fictive story within an autobiography. Consequently, this is not a mere framed story, but an innovation that strains the conventions of both the spatial and temporal-form traditions and even brings them together into a technical and structural relationship of dynamic tension [247].

Kurt Vonnegut, Richard Brautigan and Tom Robbins have been, likewise, compared to Mark Twain, not only for their colloquial tone and satirical wit, but in resemblance as well. Ample hair and big mustaches helped in this respect. These distinctly American writers all exhibited a highly imaginative wit. Conrad Festa in his article, "Vonnegut's Satire," reflects on how this author's humor is often treated as an aside when his works are studied critically. Yet, Festa contends that satire is central to the construction of Vonnegut's prose:

> Vonnegut focuses our attention on evils in our society which make life unnecessarily painful, dangerous, and destructive—evils which, for the most part, can be corrected if only we would avoid our greatest folly: our tendency to escape unpleasant, threatening reality which demands corrective action, either by slipping into private dream worlds or by pretending that nothing can be done about it anyway.
>
> Vonnegut's satires offer us hope, not despair—but not hope without action. [. . .] To a very large degree Vonnegut has accepted life as it is. But just as strongly as he has accepted life, he rejects the idea that we have no control over the evil in it that makes life unnecessarily painful. The tension between the

> two positions held simultaneously by Vonnegut creates not only the impulse toward satire but also the special tone of his satire [147–148].

Brautigan's juxtapositional imagery in *Trout Fishing* stays inside a private dream world where the modern world, more than individual men, are to be held accountable for the absurd state of our existence. Whereas Vonnegut inserts himself into the narrative of *Slaughterhouse-Five* with its focus on man's behavior toward fellow man, in *Trout Fishing* there is much less characterization occurring, simply a shifting conceptual lens toward what or who Trout Fishing in America is or might be construed to be. In many of the episodic fragments in *Trout Fishing*, the reader is given no reason to assume any separation between the author and the narrator. And, by the end of the book, the reader, presumably, will never look the same way again at trout fishing in America.

Vonnegut's focus as author is on developing Billy's character as a metaphor, not theme as metaphor as Brautigan does. Vonnegut creates a fully realized schizophrenic persona through the character of Billy Pilgrim. By the end of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the reader, presumably, will never look at war in the same way again. Both books challenge the way in which the reader looks at the world by first fragmenting how the world is presented. The evocative power of these works, though, is in the impact of the completed assemblages, the textual whole of the narratives through the manner in which they have been constructed.

In a manner more similar to *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, Vonnegut begins with himself as the narrator, establishes the promise and parameters of this unstuck-in-time novel and then, once Billy Pilgrim takes over, the point-of-view shifts to omniscience, with the author entering the minds of any of the many characters at will. In the same way that Tom Wolfe maintains his presence throughout the narrative with the authorial "I", Vonnegut reappears on a few occasions throughout the novel, mostly to remind the reader that he is not one-and-the-same as Billy Pilgrim and that this book is only fictional on the surface. "That was I. That was me," he would say when making a cameo appearance. From the boxcar of the POW train entering the "intricate and voluptuous and enchanted and absurd" skyline of unbombed Dresden, the author-as-character sits behind Billy and describes the sight as "Oz" (133). At the opening of the last chapter, Vonnegut also surfaces to tell the reader that it is 1968 and Robert Kennedy was shot two nights earlier. "Martin Luther King was shot a month ago. He died, too. So it goes" (186).

The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test treats the primary chronological narrative as an extended backstory to Wolfe's arrival on the scene, but the storyline

never wavers from its chronological unfolding. The story starts in 1966 with Wolfe, moves back to Kesey's arrival in California in 1960 and progresses with the Merry Pranksters until the reader is back with Wolfe again in 1966 at the end of the novel. This reflects the traditional narrative form with the prime innovation being that the story took the reader into the subjective minds of real-life characters. Billy Pilgrim is a fictional construct modeled by Vonnegut on an apathetic, real-life private who survived the Dresden firebombing only to refuse to eat. While a fictional Billy survived the war, this soldier died of self-induced starvation in Dresden, just days before the war ended.

Vonnegut's own appearance in his novel also allows for its metafictional attributes, meaning that the novel draws attention to its own structure and telling. Similar to Norman Mailer making himself a character in *The Armies of the Night*, Vonnegut uses his own real-life experience in surviving the Dresden bombing to establish authorial legitimacy. Like Mailer, he can talk about why he was writing this book and the difficulties involved. When Vonnegut appears as a character, the reader believes in the plausibility of the framed, fictive story within this autobiography; the delusional reactions of a Billy Pilgrim are not flights of fancy as much as realistic adaptations of a man who is justifiably disturbed. *Slaughterhouse-Five* is, consequently, a fascinating blend of creative nonfiction and postmodernist fiction.

The fictional aspects of the novel allow the author to establish his absurdist ironies with greater definition than had this been strictly autobiographical. Billy Pilgrim is an innocent at war, a man-boy entering the war at the holiest and lowest rank afforded by military establishments. Billy is a chaplain's assistant. This lends weight to the idea of the war as a "Children's Crusade." Billy is one moment at war, the next time-traveling. He fixates on a gruesome crucifix that his mother had bought while on a trip across the American West. In constructing his Postmodern simulacra, Vonnegut describes Billy's mother, "like so many Americans, [. . .] trying to construct a life that made sense from things she found in gift shops" (39). The crucifix was one such item. Like a giftshop facsimile, death for Billy is always just one step removed, always surreal and absurd, an imitation of the given finality that we all will die. "So it goes," says Vonnegut.

When Vonnegut describes Tralfamadorian writing as clumps of symbols with urgent but brief messages, he is outlining, in part, his own narrative design in *Slaughterhouse-Five*:

> There isn't any particular relationship between all the messages, except that the author has chosen them carefully, so that, when seen all at once, they produce an image of life that is beautiful and

> surprising and deep. There is no beginning, no middle, no end, no suspense, no moral, no causes, no effects. What we love in our books are the depths of many marvelous moments seen all at one time. [82]

Vonnegut's assemblage of reoccurring imagery presents a non-linear mosaic of Billy Pilgrim's life (and the author's war experience). Yet, due to the linearity of the written form, the author's curtain can only gradually reveal its patterns of thematic and scenic fragments. There is, also, deftness in the placement, and suspense in wanting to know all that happened to Billy and how, causally, it happened. The reader is told one-third of the way into the novel that "Billy [age 44] was guided by dread and lack of dread. Dread told him when to stop. Lack of it told him when to move again" (68–9). Ultimately, Billy's paradoxical blend of numbness and luck yield for Vonnegut a deep probing of mankind's often senseless behavior as relates to warfare. The author, in the context of man's warfare, repeatedly asks just what sort of creature we human beings are. The element of science fiction in the novel, allows this question to be posed humorously, but in a profoundly metaphorical way, too.

Perhaps one of the primary reasons this novel resonated with the growing anti-war sentiment of 1969, was in the manner Vonnegut successfully juxtaposed the oddly successful life of a quietly disaffected optometrist in 1968 with the horrors of a distant war. Of course, at the time Vietnam was distant and being fought by 500,000 American soldiers while the home front in America was, for the most part, complacent in its affluence. World War II impacted the American domestic calm much more directly. In 1967, the Second World War was historical and distant, but still haunting the memories of the many living participants. Vonnegut refuses to glorify or ennoble a war that was typically glorified and ennobled: "World War Two had certainly made everybody very tough. [. . .] The nicest veterans in Schenectady, I thought, the kindest and funniest ones, the ones who hated the war the most, were the ones who'd really fought" (15). When Vonnegut, as his own character, states this early in the novel, his credibility with those questioning the war in Vietnam was immediately enhanced. Also, *Slaughterhouse-Five* was notable in that unsympathetic representations of World War II were not commonplace.

When Billy Pilgrim is abducted by the flying saucer, he asks, "Why me?" (72) When an American P.O.W. is pulled out of line for talking and an English-speaking German soldier knocks his teeth out with the butt of his rifle, the American wonders, "Why me?"

"The guard shoved him back into ranks. 'Vy you? Vy anybody?' he said" (85).

Most of Vonnegut's earlier works were more overtly sci-fi. With the many fragments of Billy's time-travel to the Planet Tralfamadore, *Slaughterhouse-Five* employed science fiction fantasy as a metaphorical device to illustrate how tenuously any human being's hold on sanity actually is. When Billy Pilgrim is in a Tralfamadorian cage and mates with a fellow earthling, Vonnegut doesn't strive for verisimilitude, but an absurdist sense of pathos. Billy's flights of fantasy grow increasingly understandable as a human survival mechanism. There is a traditional narrative cause and effect at work here. The man's amazing fortuitousness for barely surviving takes an increasing toll on his mental equilibrium. The reader comes to empathize with Billy and his quirky ways.

Billy, in his World War II dress, is also unwittingly theatrical, not unlike a Merry Prankster. When he is the recipient of a greatly undersized overcoat off of a tiny man who had just died, his skinny arms protrude out ward giving him the appearance of a stork. He finds silver painted boots to wear that are left behind from the British P.O.W's production of *Cinderella*. From the makeshift stage he appropriates an azure curtain to drape over his body in the manner of a toga. The curtain is Billy's bedding and his warmth. As an outfit, this appearance gives him the look of a buffoon. The German captors laugh hysterically at the sight of this gangly boy-soldier so attired. In Dresden, prior to the bombing, a German surgeon confronts Billy on the street. In English he asks if Billy thinks the war was funny, something to mock. Billy, in his typical disoriented mode of detachment, doesn't answer the doctor, but instead pulls from the seam of the tiny overcoat a large diamond and a partial denture he had found lodged there to show the German. After the war Billy has the diamond mounted and gives it as an engagement ring to his wife-to-be. She is the daughter of a wealthy optometrist who helps Billy become affluent. The odd luck of this odd young man created a comically captivating protagonist.

Interspersed with the absurdist humor are the author's constant reminders of the philosophical depth at the cusps of life, and the inequality of our human fates. Vonnegut refers to life as liquid, and death as stone in his weave of domestic life, wartime life, and outerspace life. However, foremost in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the young men were off fighting—like a Children's Crusade, and: "Most of the privates on Billy's car were very young—at the end of childhood" (65).

At the beginning of the decade, Joseph Heller in *Catch-22*, wrote an absurdist satire about the Air Force in World War II where the commanders were all bumbling incompetents and the protagonist, Yossarian, was always scheming to be sent home. However, Yossarian was caught in the "Catch-22" where the leadership could keep him there at the base off the coast of Italy flying bombing missions for as long as they pleased, despite the fact that the

protagonist had met his quota of bombing missions. The novel was written in the late '50s, but its anti-establishment tone did not come out of the Beat literary movement. It was, however, like *Slaughterhouse-Five* and the Beat writings, a part of the underground literature that typified an anti-authoritarian upsurge of expression that grew common by the late '60s.

Stanley Schatt in *Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.*, addresses the similarities in the protagonists of both novels, particularly how the absurdist tone in each book leads to climactic resolutions filled with mental dissonance:

> Yossarian is compelled to think about Snowden's death yet finds it too painful and tries to avoid the memory, so too is a reluctant Billy Pilgrim forced to return again and again to the fire-bombing of Dresden. Only when Yossarian and Billy Pilgrim learn to cope with mankind's inhumanity and the horrors of war are they able to describe the atrocities they have repressed. Billy consistently retreats from Dresden just before the atrocity is to take place until he hears a group of optometrists singing, for the barbershop quartet reminds him of the group of German soldiers who shared the protection of *Slaughterhouse-Five* with the American prisoners during the bombing. [. . .] [H]is observation or recall of the past incident represents the climax of Vonnegut's novel since it is only after Billy has faced the past that he is able to return to Dresden and live through the holocaust once more. Vonnegut himself had blotted out his memories of the actual fire-bombing of Dresden . . . [82–83].

This underscores the earlier point that *Slaughterhouse-Five* offers the illusion of being built solely on random juxtaposed images and fragmented scenes that render a spatial meaninglessness. Actually, the repetition of these fragments build and accrete toward this culminating confrontation with the horror of death that is seemingly not deterministic, but atrocious beyond the mind's comprehension. In this sense, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, though overwhelmingly juxtapositional, builds slyly toward an energetic climax, the traditional narrative form where dramatic actualization is rendered through the potential of character and situation. Just as Vonnegut must confront his inability to articulate the horror of Dresden, so must Billy, always so passively surreal, confront in a climactic fashion, Dresden's reality as well. This novel is, ultimately, the story of confronting the horrors in one's own life as well as an imploring cry that mankind must address its own complicity in the horrors of war.

In terms of anti-war sentiment, *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* served as bookends of the decade. *Catch-22* was widely advertised when first

published in 1961, but, while initial sales were slow; its popularity grew steadily over the next few years due to word-of-mouth, and the unpopularity of the latest war in Vietnam. According to Heller's 1994 foreword to the novel: "in late summer of 1962, Raymond Walters, on the bestseller page of the Sunday *Times* [. . .] reported that the underground book New Yorkers seemed to be talking about most was *Catch-22*. (The novel probably was more heavily advertised than any other that year, but it was still underground)" (11).

The term "underground" applies to every book being examined in *The Hippie Narrative*. Even *Stranger in a Strange Land*, though not intended to be a template for communal religion and relationships, became part of the underground scene when its satire on the mainstream churches and sexual mores of the time began to be taken seriously by the earliest hippies. By this point, the book's messages were self-contained and divorced from the sentiments of its conservative author, Robert Heinlein. The term "underground" is often misunderstood to mean clandestine or non-commercial in nature. However, in the '60s an underground press, the underground rock music, or underground rebelliousness meant simply a posture of anti-authoritarian disaffection with the mainstream culture. Rock groups were often phenomenally successful financially, but still part of the underground.

Again, as cited in the opening chapter in *The Beat Generation and the Popular Novel in the United States, 1945–1970*, Thomas Newhouse describes the underground narrative as "the literary response in fiction to the spiritual malaise that grew from dark cold war realities affecting artists and intellectuals immediately after the Second World War, a response that reached its fullest expression in the counterculture of the 1960s" (4). *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, *Sometimes a Great Notion*, *Been Down So Long It Looks Like Up to Me*, *Trout Fishing in America*, *Armies of the Night*, and *Slaughterhouse-Five* are all direct propagators of this specific literary response.

Jess Ritter was a teacher at San Francisco State College University and a frequent contributor to *Rolling Stone Magazine* at the height of Kurt Vonnegut's popularity. Few American campuses witnessed more student turmoil during the Vietnam War era than S.F. State. In his article, "Teaching Kurt Vonnegut on the Firing Line," Ritter points out how: "somewhere in the late 1960's Kurt Vonnegut, Ken Kesey, and Joseph Heller took a generation's consciousness on a sharp left turn down the crooked road to the absurd. Yet it was a recognition of the absurd that was not a surrender to meaninglessness but a wholehearted, raucous Bronx cheer for the false pieties and Aesopean language of rampant technology and the cold war" (35). In this lack of surrender, Ritter points out the structural discontinuities, radical juxtapositions and ironies which surfaced in Vonnegut's fiction through what Ritter calls social surrealism. "Much as William Faulkner created his mythical Yoknapa-

tawpha Country, so Kurt Vonnegut is creating a mythical modern universe. [. . .] The Planet Tralfamadore suggests technology gone awry, time turned inside out" (38).

Ironically, for this 1973 article, Ritter—in the autobiographical mode of the New Journalism—uses literary realism to establish his case for Vonnegut's social surrealism:

> "Hey, man." Victor has already taken a chair. "Space Daisy tells me you dig Vonnegut, man, you really read all his books? Fahr out!"
>
> "Space Daisy?" I had been reading literary criticism for an evening class.
>
> "Yeah, my old woman. She's in your whatchacallit, 'Language of the '70s' class, man, I been reading the booklist, all that Heller and Southern and Vonnegut and Barthelme. How come you don't have Hesse in there? You gotta get into Hesse's head trips. You ever read *The Sirens of Titan* on acid, man? Wow! [. . .]

Ritter's hippie character goes on to inform Ritter that he and Space Daisy live in a commune up the hill from the Haight where it's cool, except for a couple dudes snorting coke or shooting meth, but that they are going to split for far northern California in the summer to avoid all the dope and the bad vibes from the city. Even though Ritter, as a hip contributor to *Rolling Stone Magazine*, has a countercultural sensibility, he mocks the anti-intellectual lingo and flakiness of this hippie sitting in his office. At the same time, Ritter captures the back-to-the-land sentiment that was pronounced when he wrote this article in the early '70s. He also lets the reader of his article know that the intelligence and concerns of these hippies was not to be underestimated:

> I hear from the Midwest and East Coast that literature people worry: "The young don't read." I don't know what "young" they're talking about. The young I know read—maybe not freshman anthologies or *Silas Marner* or *Harper's*, but Heller, Vonnegut, Hesse, R. Crumb and *Snatch Comix*, McCluhan, Pynchon, Kesey, *The Whole Earth Catalog*, Brautigan, and *Rolling Stone*. In fact they read too much for their Peace of Mind [32–33].

Vonnegut, in the opening of his novel, speaks about his own unsettled mind as an author trying to write *Slaughterhouse-Five*:

> I would hate to tell you what this lousy little book cost me in money and anxiety and time. When I got home from the Second World War twenty-three years ago, I thought it would be easy for

> me to write about the destruction of Dresden, since all I would have to do would be to report what I had seen. And I thought, too, that it would be a masterpiece or at least make me a lot of money since the subject was so big.
>
> But not many words about Dresden came from my mind then—not enough of them to make a book, anyway [8].

Perhaps it took until the arrival of the children's crusade into Vonnegut's imagination before the author could confidently sculpt this masterpiece. Perhaps it took until 1969 and the height of American involvement in the Vietnam War before it would fully resonate with a reading public. As "unstuck in time" as *Slaughterhouse-Five* was, the novel was very much a product of its time at the peak of anti-war unrest in 1969. There was an audience of young people, questioning one war and receptive to hearing a compatible and freshly disturbing take on a war that was almost always treated as good and justly heroic. In this sense, Vonnegut deconstructed the prevailing American disposition toward World War II. This literary work experimented boldly and convincingly to find an alternative narrative form for expressing the absurdities of war and death. From an authorial perspective, this assemblage of the schizophrenic fragments of multiple narratives was not deconstructivist on Vonnegut's part, but brilliantly constructivist—an alternative geodesic vision. He not only tore apart the status quo vision of itself as noble and just, but, more importantly, moved beyond iconoclasm to create a more humane vision in its place.

The real-world story of the hippie phenomenon in 1969 could be said to have reached the peak of its cultural allure. This was the point where the counterculture shifted from its own iconoclastic approach toward the system, toward a more serious vision of creating sustainable alternatives. The Woodstock Music Festival took place in September to several days of peace and love and mud. At Altamont in California in December, a Hell's Angel bludgeoned a man to death as the Rolling Stones played. The demonic communal cult of Charles Manson was responsible for the murder of Sharon Tate. In many respects the hippie phenomenon was seemingly "deconstructing." However, at the same time, many in the counterculture, such as the young hippie talking with Jess Ritter, were earnestly seeking alternative lifestyle solutions. Altamont and Charles Manson were viewed as isolated aberrations to those many hippies who sought out lives anchored in living more peacefully, creatively, and lovingly. For the hardcore, their immediate lives were being wholeheartedly committed to this endeavor.

As the movement diffused into the cultural seams of America, signs of its own fracturing into different spiritual persuasions and lifestyle choices grew more evident. From Tiny Tim to the Hippie Dippy Weatherman, the

countercultural phenomenon became easy to lampoon and spoof, a victim, in part, of its own colorful theatricality, but also because its multifaceted dissidence always faced significant mainstream opposition. A hawkish hostility continued to greet the radical anti-war activism. The Weather Underground (or Weathermen), a small group that resorted to bombings to confront the system, was an example of the most extreme manifestation of this activism. Opposition to the war from the growing middle-class, however, including the likes of Vonnegut, precipitated a painfully slow exit policy from Vietnam that ended the draft in 1972, resulted in the peace accords in 1973, but wasn't complete until North Vietnam violated those accords and successfully invaded Saigon in 1975 and forced the U.S. to evacuate its embassy.

On the fringe of American culture, the hardcore hippies ignored the increasingly systematic derision from the mainstream media. And, despite the growing countercultural ire toward the government's seeming intractability on withdrawing from Vietnam, there was also a deliberate transition by many hippies into a more "constructivist" mode. As the 1970's took shape, "The Movement" began to diffuse into multiple movements from New Age to environmentalism to organic to any number of spiritual affiliations. But, in the early '70s, the hippies were by no means extinct, but actually still growing in numbers. Key aspects of the counterculture—longhair, amplified music and a host of rebellious attitudes—were not only less shocking to the mainstream sensibility, but being assimilated by the larger culture. This process of assimilation is notable in the works of literature examined in the final section of *The Hippie Narrative*.

Chronology

1922	Born November 11 in Indianapolis, Indiana, one of three children: an older brother, Bernard, and a sister, Alice. Father, Kurt Vonnegut, Sr., was a wealthy architect and his mother, Edith Lieber Vonnegut, was the daughter of a socially prominent family.
1929	With Great Depression, family fortune disappears.
1936–1940	Attends Shortridge High School, where he becomes editor of the *Shortridge Daily Echo*, the first high school daily newspaper in the country.
1940	Enters Cornell University as a chemistry and biology major. Becomes columnist and managing editor of the *Cornell Daily Sun*.
1943	Hospitalized for pneumonia and loses draft deferment; enlists in the U.S. Army.
1943–1944	Studies mechanical engineering at Carnegie Mellon University as part of military training.
1944	Returns home before shipping out; mother commits suicide by overdosing on sleeping pills on Mother's Day, May 14. Joins 106th Infantry Division; on December 19, Vonnegut becomes a German prisoner of war after being captured at Battle of the Bulge. Sent to Dresden, he works with other POWs in a vitamin-syrup factory.

1945	On February 13–14, U.S. and British air forces firebomb Dresden. Vonnegut and other POWs, quartered in the cellar of a slaughterhouse, survive. On May 22, Vonnegut is repatriated. Marries his childhood friend Jane Marie Cox on September 1 and moves to Chicago.
1945–1947	Studies anthropology at the University of Chicago. Works as police reporter for Chicago City News Bureau.
1947	After master's thesis rejected, moves to Schenectady, New York, to work as a publicist for General Electric, where his brother, Bernard, is a physicist. Begins writing fiction.
1950	First short story, "Report on the Barnhouse Effect," is published in *Collier's* on February 11.
1951	Begins writing full time. Family moves to West Barnstable, Massachusetts, on Cape Cod.
1952	First novel, *Player Piano*, is published; sells short stories to magazines, including *Collier's* and the *Saturday Evening Post*.
1953–1958	Publishes short stories, works in public relations, runs a Saab dealership, and teaches English at a school for the emotionally disturbed.
1957	Father dies October 1. Sister Alice's husband dies in commuter train accident; Alice dies of cancer less than forty-eight hours later; the Vonneguts adopt their three children.
1959	Second novel, *The Sirens of Titan*, is published.
1961	Collection of stories, *Canary in a Cat House*, is published.
1962	*Mother Night* is published.
1963	*Cat's Cradle* is published.
1964	*God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* is published and attracts serious critical attention. Begins publishing essays and reviews in *Venture*, the *New York Times Book Review*, *Esquire*, and *Harper's*.
1965–1967	Begins two-year residency at the University of Iowa Writer's Workshop. Novels reissued as paperback editions become popular with college students and attract increasing critical attention.
1968	Receives Guggenheim Fellowship; revisits Dresden. A collection of short stories, *Welcome to the Monkey House*, is published.

1969	*Slaughterhouse-Five; or, the Children's Crusade, a Duty-Dance with Death* is published and becomes a bestseller.
1970	Takes up residence, alone, in New York City; a play, *Happy Birthday, Wanda June*, is produced Off-Broadway. Serves as Briggs-Copeland lecturer at Harvard University. Awarded M.A. from University of Chicago; *Cat's Cradle* is accepted in lieu of thesis.
1972	*Between Time and Timbuktu* is produced for public television; *Slaughterhouse-Five* is released as a motion picture.
1973	*Breakfast of Champions; or Goodbye, Blue Monday!* Is published; he is appointed distinguished professor on English prose at the City University of New York.
1974	*Wampeters, Foma, and Granfalloons*, a collection of essays, speeches, and reviews, is published.
1976	*Slapstick; or Lonesome No More!* Is published.
1979	*Jailbird* is published. First marriage ends in divorce; he marries photographer Jill Krementz.
1980	A children's book, *Sun Moon Star*, is published in collaboration with illustrator Ivan Chermayeff.
1981	*Palm Sunday: An Autobiographical Collage* is published.
1982	*Deadeye Dick* is published; *Fates Worse Than Death* is published in England as pamphlet by the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation.
1985	*Galápagos* is published.
1986	Jane Vonnegut Yarmolinsky, his former wife, dies of cancer.
1987	*Bluebeard* is published.
1990	*Hocus Pocus* is published.
1991	*Even Worse Than Death: An Autobiograhpical Collage of the 1980s* is published. With wife Jill Krementz, files a petition for divorce, which is later withdrawn.
1996	Robert Weide's film adaptation of *Mother Night* is released nationally. A stage adaptation of *Slaughterhouse-Five* premieres in Chicago.
1997	*Timequake* published. Brother, Bernard, dies.

1999	A film version of *Breakfast of Champions* is distributed in limited release; *Bagombo Snuff Box* is published.
2000	*God Bless You, Dr.* is published.
2005	*A Man Without a Country*, edited by Dan Simon, is published.
2007	Dies on April 11.
2008	*Armageddon in Retrospect* is published.

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