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KURT VONNEGUT, MODERNITY, AND THE SELF:  
A GUIDE TO THE GOOD LIFE

By

Josh Simpson

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Faculty of the  
College of Arts and Sciences of the University of Louisville  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy  
in Humanities

Department of Comparative Humanities  
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May 2022



KURT VONNEGUT, MODERNITY, AND THE SELF:

A GUIDE TO THE GOOD LIFE

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B.A., Berea College, 2001

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A Dissertation Approved on

April 15, 2022

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Jerome Klinkowitz

## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my wife, Lucia, and our two sons, Charlie and Sam. For years (far *too* many years) they've lived with a crotchety curmudgeon who has been stomping irritably around the house and talking about Vonnegut. I never would have finished without their love, support, and reminders that I need to get upstairs and keep writing. My sons have never known a time when I wasn't working on my "Vonnegut book," and I'm sure my wife can't remember a time when we weren't financing it on two teachers' salaries. I hope I can somehow make it up to them.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Vonnegut once told the 2001 graduating class at Rice University that “communities are all that’s substantial about the world” (*If This Isn’t Nice* 37), and writing a dissertation has helped me fully understand the truth of this observation. This project certainly wouldn’t have been possible without the guidance, support, and patience of the following community.

I owe a tremendous debt to John Gibson for believing in this dissertation and helping me to navigate the entire experience. He has been an advocate, a mentor, and a constant source of support.

The first person I spoke with regarding my early initial ideas of focusing on Vonnegut for this dissertation was Aaron Jaffe. Early on, he helped me to fine-tune my focus, and throughout the planning and drafting he provided incredibly helpful guidance, suggestions, and feedback. He has been invaluable in shaping this dissertation.

Simona Bertacco’s leadership and guidance over the past five years have been unwavering. From her I learned to see Vonnegut’s philosophical project in global terms, and she helped me build a theoretical context for understanding Vonnegut’s Biafran experience and his artificial extended family model.

When I first began this dissertation, like anyone familiar with Vonnegut’s work, I knew of Jerome Klinkowitz as a scholar. One of the great privileges of this dissertation

has been working with and getting to know Jerry personally. His generosity and support have not only informed this project but also made it enjoyable.

In addition, I would like to thank Fran McDonald for her generous help and support. She was instrumental in helping me find the direction for this dissertation at a time when I had lots of ideas but little in the way of a cohesive vision for this project.

Finally, Ed Comentale graciously welcomed me into the IU Granfalloon community, I would like to thank him for his kindness, generosity, and support.

ABSTRACT  
KURT VONNEGUT, MODERNITY, AND THE SELF:  
A GUIDE TO “THE GOOD LIFE”

Josh Simpson

April 15, 2022

What are people for? This is a question Kurt Vonnegut raises in his first novel, 1952’s *Player Piano*. Over five decades later, when he concludes a career with 2005’s *A Man Without a Country*, he is still asking, “What is life all about?” (66). These are *the* central questions for Vonnegut, and his novels, short stories, essays, interviews, correspondence, and commencement addresses offer a singular, life-long attempt at an answer. In this dissertation I offer a reading of Vonnegut not just as a writer concerned with philosophical questions, but rather, on a deeper, more personal level, as a philosopher of the self. Vonnegut offers a unified, coherent, and systematic philosophical worldview, one in which purpose, *foma*, aesthetic experience, and community are non-negotiable elements for “the good life.” By bringing Vonnegut’s thought and work into conversation with Camus, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, and diasporic theory, a goal of this dissertation is to explore Vonnegut’s work in philosophical, anthropological, cultural, and individualistic terms. The good life for Vonnegut is ultimately one in which the individual is able to say “yes” to existence in the midst of

modernity. Purposelessness, embarrassment, hopelessness, shame, and loneliness are serious philosophical problems for Vonnegut, and his work represents a systematic attempt to come to terms with and ultimately (hopefully) work through them, not just for his readers, but as this dissertation will illustrate, for himself as well.

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## INTRODUCTION

A guy walks into the restroom of a New York City pornographic theater...

The above scene, which takes place in the middle of 1973's *Breakfast of Champions*, could easily serve as the set-up for a great one-liner, especially in the hands of a writer like Kurt Vonnegut. Interestingly, and, I would argue, tellingly, Vonnegut takes this absurd moment of potential low comedy and does something else entirely.

While washing his hands, Kilgore Trout happens to glance over, and under a roll of paper towels he discovers someone has written in the wall, "What is the purpose of life?"

"Trout plundered his pockets for a pen or pencil. He had an answer to the question. But he had nothing to write with, not even a burnt match. So he left the question unanswered, but here is what he would have written, if he had found anything to write with:

To be  
the eyes  
and ears  
and conscience  
of the Creator of the Universe,  
you fool (67-8).

The Joycean undertones here are deliberate. As Vonnegut writes in the prologue to *Timequake*, Trout "has been my alter ego in several of my other novels" (xv). Much like Stephen Dedalus, who at the end of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* sets off as an

exile from Dublin to “encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race” (224), Trout (and as such, Vonnegut himself) undertakes a significant journey of personal and cultural discovery within *Breakfast of Champions*. Trout (and Vonnegut) are exiles as well...with a critical difference. While Stephen’s task is one of creation, Vonnegut’s is one of destruction. As he explains in the preface, “I think I am trying to clear my head of all the junk there ...I’m throwing out characters from my other books, too. ... I think I am trying to make my head as empty as it was when I was born onto this damaged planet fifty years ago” (5). He adds, “I have no culture, no humane harmony in my brains. I can’t live without a culture anymore” (5). At stake within this novel is Vonnegut’s attempt to discover a culture which is worth being part of, and more importantly, a life which is worth affirming.

Vonnegut inarguably raises philosophical questions within his work. Even his most commercial efforts, namely the short fiction written primarily to “finance the writing of the novels” (*Monkey House* xiv), address philosophically complex topics such as the subjectivity of truth, physician-assisted suicide, overpopulation, and government-mandated sterilization.

With this dissertation, I intend to offer a reading of Vonnegut as a philosophical novelist, a writer who over the span of fourteen novels, one full-length play, multiple short stories, and hundreds of articles, interviews, and public addresses, offers a unified, coherent, and systematic worldview. In a 1973 *Playboy* interview, when asked to expand on the personal burden of “living without a culture,” Vonnegut responds, “All my books are my effort to answer that question and to make myself like life better than I do”

(*Conversations* 109). A careful study of Vonnegut's work reveals the emergence of a personal philosophy, an individual attempt to come to terms with life. In the Nietzschean tradition, Vonnegut is a philosopher of the self, and I offer a reading of his work as a continually-developing personal philosophical system, one which culminates in 1997's *Timequake*, his final and most experimental novel. Ultimately, I argue, Vonnegut creates a guide to a "good life" in modernity, one based on foundational principles of resistance, self-deception, artistic creation, and community.

Upon exploring the relationship between Vonnegut's fiction and non-fiction, what emerges is a portrait of the author whose work acts as a singular attempt to make sense of life, not just for readers, but more directly, for himself. "Any creation which has any wholeness and harmoniousness" he writes in *Slapstick*, "was made by an artist or inventor with an audience of one in mind" (17). For Vonnegut, I intent to illustrate, this audience was himself. I argue that this is precisely why Vonnegut *becomes* the underlying character and the unifying element imbedded within his own fiction, from the 1966 preface to the second edition of *Mother Night* on.

Two important recent studies which explore Vonnegut's work through the lens of both philosophy and critical theory are Todd F. Davis's *Kurt Vonnegut's Crusade, or, How a Postmodern Harlequin Preached a New Kind of Humanism* (2006) and Robert T. Tally Jr.'s *Kurt Vonnegut and the American Novel: A Postmodern Iconography* (2011). Davis is the first to treat Vonnegut as a literary philosopher, an artist whose novels "often take the form of parables" (7). Specifically, Davis charts Vonnegut's "desire to enact change, to establish patterns for humanity that will lead to the construction of better realities for the world" (6), ultimately resulting in "a new kind of fiction, a paradigm of

postmodernity that allows the author to struggle with philosophical ideas concerning our condition” (7). Davis argues, and rightly so, that Vonnegut is, above all, a novelist (or, to use his term, a “literary pragmatist”) deeply committed to social change.

Tally, taking a different philosophical approach, focuses largely on Vonnegut’s novels, which he suggests “represent literary experiments conducted in order to provide a comprehensive image of American experience in the postmodern condition of the late twentieth century” (xii). An important term which Tally introduces to Vonnegut studies is “misanthropic humanism,” which he defines as “the fundamental sense that human, all-too-human behavior inevitably leads to ruin” precisely because “the fundamental problem with people is people” (10).

While this dissertation will enter into critical conversation with these texts (in addition to classic and contemporary Vonnegut criticism) I will be proposing an alternative reading. Davis, of course, is correct in addressing the broad social implications and the transformative social thrust inherent in Vonnegut’s fiction, and Tally is equally correct in his assertions that Vonnegut intentionally charts the ever-changing (post)modern human condition through the twentieth century. That said, what has yet to be fully explored is Vonnegut’s deep commitment to and celebration of the individual within a philosophical context. In its totality, Vonnegut’s work offers a guide to affirming life on an individual level.

In the chapters which follow, I will also be addressing the critical dilemma which Vonnegut found himself in for much of his career...and which continues to serve as the central challenge to his literary legacy. In a 1992 letter to Jerome Klinkowitz, Vonnegut states that he is reminded “why so many critics educated as gentlemen at prep schools

and then old, elitist colleges and universities dislike my work. Gentlemen know of the void, but do not speak of it lest they alarm the lower classes, who might run amok” (*Letters* 349). Vonnegut’s response here is altogether in keeping with his problematic view of academic criticism, and it highlights another complicated facet of Vonnegut’s work—his instant quotability. To be fair, he is easy to quote because he’s so damn quotable. Many of his best one-liners—“So it goes,” “God damn it, you’ve got to be kind,” “Everything was beautiful, and nothing hurt,” “Life is no way to treat an animal” among countless others—are snappy, Twitter-ready soundbites. Frequently, these one-liners are so catchy because they are so funny. In “Funnier On Paper Than Most People,” Vonnegut explains that “an advantage of a writer’s having a joke-making capability is that he or she can be really funny in case something really is funny,” a skill he finds “most contemporary American novelists” are capable of. “The problem,” he goes on to explain, is that jokes deal so efficiently with ideas that there is little more to be said after the punch line has been spoken. It is time to come up with a new idea—and another joke” (*Palm Sunday* 166). What’s problematic here is not Vonnegut’s humor or his instant quotability but rather his career-ranging tendency of using (and at times overusing) the one-liner as a mode of philosophical expression. A careful reading of Vonnegut in his totality, however, reveals a fuller picture of his philosophical system at work.

The philosophy of literature as a study in and of itself is an emerging field. Recent series such as *Oxford Studies in Philosophy and Literature* and Open Court’s *Popular Culture and Society* offer starkly-contrasting approaches to the ways in which literature and culture can be viewed from philosophical perspectives. Since 2018, the

Oxford series has issued provocative and insightful texts offering myriad perspectives on philosophical aspects of such canonical texts as *Hamlet*, *Emma*, *Crime and Punishment*, *Ulysses*, and *The Trial*. For over two decades now, Open Court's series has served as a reminder that in popular culture virtually anything, from Woody Allen to The Simpsons to (evidently) KISS, can lend itself to philosophical analysis. Vonnegut's work is, as Robert Scholes suggests, "a difficult case for elitist criticism to confront" (45), and the resulting dilemma is that his work is a bit too popular and commercial for the Oxford series yet a bit too literary and academic for the Open Court series. In part, what I intend to do in this dissertation is challenge such binary thinking, illustrating how Vonnegut's work is alternatingly both literary *and* pop culture.

Chapter one, "On Purpose, or Saying "Yes" to Life in the Midst of the Absurd" focuses on the quest for personal meaning and purpose which recurs in Vonnegut. Using Camus' suicide question as a starting point, from his earliest work on, Vonnegut accepts the absurdity of life in modernity, and like Camus, views rebellion and revolt as acts which render life meaningful. Where Vonnegut differs from Camus, and this is the lead-in to Nietzsche and the next chapter, is that even purposefully futile rebellion can render life meaningful. Death or defeat are absolute certainties for nearly all of Vonnegut's characters, but what makes life worth living is not an overcoming so much as a commitment to revolt.

"Truth and *Foma* in a *Necessary* Sense: The Value of Perspectival Illusion in Modernity" will focus on Nietzsche and truth/self-deception and how "harmless" lies are necessary to make life bearable in Vonnegut's fiction. The central Vonnegut texts explored here will be *Cat's Cradle*, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and *Galapagos*. As for

Nietzsche, I'm working closely from "On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense," *The Gay Science*, and *Beyond Good and Evil*. Vonnegut differs from Nietzsche significantly in this way—rather than viewing the herd as something which should be overcome on the path to becoming a free spirit or an ubermensch, Vonnegut is an advocate for rendering herd life meaningful, and I will illustrate the ways in which Vonnegut identifies more with the herd than with the Zarathustras of the world.

Chapter three, "Better Living Through Art: Vonnegut and The Transformative Nature of Aesthetic Experience," will examine Vonnegut's advocacy for the importance of the arts in the context of Schopenhauer's notion of art as being a tool to transcend/escape the will/self. I will be focusing on Vonnegut's non-fiction here, particularly his commencement speeches and interviews, where he repeatedly encourages others to create as a way to "make your soul grow." Also, *Bluebeard* and *Deadeye Dick* are important novels in that they focus on individual transcendence through art.

Finally, in chapter four, "'Lonesome No More!': Vonnegut's Extended Family Model As Existential Diasporic Community," I will focus on Vonnegut's 1970 trip to Biafra and the impact that it had on his post-*Slaughterhouse-Five* output. I'm interested in exploring the Biafran influence on Vonnegut's creation of the "Artificial Extended Family," and how what Vonnegut actually creates and champions is ultimately a type of metaphoric diasporic community that unifies the post-*Slaughterhouse-Five* novels, reaching culmination with *Timequake*.

Over the course of six decades, Vonnegut produced a wide-ranging body of work, and his early formulaic short fiction differs radically from his later experimental, metaphysical novels. In another sense, though, what unites his work is a singular focus. In 1952's *Player Piano*, Vonnegut's first novel, when the Shah of Bratpuhr encounters EPICAC XIV, a supercomputer capable of solving any problem from the vantage point of being "dead right about anything" (117), the Shah has but one question for this electronic oracle: "Would you ask EPICAC what people are for" (320). Forty years later, in a 1999 interview with William Rodney Allen and Paul Smith, while lamenting the increasingly prominent influence of television on daily life, he asks, "But again it raises the question of what human beings are supposed to do with their time, anyway? What are people for?" (*Conversations* 307). Simply put, this is the question which Vonnegut spent a lifetime attempting to answer, the fruits of which offer a unique philosophical view of the good life in modernity.

CHAPTER I:  
ON PURPOSE, OR SAYING “YES” TO LIFE IN THE MIDST OF THE ABSURD

Vonnegut offers up one of his most personal revelations at the beginning of *Slapstick*: “This is the closest I will ever come to writing an autobiography,” he writes. “It is about what life feels like to me” (1). What unifies Vonnegut’s diverse body of novels, short stories, essays, and plays is his perpetual inward gaze. At his best, he is capable of powerfully universalizing the personal, and in a feat of Tralfamadorean proportions, speak directly to readers across time and place.

As an illustration, I’d like to open with three vignettes, intentionally drawn from the beginning, middle, and end of Vonnegut’s career:

- From 1955’s “The Kid Nobody Could Handle.” Jovial band director George M. Helmholtz realizes the reckless futility in his belief that happiness can be achieved in the material realm, grabs his prized possession, a trumpet formerly owned by John Philips Sousa, and violently smashes it against the edge of a table. As Vonnegut paints the scene: “A terrible blasphemy rumbled deep in him, like the warning of a volcano. And then, irresistibly, out it came. ‘Life is no damn good,’ said Helmholtz. His face twisted as he fought back tears and shame” (*Welcome to the Monkey House* 282).

- From 1973's *Breakfast of Champions*: Just before this particular textual moment, Vonnegut writes himself into the novel, and then Vonnegut the character enters into conversation with Vonnegut the novelist:

“This is a very bad book you’re writing,” I said to myself behind my [mirrored sunglasses].

“I know,” I said.

“You’re afraid you’ll kill yourself the way your mother did,” I said.

“I know,” I said. (198)

- From 1997's *Timequake*, Vonnegut's final novel: “That there are such devices as firearms, as easy to operate as cigarette lighters and as cheap as toasters, capable at anybody's whim of killing Father or Fats [Waller] or Abraham Lincoln or John Lennon or Martin Luther King, Jr., or a woman pushing a baby carriage, should be proof enough for anybody that, to quote the old science fiction writer Kilgore Trout, ‘being alive is a crock of shit’” (3).

These three passages share a particular philosophical perspective, each revealing what life “felt like” for Vonnegut 1) as a struggling writer with a large family to support, 2) in the midst of immense critical and commercial success, and 3) at the close of his career, at a time when his legacy was in debate. Transcending the personal, however, they also pointedly illustrate what life too frequently feels like in modernity as well.

My goal in this chapter is to offer a reading of five texts—*Player Piano* (1952), *The Sirens of Titan* (1959), *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* (1965), *Happy Birthday*, *Wanda June* (1971), and *Hocus Pocus* (1990)—which yields Vonnegut's answer to the

question Trout encounters on the men's room wall—what is the purpose of life? Indeed, I suggest that this is *the* central question which is at the core of Vonnegut's fiction, one which he explores both explicitly and implicitly in all of his novels. I select these five texts because they offer Vonnegut's most direct attempt at providing a cohesive answer to this question. For Vonnegut, if life is to have any meaning at all, the individual must have a specific sense of purpose. As we shall see in chapter two, this purpose need not necessarily be based in reality. The problem for Vonnegut and his characters is that the modern world—that is, a world of global war, genocide, industrialization, ever-expanding technology, environmental destruction, and atomic annihilation—is not inherently conducive to human life. Like Camus, Vonnegut suggests that modernity is governed by absurdity. Also like Camus, Vonnegut's fictions are frequently as philosophical as they are literary. His principle interests lie not in telling his readers how to live but instead, by challenging commonplace notions of truth, beauty, morality, justice, and time, how to find their own answers to life's most challenging questions. An individualistic sense of purpose is a foundational prerequisite not only for the good life, but for life in general. In Vonnegut's world, however, purpose is something which must be negotiated on a personal level in the midst of the absurd; it is far from inalienable.

### **Camus, Absurdity, Resistance, and Suicide**

In *A Man Without a Country*, the last book Vonnegut published during his lifetime, he quotes Camus' well-known assertion that "There is but one truly philosophical problem, and that is suicide" (8). This passage is particularly important because it establishes Vonnegut's familiarity with Camus. For both writers, the question

of suicide is central, and even though they arrive at different conclusions, the question must first be addressed.

Camus lays the framework for his view of the absurd in 1942's *The Myth of Sisyphus*, and then spent the rest of his writing life offering examples which expand and deepen the meaning of his initial philosophical perspective. Joseph Ward offers a particularly insightful reading of Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus* by establishing numerous parallels between Camus' view of the absurd, the tenets of Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy, and two of Vonnegut's later novels—*Deadeye Dick* and *Hocus Pocus*. As he argues in "Following in the Footsteps of Sisyphus: Camus, Vonnegut, and Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy," "Camus's existential philosophy of the absurd, and his corresponding belief in an individual's ability to achieve happiness through acceptance, is expressed in REBT's emphasis on awareness of life's absurdities, unconditional acceptance of unalterable reality, and the rejection of any irrational beliefs that would impose absolutist conditions on what *should* or *must* be" (82). I would argue, however, without minimizing the value of acceptance, that for Camus, existence is and must be an act of resistance and rebellion. Acceptance, as Ward shows, can be empowering. At the same time, it can also lead to and result in resignation. In a chaotic, godless universe, life is entirely devoid of meaning; each individual must therefore negotiate the paradox of birth in the midst of cosmic indifference. "In a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights," Camus writes, "man feels an alien, a stranger" (*The Myth of Sisyphus* 6). For Camus, this inherited alienation is what gives shape to life. "This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity (*The Myth of Sisyphus* 6).

What Camus advocates in *The Myth of Sisyphus* is the necessity of what he terms metaphysical revolt, which is an act of affirming life in the midst of absurdity. “That revolt gives life its value. Spread out over the whole length of a life, it restores its majesty to that life” (55). For Camus, saying yes to life, even with “the certainty of a crushing fate” (54) requires rebelling against the absurdity which “stands at the center of experience” (22). Herbert R. Lottman, whose *Albert Camus* is regarded as *the* definitive biography, points out that much of *The Myth of Sisyphus*’ power stems from just how personal the essay is. “At times it seems veritable autobiography, a portrait of the artist as a young man. When the book opens ...one can imagine that one is reading Camus’ journal” (258). Indeed, Oliver Todd suggests the stakes of *The Myth of Sisyphus* can be summed up with a single question: “How should we live?” (142). More broadly, I’d suggest this question as at the center of Camus’ fiction as well.

Examples of the absurd and rebellion abound throughout Camus’ novels. Meursault’s senseless act of violence in *The Stranger* and the Mother’s unknowing murder of her son, Jan, in *Cross Purpose* serve as metaphoric representations of the random horrors which are inherently part of the human condition in the midst of absurdity. Yet it is *The Plague* which offers Camus’ most fully realized example of resistance and revolt. As we know all too well post(?) COVID, pandemics serve as reminders of just how absurd life can truly become at a moment’s notice. For Camus, what matters most is not what happens—because anything can happen—but how the individual reacts in the face of absurdity.

In *The Plague*, the bubonic outbreak which mysteriously appears in Oran has no specific point of origin. It simply exists. It happens because it can. Any attempt at

finding meaning as to why, a task undertaken by Father Paneloux in the novel, is futile. In the face of absurdity, for Camus, the only possible recourse is the one taken up by Doctor Rieux, “fighting against creation as he found it” (114). “I have no idea what’s awaiting me,” he explains, “or what will happen when all this ends. For the moment I know this: there are sick people and they need curing” (114). It’s the *why*, not the *how*, which gives life meaning for Camus. In *Albert Camus: A Very Short Introduction*, Oliver Gloag suggests that Rieux “keeps on tending to his patients with no hope of curing them” (59), which is absolutely true. Such perseverance in the face of certain defeat is the fate of us all. In this sense, Doctor Rieux in *The Plague* is much more the typical Camusean hero than Meursault in *The Stranger*. Rieux challenges the absurd; Meursault resigns himself to it entirely. If Rieux’s mantra could be reduced to “there are sick people and they need curing” (114), Meursault’s can best be summed up as “it’s not my fault” (3, 18, 19, etc.) his only response to a world he can’t begin to understand.

The philosophical justification for Rieux’s actions are offered in *The Rebel*, illustrating how Camus’ fiction and non-fiction enter into continual conversation. After rather brazenly proclaiming “I believe in nothing and that everything is absurd,” Camus writes, “Rebellion is born of the spectacle of irrationality, confronted with an unjust and incomprehensible condition. But its blind impulse is to demand order in the midst of chaos, and unity in the heart of the ephemeral” (10). In Vonnegut’s fiction, order is created through a sense of individual purpose.

Before attempting to answer “What is the purpose of life?,” Vonnegut first must reconcile a much more philosophically complex question: “Is life worth living?” This is a problem he addresses with considerable care. Aside from the firebombing of Dresden in

1945 which he would chronicle two decades later in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, no single event impacted Vonnegut's life as profoundly as his mother's suicide. In *And So It Goes*, Charles Shields offers the following account of her death: "Kurt was awakened by [his older sister] Alice early Sunday morning, Mother's Day. Something was wrong with mother, she said. Together, they went quietly into her bedroom, where Kurt bent over his mother ... Edith Vonnegut, age fifty-six, was dead from an overdose of sleeping pills" (53). Three factors are worth noting here, each of which adds additional layers of pain to the horrific tragedy. 1). At the time of her suicide, Vonnegut was visiting home while on leave before shipping out to join the Allies overseas. His mother's suicide served as preface to his WWII experiences as a POW, and he carried her recent loss all the way to Dresden (Shields 52). 2). Vonnegut discovered his mother's body, which understandably had lasting consequences on him. 3). Edith Vonnegut chose to take her own life on Mother's Day of all days.

The following passage from *Palm Sunday* humorously reveals the influence his mother's suicide had on him:

As for real death—it has always been a temptation to me, since my mother solved so many problems with it. The child of a suicide will naturally think of death, the big one, as a logical solution to any problem, even one in simple algebra.

Question: If Farmer A can plant 300 potatoes an hour, and Farmer B can plant potatoes fifty percent faster, and Farmer C can plant potatoes one third as fast as Farmer B, and 10,000 potatoes are to be planted to an acre, how many nine-hour days will it take Farmers A, B, and C, working simultaneously, to plant 25 acres:

Answer: I think I'll blow my brains out. (277-8)

Suicide is a possibility never far removed in Vonnegut's fiction, and while he never romanticizes the act, he nevertheless understands its allure. Nowhere is this seen more clearly than in *Breakfast of Champions*. "Yes, suicide is at the heart of the book," he explains in a 1973 interview with David Standish. "It's also the punctuation mark at the

end of many artistic careers. I pick up that punctuation mark and play with it in the book, come to understand it better, put it back in the shelf but leave it in view” (*Conversations* 108). The following year, in his preface to *Wampeters, Foma & Granfalloon*s, Vonnegut recounts a fan letter he received from a 12-year old reader who had just finished reading *Breakfast of Champions*: “Dear Mr. Vonnegut. Please don’t commit suicide” (xix).

If suicide plays an important role in Vonnegut’s fiction, it is because, like Camus before him, he sees it as *the* central question. He even suggests that most people agree, and this view influences his work. As he states in a 1980 interview with Robert Musil, “The most horrible hypocrisy or the most terrifying hypocrisy or the most tragic hypocrisy at the center of life, I think, which no one dares mention, is that human beings don’t like life. They pretend to like it some ... But life is, for most people, a very terrible ordeal” (*Conversations* 232). Perhaps Vonnegut’s greatest singular achievement as an artist, and the one which most accounts for his enduring popularity, is his ability to help put this “terrible ordeal” into perspective. This is the impulse which helps define even the most commercial of his short fiction, and from his first novel onwards, it serves as his singular focus.

Robert Zaretsky’s two excellent recent studies—2010’s *Albert Camus: The Elements of a Life*, and its companion, 2013’s *A Life Worth Living: Albert Camus and the Quest for Meaning*—explore the impact of Camus’ thinking on modernity. They also reveal just how much of himself Camus used in his writing and the extent to which “they have become guides for the perplexed” (*Elements* 7). This is an approach Vonnegut too would adopt in his work. When Zaretsky writes, “He was a moralist who insisted that while the world is absurd and allows for no hope, we are not condemned to despair; a

moralist who reminded us that, in the end, all we have is one another in an indifferent and silent world” (*Life Worth Living* 8), he just as easily could have had Vonnegut in mind.

***Player Piano: “A Book About What Could Be”***

Written in 1946 while he was struggling to find both his voice and his market as a short story writer, and years before his first novel, Vonnegut’s letter to Don Matchen outlines his chief philosophical concern, both as an artist and as a human being: “To speak in terms of humanity, in terms of *change* engendered by compassion and yearning for a better life on earth for the human species, is to incur the fury of those fortunate few who are wonderfully well-off ... under *the system as it now stands*” (*Letters* 18). It’s important to note that during the early years of his career, two Vonneguts were at work, often simultaneously. On the one hand, Vonnegut had a family to support and a spiritually-deadening publicist’s job at General Electric he was trying to escape, so he churned out volumes of short stories, or, as he refers to them, “mild but popular form[s] of entertainment” (*Bagombo Snuff Box* 2) for the magazine market of the 1950s. “Say what you want about me, I never wrote for a magazine called *The Woman’s Home Companion*, but there was a time when I would have been most happy to” (*Bagombo Snuff Box* 4). If his assessment of the vast majority of his short fiction, particularly that which was gathered by Peter Reed in 1999’s *Bagombo Snuff Box*, is a bit too uncharitable, we must remember that Vonnegut *did* agree to have the collection of early work published. He might not have been particularly proud of these stories, but he wasn’t necessarily embarrassed by them either.

The novels are a different matter altogether. Vonnegut himself freely acknowledges the distinction between his short fiction and his more ambitious works in

the preface to *Welcome to the Monkey House*, referring to the stories as “the fruits of Free Enterprise” (xiv). While I disagree with those critics who rather unfairly gloss over the short fiction in their work for this very reason, I readily acknowledge that Vonnegut is a writer much better suited for the long-form the novel provides. *Player Piano*, written at the same time he was mass-producing short stories for the slicks, serves as a case in point.

“This book is not a book about what is,” Vonnegut writes in the foreword, “but a book about what could be.” This statement, which serves as the opening sentence of his first novel, also acts as a preface of sorts for his lengthy career, and it could just as easily be attached as a prefatory remark at the beginning of any of his novels, all of which, to varying degrees of success, can be read on the level of personal and societal warnings as to what “could be” if we aren’t careful. *Player Piano* is situated in a near future, ten years after a Second Industrial Revolution has radically changed the quality of life in the modern world for the masses. A rigid divide separates the thinkers and the doers, and post-revolution, there is little work—or use—for manual laborers. Largely, they have been replaced by machines and gadgets which were designed by the managers and engineers, who themselves have assumed elevated positions in a damaged, post-human society. Paul Proteus is the novel’s central character, and while he is a distinguished manager with a promising future at Illium Works, “He didn’t feel important or brilliant at the moment, nor had he for some time” (1). Paul’s personal transformation is central to the narrative, and it grows out this initial sense of anxiety and unrest.

In *Understanding Kurt Vonnegut*, William Rodney Allen astutely points out the ways in which *Player Piano* satirizes both “corporate life in the 1950s” (20) and the anti-

communist movement (32), and these contemporary critiques are central aspects of the novel. Philosophically, however, it is also a deeply existential novel. The malaise which dominates the world of the novel is ironic because at no point in history have there been so many resources available for making life as easy as possible. Indeed, technology has improved the quality of life for the masses, and in doing so, it has displaced them. In *The Clown of Armageddon*, Peter Freese perceptively suggests, “human beings cannot live without some kind of meaning and sense of purpose, and consequently the characters of the novel are continually haunted by the one, all-important question—what are people for?” (94). When Paul attempts to express to his wife, Anita, his feelings of guilt and shame for developing the machine which leads the eventual unemployment of Rudy Hertz, she asks, “Is he starving?” “Of course not. Nobody starves” (37) he replies, and while this settles the matter for Anita, Paul is sensitive enough to see the larger philosophical implications of his work. Food, shelter, and gadgetry are not adequate trade-offs for a sense of dignity and purpose.

In the novel, Vonnegut creates a deeply-divided society in which the options are to become either an engineer or manager, a calling only granted to the select few, to develop a skill in an area which is so specialized that it can't be adequately performed by a machine, or to join the “Reeks and Wrecks.” As he explains, “those who couldn't complete economically with machines had their choice, if they had no source of income, of the Army or the Reconstruction and Reclamation Corps” (25). The latter is the only option available to the bulk of the population, and as such, it's really not much of an option at all. Social mobility is all but extinct, and the rags-to-riches-style success stories

which have long been central to the American success narrative have become as preposterous as fairy tales.

I emphasize America because Vonnegut is intentionally lampooning his own culture. Throughout the novel, the plot is intercut with a parallel narrative, that of the Shah of Bratpuhr, who travels to America “to see what he could learn in the most powerful nation on earth for the good of his people” (19-20). When the Shah visits the home of Edgar R.B. Hagstrom to see how an average member of the Reeks and Wrecks lives, readers are afforded a glimpse into the daily life of an everyman, one which is loaded with top-of-the-line appliances and conveniences. Of course, these gadgets are not enough to make life meaningful, or even bearable. “Listen, it’s the world,” Edgar tells his wife, Wanda, in a scene which mirrors Paul’s earlier conversation with Anita. “Me and the world. I’m no good to anybody, not in *this* world. Nothing but a Reek and Wreck, and that’s all my kids’ll be, and a guy’s got to have kicks or he doesn’t want to live ... I’m no good, Wan, no good” (167).

Paul’s heroism lies in the eventual acceptance of his own role in creating a world overrun with Edgar Hagstroms. “In order to get what we’ve got,” he begs Anita to realize, “we have, in effect, traded these people out of what was the most important thing on earth to them—the feeling of being needed and useful, the foundation of self-respect” (175). The epiphany, though, comes too late, and while Paul’s attempt at revolution is ultimately futile, what matters is that he tries. “If only it weren’t for the people, the goddamned people, always getting tangled up in the machinery” (332) Paul’s friend and mentor Ed Finnerty utters at the end of the novel, yet his rhetorical complaint is triumphantly celebratory. It is, after all, the people who matter most. What makes the

world so inhospitable is those in charge often forget this fact, in Vonnegut's fiction and in our own world.

Gregory D. Sumner explores *Player Piano*'s autobiographical antecedents and calls the novel "a commentary on the scientifically engineered future Vonnegut saw being born every day at the GE lab" (22) where he was employed during the 1950s. Likewise, Ginger Strand contextualizes the booming GE culture which Vonnegut is satirizing. By the early 1950s, General Electric's best inventors had become "too spellbound by their shiny, mechanical toys, too enthralled by their exciting new science to consider its effect on real human lives" (206). Perhaps the singular most important achievement of Vonnegut's first novel is that it transcends satire and gets at a much more universal philosophical truth—a clear sense of purpose is a necessity, not just for the good life, but for life on any terms. While he would return to this theme in many of his most important later novels (including *Cat's Cradle* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*), *Player Piano* remains an essential work, largely because it first poses the very questions Vonnegut would spend the rest of his career attempting to answer.

### **Finding Purpose in *The Sirens of Titan* and *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater***

Vonnegut's second novel reveals an important shift in focus. *Player Piano* addresses the corrupting power of institutions, the implication being that the good life is possible through societal change. With *The Sirens of Titan* and *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, Vonnegut turns his attention to the individual, suggesting that purpose amidst the chaos of uncertainty is a personal matter, one which should not...and one which *cannot...* be dictated by the world outside of self. Both novels are central to

understanding Vonnegut's systematic view of life, and my goal here is to explore the individual search for purpose which frames both novels.

*The Sirens of Titan* is deceptively complex and highly ambitious, in both its scope and its attempt to offer a self-contained, unified world view. It is here that Vonnegut offers his first systematic view of human existence, and in doing so, he provides a much more cohesive answer to the question of "what are people for?" than in *Player Piano*. "Everyone now knows," he begins, "how to find the meaning of life within himself. But mankind wasn't always so lucky. Less than a century ago men and women did not have easy access to the puzzle boxes within them" (1). As in *Player Piano*, the setting remains somewhat ambiguous, but the predicament is the same—life has become utterly meaningless.

"Malachi Constant of Hollywood, California, the richest American" (5) serves as the novel's protagonist, yet as Vonnegut points out, "money, position, health, handsomeness, and talent aren't everything" (7). Much like Paul Proteus, Malachi is ill-at-ease in affluence. Unlike Paul, though, he knows exactly what he wants: "a single message that was sufficiently dignified and important to merit his carrying it between two points" (12). Importantly, it's not the message Malachi yearns for but rather a role in "carrying" that message. In other words, purpose, not truth, is what he seeks.

Every fifty-nine days, Winston Niles Rumfoord, who, along with his dog, Kazak, has become lost in an intergalactic chrono-synclastic infundibula, materializes briefly on earth, and his appearances are regarded with a sense of religious wonder. People travel from all over in order to witness his miraculous materializations, and the gatherings often turn violent. As one angry member of the crowd tells Malachi, just before he meets

Rumfoord for the first time, “We’ve got a right to know what’s going on!” As Vonnegut explains, the gatherings result from “a seeking after clues by the living as to what life was all about” (39) The fact that the gathering in question takes place in the shadow of a giant billboard which proclaims “LET’S TAKE A FRIEND TO THE CHURCH OF OUR CHOICE ON SUNDAY!” illustrates the inadequacies of religion at providing the answers to life’s questions.

In *Sanity Plea: Schizophrenia in the Novels of Kurt Vonnegut*, Lawrence R. Broer presents a compelling argument that *The Sirens of Titan* is a warning of a possible/likely future and “to intensify our awareness of the madness of our present lives” (29). In the “now” of the novel, madness certainly reigns supreme, due in large part to life’s overall meaninglessness. Perhaps the most illustrative example of the novel’s general spiritual tone comes from Ransom K. Fern, President of Magnum Opus Corporation. “You go up to a man, and you say, ‘How are things going, Joe?’ And he says, ‘Oh fine, fine— couldn’t be better.’ And you look into his eyes, and you see things really couldn’t be much worse” (66). As he interprets the human predicament, “When you get right down to it, everybody’s having a perfectly lousy time of it, and I mean everybody. And the hell of it is, nothing seems to help much” (66). After delivering a letter to Malachi from his father, one which was written years before with the instructions that it be opened only in the event on an emergency, Fern implores, “If the letter seems to cast the vaguest light on what life might be about, I would appreciate your telephoning me at home” (83). Fern’s damning flaw, like so many characters in the novel, is passivity. Vonnegut suggests that meaning and purpose must be actively created rather than passively sought.

In this midst of this broad social ennui, Rumfoord's attraction is that his intergalactic accident allows him to exist inside and outside time, and as such, he can see all time periods at once: "When I ran my space ship into the chrono-synclastic infundibula, it came to me in a flash that everything that ever has been always will be, and everything that ever will be always has been" (20). When he tells Malachi that he will travel to Mars, Mercury, and Titan, he is not offering a prophecy; he is explaining what happens in a *different* moment. What Malachi yearns for is a sense of usefulness, not freedom, and rather than fighting against the inevitable, he prepares for a new life.

On Mars, Malachi has his brain cleaned, a customary procedure conducted on all new recruits in order to make them obedient Martian soldiers. For all practical purposes, Malachi Constant has been erased. The younger soldiers refer to him simply as "Unk," which becomes his new identity. While on Mars, he meets Boaz, a commander in the Martian Army, and through a complicated series of events, they end up stranded in a cave deep beneath Mercury's surface, where they are imprisoned for three years. It is here that Boaz discovers a sense of usefulness which for the first time gives his life meaning. The cave is inhabited by thousands of completely unintelligent kite-shaped creatures known as harmoniums, and during his captivity Boaz forms a deep bond with these creatures, so much so that he becomes "God Almighty" (204) to them. He is unable to communicate with these creatures, but this doesn't bother him in the least. Their feeble helplessness endears them to him, and as their metaphoric God, he devotes himself completely to their safety and happiness.

Years later, once Unk discovers a way out, Boaz is forced to make a decision—he can either escape or remain entombed with the harmoniums. As he explains, "I found me

a place where I can do good without doing harm, and I can see I'm doing good, and then I'm doing good for know I'm doing it, and they love me, Unk, as best they can. I found me a home" (217). Among the harmoniums, Boaz has found a way to be of use, and in doing so, he's discovered a clear purpose for his life, something which makes existence meaningful.

Eliot Rosewater finds himself caught in a similar philosophical situation in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*. Like Malachi, he is extremely wealthy, yet he makes the mistake, at least initially, of thinking the world's problems can be solved financially. His aimless wanderings in search of purpose through the first section of the novel are viewed by his family (particularly his wife and father) as eccentric, but when he begins suggesting "how the government ought to divide up the wealth of the country equally, instead of some people having more than they could ever use, and others having nothing" (38), he becomes a threat to the family fortune of which he is heir.

In time, Eliot discovers meaning: "I'm going to care about these people," he says, referring to the citizens of Rosewater County, Indiana. "I look at these people, these Americans, and I realize that they can't care about themselves any more—because they have no use. The factory, the farms, the mines across the river—they're almost completely automatic ...I'm going to love these discarded Americans, even though they're useless and unattractive. That is going to be my work of art" (43-4). Eliot's greatest gift to the people of Rosewater County is actually listening to them. He establishes the Rosewater Foundation for the sole purpose of helping others, and in doing so he acknowledges their worth. The citizens of Rosewater County, like the Reeks and Wrecks, have no purpose, and the dignity which Eliot shows them produces miraculous,

almost magical, results. Diana Moon Glampers revels, “Dawn Leonard had boils for ten years, and you cured ‘em. Ned Calvin had that twitch in his eye since he was a little boy, and you made it stop. Pearl Flemming came and saw you, and you threw her crutch away. And now my kidneys have stopped hurting, just hearing your sweet voice” (78). Eliot’s genuine compassion makes him a frumpy savior of sorts for the inhabitants of Rosewater County, the land of “shithouses, shacks, alcoholism, ignorance, idiocy, and perversion” (48).

Both Eliot and Boaz are self-appointed messianic figures. They create communities of compassion which provide meaning for themselves and others. In this sense, the Rosewater Foundation is a reimagining of Boaz’s cave experience. Kilgore Trout, who makes his debut in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, sums up Eliot’s accomplishment as such: “If one man can do it, perhaps others can do it, too. It means that our hatred of useless human beings and the cruelty we inflict upon them, for their own good need not be parts of human nature. Thanks to the example of Eliot Rosewater, millions upon millions may learn to love and help whomever they see” (269). Finally, Eliot’s greatest achievement is not discovering a purpose for life but inspiring others to do the same, on their own terms.

### ***Happy Birthday, Wanda June: Learning to Say “Yes”***

*Player Piano* and *The Sirens of Titan*, Vonnegut’s first two novels, raise serious questions about the meaning of life, and *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* illustrates how a fulfilling life can be a work of art. All three works directly address the perquisite conditions necessary for living the good life. In the sections which follow, I will be exploring two later works: 1971’s *Happy Birthday, Wanda June* and 1990’s *Hocus*

*Pocus*, both of which take up the same philosophical questions in radically different ways. It's important to note at this point that between these two sets of works, Vonnegut published *Slaughterhouse-Five* in 1969, and the success of that novel would prove simultaneously liberating and limiting.

At the time of *Slaughterhouse-Five*'s publication during the Vietnam War, Vonnegut's anti-war novel hit an exposed societal nerve, particularly within the counterculture movement. Indeed, Vonnegut became not just a successful writer; he became an overnight sensation. Shields explains that as early as the summer of 1969, young people from across the country began making pilgrimages to Vonnegut's Cape Cod home, just to catch a glimpse of their new hero (255-6).

Artistically, Vonnegut found himself in a bit of a Foucaultian paradox. For the first time in his career, he was both wealthy and internationally famous, which allowed him the freedom to write without concerning himself with sales. At the same time, fame made Vonnegut's name synonymous with a set of conventions readers would expect for the rest of his career. In "What is an Author?," Foucault addresses the impact authorial presence has on texts, noting, "an author's name is not simply an element of speech (as a subject, a complement, or an element that could be replaced by a pronoun or other parts of speech). Its presence is functional in that it serves as a means of classification" (1627). The downside of Vonnegut's fame is that his fiction became a classifiable genre unto itself. Tellingly, Vonnegut's response was to abandon novel writing, at least temporarily, and turn to drama.

Over the years, 1971's *Happy Birthday, Wanda June* has received little serious critical attention, a fact which can be attributed largely, it seems, to two points: 1) it

remains the only major full-length work by Vonnegut to go out of print (until Dell's 2020 reissue), and 2) as a play, it is regarded as something of an anomaly among his other novels, short stories, and essays. William Rodney Allen dismisses the work altogether, referring to it as Vonnegut's "most embarrassing artistic failure" (142). I intend to argue that *Happy Birthday Wanda June* is not only a major work, one which deserves far more attention than it has received to date, but on a deeper level it also serves as one of Vonnegut's most life-affirming works. By the end of the play, Harold Ryan undergoes a profound change, one which shatters his perceptions of what life is and allows him to discover a radically new purpose for existence.

In his introduction, Vonnegut explains that *Happy Birthday, Wanda June* is actually a rewritten version of a play he wrote years before titled *Penelope*, which was inspired by both *The Odyssey* and prevalent mid-century views of masculinity. "Ernest Hemingway was still alive and seemingly well. So I felt free to imagine a modern Odysseus who was a lot like that part of Hemingway I detested—the slayer of nearly extinct animals which meant him no harm" (viii). The curtain opens on Penelope, Harold's wife, who matter-of-factly informs the audience, "This is a simple-minded play about men who enjoy killing—and those who don't" (1). Her husband, we learn, has been missing for eight years, his plane having disappeared over the Amazon Rain Forest while in search of diamonds and riches. In the interim, Penelope has raised their young son, Paul, on her own. In Harold's absence, his "presence" has dominated the home, filling young Paul's mind with fantasies of what his father must be like. These lofty paternal expectations are starkly contrasted by Penelope's two suitors—Herb Shuttle, an

impressionable vacuum cleaner salesman, and Norbert Woodly, a sensitive, intellectual physician—both of whom Paul finds intolerable and pathetic.

If *Happy Birthday, Wanda June* has a shortcoming, it is one of characterization. Harold, Herb, and Dr. Woodly are, at their core, exaggerated stock characters, giving the play an almost allegorical feel at times. To unpack the rather obvious metaphor, Herb Shuttle is a stand-in for commerce, Norbert Woodly represents contemporary male sensitivity and scientific (in this case, medical) progress, and Harold Ryan is an over-the-top caricature of the absolute *worst* masculine qualities, pure chauvinistic ID. He is a blood-thirsty, brutal, crass, violent, perpetually horny blowhard with no redeemable qualities. These caricatures are offset by Colonel Looseleaf Harper, Harold's sidekick. He is a broken man, a victim of perpetual grief. Life became alien to him after he dropped an atomic bomb on Nagasaki during WWII, killing 74,000 men, women, and children instantly. When asked about his role in this atrocity, all he can do is fidget and mumble, "I dunno, boy. It was a bitch" (2-3). In the opening chapter of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut is apologetic about the "short and jumbled and jangled" nature of the novel, yet he has little choice since "there's nothing intelligent to say about a massacre" (24). Perhaps Looseleaf Harper is best understood as the personification of this incommunicability.

Harold's homecoming is disastrous because there's nothing else it could be. Odysseus he is not. Penelope's suitors are too incompetent to deserve a seat at her table, but then again, so is Harold. When read as an allegory for modernity, the play reveals that humanity is deeply flawed, and this, of course, is a nihilistic sentiment Vonnegut will explore in much bleaker terms in his later fiction.

The central problem all *Wanda June*'s characters face is their own lack of a clear purpose. They neither resist nor rebel. I wholeheartedly agree with Stanley Schatt that the most morally courageous character in the play is Penelope (138), yet she too is profoundly flawed. In the eight years her husband has been away, she has been unable adjust to life without him, and the suitors she invites into her life are kinder, for sure, but overall not much better. When Harold returns, like Odysseus he manages to easily drive out the suitors, but in doing so, he also drives out Penelope. His purpose in life is to maintain the stereotypical notions of masculinity by acting as he feels a man is *supposed* to act. This can best be seen when he forces a gun into the hands of his young son and exclaims, "Welcome to manhood, you little sparrowfart! Load that gun" (172). All of Harold's beliefs and actions are clichéd, yet they lend a structure to his life by offering him a part to play. In that sense, all the world really is a stage to Harold Ryan.

What's remarkable about *Happy Birthday, Wanda June* is the change which takes place in the final act. The case could be made that the majority of Vonnegut's characters are largely static. Change is always a possibility in Vonnegut's world, of course, but with a few notable exceptions, most of the men and women he writes about are too weary and too damaged by life to open themselves up to its possibility. Penelope asks one small request of her husband upon his return: "I want you to tell me that you loved me once. I *mean* it! I must have that, and so must Paul. Tell him that he was conceived in love ... Tell us both that somewhere in our lives was love" (166). For the first time in the play, and perhaps his life, Harold's confidence is shaken. Vonnegut writes, "Harold experiments inwardly with responses of various kinds, obviously saying them to himself, directing himself with his hands. Nothing quite satisfies him." Finally, all is he able to

mutter is, “Testimonials of that sort are—are beyond my range. I don’t do them well” (166). In a single moment, Harold Ryan has finally encountered a task for which he is inadequate.

In the final scene, Dr. Woodly returns for the confrontation which concludes the play. The doctor refuses to be baited into a physical altercation, which is of course what Harold wants because the physical realm is all he has ever known. Anything which can’t be killed or fucked is beyond his comprehension. Dr. Woodly realizes this, and instead attacks his sense of self. “You’re a clown. You’re a clown who *kills*—but you’re a clown ... Evolution has made you a clown—with a cigar. Simple butchers like you are obsolete” (189). While Harold is fine being regarded as evil, he is unable to accept being seen as silly, yet that’s what precisely what he is. His grand gesturing is absurd, and on some level he has always known it. He’s devoted his entire life to unquestionably serving ridiculous codes of clichéd masculinity, and these outdated codes have given his life purpose. “I put a poison thought in your head,” Woodly adds as he concludes his verbal assault. “Even now that poison is seeping into every lobe of your mind. It’s saying, ‘Obsolete, obsolete, obsolete,’ and, ‘Clown, clown, clown’” (191).

During this exchange, Harold has held a loaded rifle, and when faced with the realization that he is absurd, the broken man walks off stage. “Tell Penelope I loved her—in my clownish way. And Paul. Tell him to be a healer,” he tells Dr. Woodly as he exits. Realizing what is about to take place, and that given what has just transpired, there is only one thing which a man like Harold Ryan could do, the doctor asks for the gun. Seconds later, a shot rings out.

Schatt interprets the gunshot as follows: "Vonnegut also deflates any trace of Ryan's heroism by having him go into another room to shoot himself in much the same way that Hemingway's death occurred. Unlike Hemingway, though, Ryan misses at point blank range" (138). He goes on to add, "It is only by showing him mishandle his suicide that Vonnegut can ridicule everything the modern hero has come to represent" (142). I'd like to offer a radically different interpretation of this scene. Harold, it seems to me, doesn't "mishandle" his suicide attempt, and Vonnegut doesn't ridicule him. Rather, Harold intentionally misses, and in doing so, says yes to a new life, one in which he will be forced to change if he is to survive. Earlier in the play, when Colonel Harper is lamenting his role in the atomic bombing of Nagasaki, Harold assures him that it was "the one direct, decisive, intelligent act of your life." "It could have been," Colonel Harper responds, "if I hadn't done it. If I'd said to myself, 'Screw it. I'm going to tell all those people down there to live,'" to which Harold replies, "They were enemies. We were at war" (161-2). What makes Harold an ultimately redeemable character is that he is able to do on a personal level what Colonel Harper could not, which is to choose life over death.

The final words of the play are, "I missed" (199), and in uttering them, he is referring to both the shot and his life. Life can begin again, but it will require a new purpose, a sense of Camusian resistance. His relationships with Penelope, Paul, and Colonel Looseleaf Harper may be irreparably damaged, but the possibility of reconciliation is there. Harold may not be able to say "yes" to tomorrow, but at least he is able to affirm life in the moment, and in Vonnegut's world, that's a victory of the highest order.

### ***Hocus Pocus: A Study of a Life in Retreat***

Eugene Debs Hartke, the protagonist of *Hocus Pocus*, has a good deal in common with Harold Ryan. Both men have become victims of their own pasts. If such a thing is possible, Gene is even *more* vicious in his military conquests, *more* dedicated to his sexual exploits, yet neither are points of great pride. At the same time, neither are they sources of shame. They simply *were*, and *are*, part of his story. The problem is that they are the only parts that seem to matter much to him.

*Hocus Pocus* is written in the form of a severely disjointed autobiography. Like Howard W. Campbell Jr. in *Mother Night*, Gene is awaiting trial. He is charged with helping plan a prison break at the New York State Maximum Security Adult Correctional Institution. While he is innocent of this crime, he is indifferent to clearing his name or gaining his freedom, as life in “a country in such an advanced state of physical and spiritual and intellectual dilapidation” (283) is hardly worth living.

If the texts previously discussed in this chapter can be read as studies on the necessity of individual purpose, *Hocus Pocus* is an extended meditation on the damning fruits of a purposeless existence. Susan Farrell observes, “Like many Vonnegut characters, Hartke seems to be a prisoner of fate, locked in a downward spiral, a pawn of history rather than a shaper of it” (*Critical Companion* 186). Joseph Ward places the root source of Gene’s problem much closer to home, writing, “Unable to accept the absurdity of his condition, he becomes a prisoner of his own mind” (89). What defines Gene, however, is his lack of interest in making sense of the world and his place in it. Prison for him is as much a spiritual metaphor as it is a physical reality, and in a Camusian sense, he represents the life lived *without* resistance or revolt in the midst of absurdity.

A recurring question, one which Gene ponders in depth throughout his life, allows the reader to understand his existential predicament: “What is this place and who are these people and what am I doing here?” (256). This is precisely the question he can’t get past, no matter his station in life, whether it be serving in Vietnam, caring for his deranged wife and mother-in-law, teaching at Tarkington College and the New York State Maxim Security Adult Correctional Institution, acting as warden of Tarkington State Reformatory, or finding temporary respite in the arms and beds of dozens of lonely middle-aged women as baffled by life as himself.

Like Harold Ryan, for Gene life is neatly divided into two categories: killing and fucking. Far from being at opposite ends of human experience, Gene draws no real distinction between the two acts. At the center of this narrative is his attempt to compile two lists, the first being the number of people he has killed and the second being the number he has slept with. As he explains: “I have been wondering lately how many human beings I actually killed with conventional weaponry. I don’t believe it was my conscience which suggested I do this. It was the list of women I was making, trying to remember all the names and faces and places and dates, which led to the logical question: ‘Why not a list of all you’ve killed?’ So I think I will” (152). When asked by his defense attorney why he would bother, he responds, “To speed things up on Judgement Day” before confiding, in all seriousness, that he would like to be buried with both lists just in case there really is an afterlife and there actually is a Judgement Day (153). The fact that the lists end up with exactly the same number of names in both columns only underscores how equally adept he is at each.

That's not to say, though, that Gene is sociopathic. Far from it. His military and sexual exploits are sharply contrasted by his years of service as an educator, first at Tarkington College and then at the prison across the lake. In this capacity, he does his best to expose his students to the truth, even when it is bleak. "I see no harm," he explains, "in telling young people to prepare for failure rather than success, since failure is the main thing that is going to happen to them" (54). One of the qualities which makes him such a wildly popular teacher is that he has long had the pretense kicked out of him by life, and he is left with no sense of entitlement or superiority. The fact that Tarkington College is founded on a commitment of service to students with severe mental deficiencies and that most of the prisoners across the lake are illiterate and culturally ignorant only reinforces his broken worldview: "the worst flaw [in the human character] is that we're just plain dumb. Admit it! You think Auschwitz was intelligent?" (238).

In many ways, *Hocus Pocus* remains Vonnegut's most uncharacteristic work. For his penultimate novel, and for the first and only time in his entire career, Vonnegut goes to great lengths to intentionally distance his voice from and minimize his presence within the narrative. In "The Death of the Author," Barthes describes the creative phenomenon which results in "the Author diminishing like a figuring at the far end of the literary stage," and by doing so, "the text is henceforth made and read in such a way that at all levels the author is absent" (1467-8). In a Barthean sense, Vonnegut is uncharacteristically dead in *Hocus Pocus*. He forgoes his standard personal introduction and replaces it with a brief editor's note, which he signs simply KV. Significantly, Vonnegut relegates himself to an editorial position, and rather than acting as a *creator*, he becomes a *conveyer*. He even goes so far as to describe his editorial choices regarding

changes in spelling and capitalization. Yet, it is inevitably a personal novel as well. Gene Hartke shares a good deal in common with his creator in a philosophical sense. “That is how you get to be a writer, incidentally,” Vonnegut explains in *Palm Sunday*. “You somehow feel marginal, somehow slightly off-balance all the time” (59). “Sometimes,” he later adds, “I don’t consider myself good at life, so I hide in my profession” (293). *Hocus Pocus* is the study of a man in full retreat from life. The trial that Gene awaits is as metaphoric as it is literal, and his indifference to its outcome serves as a chilling warning about the dangers of hiding in professions, in wars, in beds, and from life itself. To return to the first words of Vonnegut’s first novel: “This book is not a book about what is but a book about what could be.” If *Player Piano* is a warning about the type of world we could one day inhabit, *Hocus Pocus* is a warning about the type of person we could one day become.

Both Camus and Vonnegut ultimately found themselves in positions of revered authority, roles both writers rejected. In *Albert Camus: Elements of a Life*, Robert Zeretsky explains, “Camus’s writings have become guides for the perplexed—a status that left Camus uncomfortable. ‘I speak for no one,’ he insisted. ‘I have enough difficulty speaking for myself’” (7). Robert Short goes even further. “Vonnegut *is* us,” he writes. “In many typical ways, Vonnegut, in his experience and thinking, has come from where most of us have come and has gone through what most of us—in one way or another—has gone through” (66). It is precisely this type of assessment which led to a “circuit breaker” in Vonnegut’s head to blow in the early 1970s, effectively ending his public speaking career at the time (*Wampeters* xiii).

*Player Piano, The Sirens of Titan, God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater, Happy Birthday, Wanda June, and Hocus Pocus* are radically different works, each with a style, tone, and point of view all its own. Yet they share the singular vision of a unique artist, one who often struggles and bumbles through life like the rest of us, even as he writes about it. Each text attempts to answer the question first raised by Camus and later by the unknown graffiti artist whose work Trout encounters on the wall of the New York City men's room—what is the purpose of life? A 1972 letter to his first wife, Jane, written recently after the couple's separation, provides an intimate glimpse into Vonnegut's personal life. As he writes, at the end of a life together they found themselves “[...]in a world we never made, in bodies we never asked for, with heads we only dimly understand ...” (*Letters* 189). In a letter he likely never imagined would one day be published, Vonnegut provides a perfect description of what life feels like, for him and for so many of his characters. On a basic level, the purpose of life is to find purpose, and to create meaning where and when there is none. This is the foundation upon which the good life is built, and it is a central principle at the heart of Vonnegut's fiction. As we shall see in the next chapter, self-deception can be both helpful and necessary in bringing order to the chaos of existence.

CHAPTER II:  
ON TRUTH AND *FOMA* IN A *NECESSARY* SENSE:  
THE VALUE OF PERSPECTIVAL ILLUSION IN MODERNITY

Entombed in a cave 116 miles beneath Mercury's alternately fire-hot and ice-cold deserted surface, Unk and Boaz, two lost souls in Vonnegut's *The Sirens of Titan*, have little to live for, and even less to believe in. The possibility of escape seems remote at best, and as days turn to months which then turn to years, both men have only illusions to make existence bearable. As we've seen in the previous chapter, Boaz finds purpose through messianic delusions of becoming "God Almighty" to the thousands upon thousands of mindless, kite-shaped harmoniums which populate the desolate caves of Mercury. Meanwhile, the deception which keeps Unk going is his belief that one day he will be reunited with his wife, Bee, his son, Chrono, and his best (and only) friend, Stony Stevenson. Unbeknownst to Unk, while under the control of a radio antenna which had been planted into his skull on a Martian military base hospital, and which controls his every action, earlier he had strangled Stony to death only to have the memory erased.

"Don't truth me," Boaz begs Unk, "and I won't truth you" (205). Repeatedly in Vonnegut's world, to "truth" someone is the cruelest of all possible acts. There on Mercury, the only thing which makes life bearable for Unk and Boaz is artifice, or, simply put, illusion.

For Nietzsche, as for Vonnegut, illusion and self-deception play an important role as well. Written almost a decade after the publication of the first volume of *Human, All*

*Too Human*, Nietzsche's backward-looking preface of 1886 offers the following uncharacteristically vulnerable glimpse into his personal past : "Thus when I needed to I once also invented for myself the 'free spirits' to whom this melancholy-valiant book ... is dedicated; free spirits of this kind do not exist, did not exist—but as I have said, I had need of them at that time... (6). This is precisely the type of individualistic artifice, based in illusion, to which so many of Vonnegut's characters turn.

In this chapter, I will be focusing on self-deception and how *foma*, or "harmless" lies, are frequently necessary to make life bearable in Vonnegut's fiction. The central texts I'll be exploring are *Cat's Cradle*, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and *Galapagos*. As for Nietzsche, I'll be working closely with "On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense," *Human, All Too Human*, *The Gay Science*, and *Beyond Good and Evil*. Vonnegut differs from Nietzsche significantly in this way—rather than viewing the herd as something which should be overcome on the path to becoming a free spirit, Vonnegut is an advocate for rendering herd life meaningful. Few Zarathustras exist in Vonnegut's world, and his message is written for not those atop the mountain, but rather, for those of us who spend our lives in its shadow.

### **Vonnegut's Nietzsche: Making the Best of the Toilsome Present**

"Insofar as they want to alleviate the life of men, poets either turn their eyes away from the toilsome present or they procure for the present new colours through a light which they direct upon it from the past. To be able to do this, they themselves have to be in many respects backwards-looking creatures"

Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*

"And Lot's wife, of course, was told not to look back ... But she did look back, and I love her for that, because it was so human. I've finished my war book now. The next one I write is going to be fun. This one is a failure, and had to be, since it was written by a pillar of salt"

Much has been written about the influence of Twain on Vonnegut's work, and Vonnegut freely acknowledges his debt to the mustachioed master from Mississippi. Philosophically, however, Nietzsche's influence on Vonnegut's work is unmistakable, and one which is under-explored. From a critical perspective, I'd like to first establish that Vonnegut was in fact familiar with Nietzsche's work.

In a 1978 graduation speech at Fredonia College, Vonnegut offered the following to the graduating class: "As for boredom: Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, a German philosopher who died seventy-eight years ago, had this to say: 'Against boredom even the gods contend in vain.' We are supposed to be bored. It is part of life" (*Palm Sunday* 168). Vonnegut also referenced Nietzsche in a Unitarian Universalist sermon he delivered in 1986: "Nietzsche said, in effect, that only a person of great faith can afford to be a skeptic." Of particular importance here is Vonnegut's accompanying comment that this Nietzschean nugget "justifies the spiritual condition of myself, my Indiana ancestors, and my children" (*Fates* 157). Loree Rackstraw, Vonnegut's former student and long-time friend, further solidifies the philosophical underpinnings of Vonnegut's work: "While he shunned the notion of being an intellectual and denied that he'd been a serious scholar of philosophers like Nietzsche or Goethe, he had read these writers, and their philosophies did lurk beneath the surface of his own life and work" (*Love as Always* 64).

Another example of Vonnegut's familiarity with Nietzsche can be found in his voluminous correspondence. As he writes in a 1990 letter to Ben Hitz, "It wasn't until I was sixty-four that I came across a statement by Nietzsche that I could articulate why committed Christians and Jews sometimes find me respectable: 'Only a person of deep

faith can afford the luxury of skepticism”” (*Letters* 340). What’s important here is not the quote itself so much as the way it reveals Vonnegut’s ongoing reading of Nietzsche’s philosophy throughout his career as a novelist.

Paradoxically, Vonnegut’s most directly candid musings on Nietzsche come from an obscure, seldomly-referenced *Hustler* interview titled “Kurt Vonnegut Visits a Strip Club” which took place in The Gentleman’s Lounge in Lincoln, Nebraska on Vonnegut’s 69<sup>th</sup> birthday. To date, this interview is *only* available on *Hustler’s* website. While he nibbles on cookies Kevin P. Simonson, the interviewer, stuffed in his coat pocket at Vonnegut’s University of Nebraska lecture earlier in the evening, Vonnegut waxes poetic on Nietzsche. Here, he offers the same quote about skepticism found in his letter to Hitz, and when asked “What attracted you to Nietzsche?,” he responds, “Just random reading and pulling the book off the shelf. I started reading him when I was about 35. He didn’t have anything to do with the shape of my career because I was already fully established.”

At 35 Vonnegut’s career was admittedly “fully established” in the sense that he was earning enough from his short fiction which regularly appeared in *The Saturday Evening Post* and *Collier’s* (among other popular “slicks”) that he was able to quit his public relations job at General Electric and devote his attention to writing full-time. He refers to these shorter works as “the fruits of Free Enterprise” which he “sold in order to finance the writing of the novels” (*Monkey House* xiv). At the moment he first encountered Nietzsche, *Cat’s Cradle* was in a long period of gestation. Of the novels I explore in this chapter, *Cat’s Cradle*, published in 1963, is the earliest. At the time of its publication, Vonnegut would have been 40. However, a 1953 letter to Harry Brague shows that Vonnegut was working on the idea for the novel a full decade earlier, when he

was 30. In other words, he became a life-long student of Nietzsche *precisely* during the completion of his first undisputed “major” work.

I would argue that Nietzsche’s influence extends far beyond *Cat’s Cradle*, and informs most of his mature—and certainly all of his most philosophical—work. Specifically, the problem Nietzsche inherited was how to make sense of the world after the collapse of the Enlightenment project. As his madman famously asks in Book Three of *The Gay Science*, “Do we still smell nothing of the divine decomposition?—Gods, too, decompose! God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed him!” Even more important, however, is the madman’s next question: “How can we console ourselves, the murderers of all murderers?” (120). This, I would argue, is *the* question which Nietzsche spent his entire life answering, and if his often-contradictory edicts have a unifying strand, it is in offering a systematic answer to this question—in modernity, how does the individual affirm life? What is there to offer consolation?

A century later, Vonnegut inherited the same philosophical question, under radically different circumstances. More to the point, Vonnegut was faced with the following dilemma—how can the individual affirm life in a godless universe and in an age where wholesale nuclear destruction is not only possible even likely? As he states in a 1970 commencement speech at Bennington College:

I fully expected that by the time I was twenty-one, some scientist, maybe my brother, would have taken a color photograph of God-Almighty...Scientific truth was going to make us *so* happy and comfortable. What actually happened when I was twenty-one was that we dropped scientific truth on Hiroshima. We killed everybody there. And I had just come home from being a prisoner of war in Dresden, which I’d seen burned to the ground...So I had a heart-to-heart talk with myself. “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... (*Wampeters* 163).

Pessimism aside, both Vonnegut and Nietzsche are staunchly anti-nihilistic. Keith Ansell Pearson and Duncan Large regard *Human, All Too Human* as a particularly important text, the first of a trilogy (followed by *Daybreak* and *The Gay Science*) which focuses on the “free spirit” and reveals Nietzsche “coming to terms with what he regards as the end of metaphysics” (153). It is in *Human, All Too Human* that he most fiercely rejects nihilism as a response to modernity. Indeed, there is no greater single impediment to the good life than nihilism for Nietzsche. Consider, for instance, his grave warning from *Beyond Good and Evil*: “There may actually be puritanical fanatics of conscience who prefer even a certain nothing to an uncertain something to lie down on—and die. But this is nihilism and the sign of a despairing, mortally weary soul—” (16). For Nietzsche, the pursuit of absolute “certainty” is a fool’s errand, and clearly this is one of the most postmodern dimensions of his work. Part of his philosophical project involves embracing uncertainty without becoming “mortally weary”—that way, after all, lies despair.

Like *Beyond Good and Evil*, *Cat’s Cradle* also offers a pointed refutation of nihilism. While on a trip to gather research for his book titled *The Day the World Ended*, Jonah, the novel’s narrator, agrees to let a struggling poet named Sherman Krebbs borrow his apartment. Krebbs, “a bearded man, a platinum blond Jesus with spaniel eyes” (77), destroys Jonah’s apartment in a spree of “nihilistic debauch” (77), and in the process kills Jonah’s cat, leaving a note around the dead animal’s neck—“meow.” No explanation is given for the absurd carnage, which includes the following nonsensical message written in lipstick on the wall above the bed: “No, no, no, said Chicken-licken.” There can be no explanation. As noted in the previous chapter, the absurd is the inherited condition of modernity, and Jonah learns what Billy Pilgrim ultimately discovers in *Slaughterhouse-*

*Five*—“there is no why” (97). The moment serves as a spiritual awakening for Jonah, though, and after experiencing the ugly Dionysian debauchery Krebbs left in his wake, he realizes that “nihilism was not for me” (78). Ultimately, it’s not until he is completely willing to denounce nihilism that Jonah is able to find any sense of meaning in life, even if that meaning is based on the harmless untruths of Bokononism.

The question which must next be addressed is *which Nietzsche* most informed the philosophical dimensions of Vonnegut’s thought. Certainly, no English-language scholar has done more to shape contemporary Nietzsche studies than Walter Kauffmann, who argues that “in Nietzsche’s case, there is not even a basic agreement about what he stood for” (3). Kaufmann ultimately uses the “will to power” as the organizing principle of Nietzsche’s work, noting, “When Nietzsche introduced the will to power into his thought, all the dualistic tendencies which had rent it previously could be reduced to mere manifestations of this basic drive” (178). Kauffmann, then, offers a reading of a *particular* Nietzsche, one which is sharply contrasted by Arthur Danto, who refuses to acknowledge a single unifying strand which runs through Nietzsche, “whose books themselves, except for their chronological ordering, do not exhibit any special structure as a corpus” and in whose work “any given aphorism or essay might as easily have been placed in one volume as in another without much affecting the unity or the structure of either” (1). Throughout *Nietzsche as Philosopher*, Danto explores various thought patterns which exist throughout Nietzsche which often clash but fail to systematize his work.

More recently, many scholars use aesthetics as a point of entry into Nietzsche. In both *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* and *The Art of Living*, Alexander Nehamas explores

Nietzsche's advocacy of approaching life as a work of art with the self-serving as both the creator and canvas, while Alain de Botton's *The Consolations of Philosophy* examines Nietzsche as being largely preoccupied as "offer[ing] paths to fulfillment" (243). In 2014's *Nietzsche of Art & Life*, Daniel Came introduces the idea of "aesthetic transfiguration," which he defines as "the capacity of art to alchemize the meaningless sufferings of mere natural existence into the aesthetically magnificent struggle that is human life" (9), and then builds a strong case for it being one of Nietzsche's most significant achievements.

As for ways Nietzsche has been used as a lens for viewing Vonnegut, Robert Tally's *Kurt Vonnegut and the American Novel: A Postmodern Iconography* provides the most thoughtful analysis to date. Tally devotes an entire chapter to Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* and the ways in which the novel "combines form and content to figure forth an ethics based on the principle of the eternal return" (70). Tally's exploration of Nietzsche's eternal return is innovative in that it offers a radically new way of reading Vonnegut from a philosophical perspective. He suggests that "Billy, like Nietzsche, understands this theory (Tralfamadorian space time or the eternal return), properly understood, is liberatory inasmuch as it frees one from the fear and loathing of life itself" (75). My goal in this chapter is to offer a parallel reading of *Slaughterhouse-Five* which focuses not on Nietzsche's eternal recurrence but rather on his perspectival view of truth. For Nietzsche, eternal recurrence is a thought experiment, one whose ultimate goal is affirmation. When he writes in *The Gay Science* of the demon who announces, "This life as you live it and have lived it you will have to live once again, and innumerable times again," we must also accept the second part of this demonic

proclamation, namely that “there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unspeakably small or great in your life must return to you” (194). For Nietzsche, the eternal recurrence represents an attempt to affirm life *in spite of* its horrors. If a single moment in life renders it worth repeating eternally, that makes the sorrow bearable as well. This view is somewhat at odds with the Tralfamadorian philosophy of selectivity, though. As the aliens explain the horrors of existence to Billy Pilgrim: “There isn’t anything we can do to [moments of horror and tragedy], so we simply don’t look at them. We ignore them. We spend eternity looking at pleasant moments—like today at the zoo. Isn’t this a nice moment” (150). Perspective, then, determines which moments are worth looking at. For Vonnegut, eternal recurrence isn’t an act of affirming life in its totality, but instead affirming its selective moments. This, of course, is a type of perspectivism.

Robert Solomon succinctly defines Nietzsche’s perspectivism as “the view that *all* doctrines and dilemmas are only partial and limited by a particular point of view” (183). For Nietzsche, if somewhat grandiosely, this provincializes all philosophy up to the time that he wrote by rendering it a matter of perspective. Nowhere is this more evident than his preface to *Beyond Good and Evil*. “Supposing truth is a woman,” he writes. “What then? Are there not grounds for the suspicion that all philosophers, insofar as they were dogmatists, have been inexpert about women” (1). Clumsy misogynistic metaphor aside, Nietzsche uses these words to launch into his prelude to a philosophy of the future, a doctrine which dynamically sets itself apart from the history of philosophy up to that moment. Nietzsche’s challenge is offering a forward-looking philosophical perspective

which doesn't fall into the traps of perspectivism. Whether he succeeds or not is beyond the scope of this project, but those are the stakes.

More directly, Nietzsche offers his view of perspectivism in *The Will to Power*, where he writes: "Against positivism, which halts at phenomena—'There are only facts'—I would say: No this is precisely what there is not, only interpretations. We cannot establish any fact 'in itself': perhaps it is folly to want to do such a thing" (267). Thus, Nietzsche opens up the possibility of an individualistic, perspectival creation not just of truth, but of the world. This view is in keeping with Vonnegut's admonition to select moments worthy of making life bearable, even if doing so is based in illusion. Billy Pilgrim, for instance, adopts Tralfamadorian philosophy and refuses to "look at" those moments which he finds particularly painful (i.e. the execution of Edgar Derby for stealing a teapot in Dresden). They exist, certainly, but by ignoring them, Billy is able to construct a reality based on the moments he finds pleasurable.

More practically, Vonnegut incorporates this selectivity into his non-fiction as well, nowhere more so than in his graduation addresses, many of which are assembled in *If This Isn't Nice, What Is: The Graduation Speeches and Other Words to Live By*. The title of this collection, offered by editor Dan Wakefield, serves to contextualize Vonnegut squarely in the realm of philosophy. "Words to Live By" suggests knowledge which can improve the quality of daily life, and indeed, this is what Vonnegut attempts to do repeatedly in his addresses and speeches, much more directly than he does through his novels, where he tends to work in metaphor. What the speeches, once anthologized, allow readers is the luxury of repetition. Surely if Vonnegut incorporated information more than once, and repeatedly over a period of years, it says something about the value

placed on this information, at least for Vonnegut. Consistently, one idea unites these addresses. As Vonnegut himself acknowledges in a 1999 graduation speech at Agnes Scott College, “Every graduation pep talk I’ve every given has ended with words about my father’s kid brother, Alex Vonnegut. One of the things he found so objectionable about human beings was that they rarely noticed it when they were happy” (30). Alex’s advice is simple—regardless of where someone is or what they are doing, they should always stop to acknowledge and appreciate a pleasant moment whenever one might come around. “If this [moment] isn’t nice, what is?” Vonnegut suggests we continually ask ourselves. It is the individual moment, after all, which instills life with meaning. As for Billy Pilgrim’s happiest moment, it wasn’t his liberation from the Germans or the birth of his children—it proved to be something much more commonplace. “Later on in life, the Tralfamadorians would advise Billy to concentrate on the happy moments in life, and to ignore the unhappy ones—to stare only at the pretty things as eternity failed to go by. If this sort of selectivity had been possible for Billy, he might have chosen as his happiest moment his sundrenched snooze in the back of the wagon” (249). Never mind the fact that the wagon was “coffin-shaped” and was traveling through a firebombed Dresden littered with the grizzly charred remains of thousands of civilian men, women, and children. Outside of objective reality, or to use Nietzsche’s term, in the midst of the most wretched phenomena, Billy is able to construct a blissful moment through perspective alone. If this isn’t nice, what is?

Nietzsche would almost certainly acknowledge Billy’s happiest moment as legitimate, precisely the type of experience which is necessary if life is to be affirmed in light of eternal recurrence. Would he consider it “true,” though? Perhaps a better

question is what is truth within Nietzsche's framework? The opening paragraph of "On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense" includes an uncharacteristically somber description of humanity's place in the cosmos as Nietzsche describes "how purposeless and arbitrary the human intellect looks within nature." As he elaborates, "there were eternities during which it did not exist; and when it has disappeared again, nothing will have happened" (141). Central to Nietzsche's philosophical project is creating a framework within which the individual can affirm existence, particularly after the death of God, or, metaphorically, without the metaphysical illusion of a reward elsewhere. Within the essay, Nietzsche draws an important distinction between truth and knowledge. Truth, he argues, "is only desired by human beings in a ... limited sense. They deserve the pleasant, life-preserving consequences of truth; they are indifferent to pure knowledge if it has no consequences, but they are actually harmful towards truths which may be harmful or destructive" (143). "What, then, is truth?" he asks. "A mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms ... after they have been in use for a long time, [they] strike people as firmly established, canonical, and binding; truths are illusions of which we have forgotten they are illusions" (146). Within the same text, however, he concedes that such illusions do (or at the very least *can*) contribute to one's overall well-being: "But human beings have an unconquerable urge to let themselves be deceived, and they are as if enchanted with happiness when the bard recites epic fairy-tales as if they were true" (151). While Nietzsche's "free spirit" might feel compelled to work through to the absolute reality behind such illusions where possible, self-deception can be a powerful tool for most of us, and even Nietzsche himself engaged in it, as evidenced by his creation of the free spirits when he "needed them."

Matthew Gannon's "Vonnegut on Truth and Aesthetics in a Nonmoral Sense" offers an extremely insightful reading of *Breakfast of Champions* which is informed by Nietzsche's "On Truth and Lying in a Nonmoral Sense." As he states: "Though Nietzsche wrote a century before Vonnegut, his concerns for language, truth, and human understanding are remarkably similar." Gannon's focus is largely limited to *Breakfast of Champions*. I would argue that "On Truth and Lying in a Nonmoral Sense" can be usefully applied more broadly to Vonnegut in an ontological sense. Vonnegut's work is filled with characters who deceive themselves and others, and far from being disdainful of such delusional self-deception, Vonnegut champions, as long as is not done maliciously (as is the case in *Galapagos*, which we will explore later in this chapter). From his perspective, not only is such self-deception helpful, but it is at times *essential*.

Towards the end of *Cat's Cradle*, John, the novel's narrator, encounters the following couplet in *The Books of Bokonon*:

Midget, midget, midget, how he struts and winks

For he knows a man's as big as what he hopes and thinks! (284).

As light as this verse is on the surface, careful analysis reveals it to serve as a microcosm for the entire novel. Clearly a man is not literally as big as he hopes and thinks, yet this is precisely the type of untruth that little Newt Hoenikker needs in order for life to become bearable. For, Vonnegut, this is religion's duty and deception's greatest achievement.

*Cat's Cradle* certainly offers Vonnegut's definitive outlook regarding *foma* (which he defines in *Wampeters, Foma & Granfalloon* as "harmless untruths, intended to comfort simple souls" [xiii]), and a large portion of this chapter will be devoted to a careful reading of this seminal work. Bokononism is admittedly a fictitious religion, yet

it orders reality in useful ways, and this is important to Vonnegut (and his characters). Towards the end of the text, Dr. von Koenigswald states, “I agree with one Bokononist idea. I agree that all religions, including Bokononism, are nothing but lies.” When asked if he has a problem engaging with that which he does not believe, he replies, “I am a very bad scientist. I will do anything to make a human feel better, even if it is unscientific” (219).

Vonnegut routinely bought into foma in his own life as well. In his 1980 Sermon at St. Clement’s Episcopal Church, Vonnegut describes himself as “a Christ-worshipping agnostic” (*Palm Sunday* 298), whereas at other times he also refers to himself as a Unitarian Universalist” (*Fates Worse Than Death* 157). In a *Weekly Guardian* interview, he defines perfect happiness as “imagining that something somewhere wants us to like it here” (*Fates Worse Than Death* 15).

In *Timequake*, Vonnegut’s final novel, he returns to the subject of religion, noting “how comforting and encouraging the make-believe of religion can be for common folk” (121). A critical difference between Nietzsche and Vonnegut becomes clear here. Whereas Nietzsche is focused with distancing the elite (that is, the Free Spirit, the *Übermensch*) from the masses, Vonnegut is primarily concerned with acting as a metaphoric shepherd to the “herd.”

Another of Nietzsche’s central philosophical and epistemological concerns is providing a framework within which the individual can both rationalize (and ultimately justify) existence and “say yes” to life. For Nietzsche, in the wake of the Enlightenment and the death of God which followed, life is *here*, and the hope of a divine *elsewhere* is both futile and wrongheaded. In *The Gay Science*, he contextualizes the existential

stakes of modernity as such: “*New battles*.—After Buddha was dead, they still showed his shadow in the cave for centuries—a tremendous, gruesome shadow. God is dead; but given the way people are, there may still for millennia be caves in which they show his shadow. —And we—we must still defeat his shadow as well!” (109). The “free spirit” Nietzsche envisions in *Human, All Too Human*, *Daybreak*, and *The Gay Science* is the individual who is capable of defeating said shadow and affirming life as a thing in itself, for its own sake, even if the thing-in-itself is tainted by perspective. Doing so, ultimately, requires a personal reimagining on a truly transformative scale.

Finally, Nietzsche and Vonnegut share artistic sensibilities which are worth exploring as well. Ansell Pearson and Large describe Nietzsche’s method of writing by noting, “his stylistic ideal ... is the paradoxical one of ‘ridendo dicere severum’ (‘saying what is somber through what is laughable’), and these two modes, the somber and the sunny, are mischievously intertwined in his philosophy” (xxx). Consider section 205 of *Human, All Too Human*: “There are writers who, by representing the impossible as possible and speaking of morality and genius as though both were merely a matter of wanting them, a mere whim and caprice, evoke a feeling of high-spirited freedom, as though man were standing on tiptoe and compelled to dance for sheer joy” (96). Ultimately, throughout their careers, both Nietzsche and Vonnegut remained committed to producing such books. “Being alive” just might be “a crock of shit” (*Timequake* 3), but it’s the only game in town.

Finally, in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut offers a clue to Nietzsche’s significant influence. As Billy rides through the wreckage of Dresden in a horse-drawn carriage, he is stopped by a couple who reprimand him for the neglect of the horses. “Billy asked

them in English what it was they wanted ... They made Billy get out of the wagon and come look at the horses. When Billy saw the condition of his means of transportation, he burst into tears. He hadn't cried about anything else in the war" (252). The nod to Nietzsche here is unmistakable. It is well known that Nietzsche's final act of sanity before his collapse in Turin in 1889 was to embrace an abused horse. Sue Prideaux vividly paints the scene in her recent biography *I Am Dynamite! A Life of Nietzsche*: "On seeing a cabbie mercilessly beating his horse, Nietzsche broke down. Overwhelmed by compassion, sobbing at the sight of it, he threw his arms protectively around the horse's neck, and collapsed" (330). By deliberately placing the horse scene near the very end of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut invites readers to explore the parallels between the novel and Nietzschean thought.

### **"The Moment is Structured That Way": Acceptance Through Reinvention in *Slaughterhouse-Five***

"This is the only story of mine whose moral I know," Vonnegut writes in the introduction to *Mother Night*. "We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be" (v). This is Vonnegut at his most quotable, and the problem with the easily-quotable Vonnegut is it's far too easy to remove from the original context. Nietzsche's aphorisms result in a similar problem. Brevity may be the soul of wit, but pithiness can be as much a curse as a blessing. Soundbites, by their very nature, lack context, and while they make for interesting bumper stickers and tattoos, they are easily distorted. Nietzsche encountered this problem when his thought was adopted by Nazis in the decades after his death, and Vonnegut, with far less at stake, ran into this issue with censors, school boards, and the far right throughout his career.

In context, however, this moral has much more to offer. *Mother Night* was first published in 1961, yet the introduction was written for the 1966 edition. What's important here is that Vonnegut's introduction was written three years before the publication of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, when the novel was near completion. "So It Goes," *Slaughterhouse-Five's* narrative mantra which appears every time something tragic happens, actually first appears in this 1966 introduction (viii). It's appearance here establishes a direct thematic connection between the two novels, and while Vonnegut's moral applies directly to Howard W. Campbell Jr., *Mother Night's* protagonist, I would argue it leads to a better understanding of Billy Pilgrim, and on a larger level, *Slaughterhouse-Five* as well. "Pretending" may at times be necessary, but it is a dangerous proposition. If Billy Pilgrim has a hamartia, it is perhaps that he pretends too well.

As early as 1972, in the first full-length study of Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five* was already being treated as a culturally significant novel. Here, Peter Reed perceptively refers to the novel as a career retrospective of sorts, a summing of Vonnegut's relatively young career to date, in which he brings together many of the other things he has talked about in his first five novels (172). Charles Shields, in his biography, attributes the novel's popularity to its publication during the Vietnam war (249), a time when anti-war sentiment was part of the zeitgeist. While this might explain the book's popularity, it doesn't quite explain its appeal. In his valuable *Kurt Vonnegut Remembered*, Jim O'Loughlin describes the way in which *Slaughterhouse-Five* transformed Vonnegut into an instant "celebrity" (65), a figure so popular that readers began making "pilgrimages" to his West Barnstable residence just to talk to (or catch a glimpse of) the writer (256).

More importantly, however, the completion of *Slaughterhouse-Five* proved to be an important personal milestone for Vonnegut. He affirms Reed's assessment in a 1973 *Playboy* interview with David Standish, noting, "Well, I felt after I finished *Slaughterhouse-Five* that I didn't have to write anymore if I didn't want to. It was the end of some sort of career" (*Conversations* 107). What ended for Vonnegut with the completion of the novel was a decades-long struggle to tell the story, truthfully ("All this happened, more or less"), of his experiences as an American POW in Dresden during World War II. The problem he encountered was in trying to make sense out of the utterly nonsensical. In his personal introduction, which serves not as preface but Chapter 1, Vonnegut inserts himself into the novel, and in doing so, he gives voice to two conflicting drives which exist throughout the text—his desire to render wholesale murder meaningful while telling the truth. Perhaps Vonnegut's greatest achievement is writing truthfully and intelligently about the horrors of war even though "there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre" (24).

Vonnegut proved to be unable to remove himself from the historical events which unfold at the core of the novel. He serves as not only a narrator but as an observer to the horrific firebombing of Dresden, and his authorial presence is literal. For instance, after capture, "An American near Billy wailed that he had excreted everything but his brains. Moments later he said. 'There they go, there they go.' He meant his brains. That was I. That was me. That was the author of this book" (160). This is but one of many examples of Vonnegut popping up as a participant within the novel. Tellingly, Vonnegut never appears as heroic—quite the opposite. He is always lurking in the background of the narrative, excreting his brains out here, dialing a wrong number there, refusing to make

himself a hero (or even a major participant) in the text. In *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of World War II*, Marina MacKay suggests that the literature of the war is most effective when it strives to recreate “the real experiences of real people” (3). Even more, “The most important claim literature can make on our historical imaginations is to show how things felt at the time” (3). As Vonnegut announces in the opening of his later novel, *Slapstick*, “This is the closest I will ever come to writing an autobiography. It is about what life *feels* like to me” (1). His presence in *Slaughterhouse-Five* both exemplifies MacKay’s expressionistic claim about the literature of the period and anticipates the increasingly significant role Vonnegut will go on to play as a character within his own post-*Slaughterhouse-Five* novels. When Vonnegut promised the wife of his fellow POW Bernard V. O’Hare that “there won’t be a part for Frank Sinatra or John Wayne [in the novel]” (19), he remained true to his word. By depicting himself as a late-night drunk dialer with bad breath who shits his brains out on the sidelines of the narrative, Vonnegut captures the spirit of what war (and life after) *felt* like.

While *Slaughterhouse-Five* is an intensely gritty and authentic war narrative, more importantly, it is about what war *feels* like, particularly for Billy Pilgrim, the novel’s protagonist. Billy is a war veteran who, like Vonnegut, is captured during the Battle of the Bulge, survives the firebombing of Dresden, and then goes on to lead a productive, prosperous, and troubled life. On a calm night in 1967, he is kidnapped by aliens and placed in a zoo-like dome in their home planet, Tralfamadore. In time, he is given a partner by the Tralfamadorians in Montana Wildhack, and they reproduce and live happily ever after in outer space, far away from the troubles of Earth. Billy has become “unstuck in time.” In other words, he experiences life in a series of

chronologically-unlinked (but intricately connected) moments. Vonnegut explains the process like this: “Billy has gone to sleep a senile widower and awakened on his wedding day. He has walked through a door in 1955 and come out another one in 1941. He has gone back through that door to find himself in 1963” (29). And so on. This is post-war reality for Billy Pilgrim.

Yet, Billy’s reality is not objective reality. Rather, it is a protective illusion he adopts in order to cope with reality. Whether *Slaughterhouse-Five* is in fact a science fiction novel is very much a matter of debate. Do the Tralfamadorians really exist? Does Billy really become unstuck in time? Given Vonnegut’s earlier work (particularly *The Sirens of Titan* in which Mars actually *does* wage a war on Earth, and in which Salo, an alien from Tralfamadore truly *does* exist), it is a logical conclusion to assume that the answer to both questions is yes. However, a close reading of the novel suggests that Billy’s Tralfamadorian captivity is nothing more than a figment of his imagination, a reality which he has constructed for himself to escape the struggles of daily life. To illustrate, consider the permanent residence he is provided on Tralfamadore: “They carried him to a cabin where he was strapped to a yellow BarcaLounger which they had stolen from a Sears Roebuck warehouse. The hold of the saucer was crammed with other stolen merchandise, which would be used to furnish Billy’s artificial habitat in a zoo on Tralfamadore” (97). A detail that many readers miss appears near the end of the novel. While in Manhattan to speak on a local radio program, Billy notices four paperback novels written by Kilgore Trout in the window of a pornographic bookstore. He picks up one of the books, titled, *The Big Board*, and instantly discovers it is familiar. “He got a few paragraphs into it, and he realized he had read it before—years ago, in the veterans’

hospital. It was about an Earthling man and woman who were kidnapped by extra-terrestrials. They were put on display in a zoo on a planet called Zicron-12” (257). Before leaving the porn shop, Billy catches a glimpse of a headline on an old “girly magazine”: “What really became of Montana Wildhack?” (261), who has been missing for a number of years, presumably long dead. Montana’s presence as his companion on Tralfamadore is nothing more than a fiction, a self-created cure for loneliness. Subconsciously, at some point Billy evidently caught a headline about her disappearance, and she ended up a partner-in-captivity in his illusion-based reality.

The most direct evidence Vonnegut offers that the Tralfamadoreans are only real to Billy can be found in his 1973 *Playboy* interview, in which he acknowledges, “The science fiction passages in *Slaughterhouse-Five* are just like the clowns in Shakespeare. He’d let up a little, bring on a clown or a foolish innkeeper or something like that, before he’d become serious again. And trips to other planets, science fiction of an obviously kidding sort, is equivalent to bringing on the clowns every so often to lighten things up” (*Conversations* 94). While he may have been using the Tralfamadorean episodes for comic relief, their role within the structure of the novel is central. In the recent article “‘Spastic in Time’: Time and Disability in Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five*,” Adam Barrows argues that any reading which attempts to discredit the reality of the Tralfamadoreans is misguided since “the novel’s ‘schizophrenic’ temporal structure is not representing the temporality of mental illness, as the diagnostic reading would have it, but is rather exposing the ways in which normative time and temporality have been complicit in the dehumanizing, diagnosing, and disenfranchising of disabled people” (392). Far from dehumanizing Billy, I suggest that Tralfamadore is *intended* to be seen as

an illusion, one which thoroughly humanizes him. For Billy, Tralfamadore serves as an escape from reality, an act of imagination so powerful that it becomes real, at least for him. This is illusion at its most powerful, and while Tralfamadore may not exist, it renders existence meaningful to Billy Pilgrim.

The problem Billy finds with reality is that it is essentially meaningless. In the previous chapter, we looked at the way Eliot Rosewater found purpose through acts of charity in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*. Eliot returns in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and he shares a room with Billy in the mental patient ward of a veterans' hospital. Here, Eliot introduces Billy to the novels of Kilgore Trout. "They both found life meaningless, partly because of that they had seen in the war," Vonnegut writes. "So they were trying to re-invent themselves and their universe" (128). This is important because it illustrates the usefulness of fiction, both as an art and as a self-created reality, in giving meaning to life (which will be the focus of the next chapter). When Eliot tells his psychiatrist, "I think you guys are going to have to come up with a lot of wonderful new *lies*, or people just aren't going to want to go on living" (129), he is articulating Vonnegut's belief that useful, life-saving truths can be built on a lies. David L. Vanderwerken's "Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* at Forty: Billy Pilgrim—Even More a Man of Our Times" offers an excellent reading of Billy in today's context. However, his assertion that Vonnegut "rejects both Tralfamadorianism and divinely-centered Christianity, while ambiguously affirming a humanly centered Christianity" (47) is only partially accurate. I'd agree that Vonnegut rejects Tralfamadorianism as an *absolute* philosophical framework, but as I will now illustrate, he certainly offers it as *a* philosophical framework worth considering.

Like many of Vonnegut's characters, Billy discovers that all of his attempts to find meaning in life are futile. As Nietzsche might put it, not only is there no way to objectively know the thing-in-itself, but the thing-in-itself turns out to be unknowable. "Among the things Billy Pilgrim could not change were the past, the present, and the future" (77), and once he comes to this realization, he is then able to change his perspective, not about what life *is*, but about what it *can be*. This realization comes in the form of a radical new way of thinking about time (and life itself) a la the Tralfamadorians. It's important to note that Billy first becomes "unstuck" in traditional time in 1944, during the Battle of the Bulge. Unarmed, under-provisioned, and with a violent death nearly certain, he tells his companions to go on without him. "Billy wanted to quit. He was cold, hungry, embarrassed, incompetent" (43). Sitting down in the snow, he resigns, surrendering himself to his inhospitable surroundings. "Billy Pilgrim had stopped in the forest. He was leaning against a tree with his eyes closed ... This is when Billy first became unstuck in time" (54). In that moment, Billy finds himself a child again with his father, who is trying to teach him to swim at the YMCA. Immediately after that, he is 41 years old in 1965, visiting his mother on her death bed. While many interpretations of *Slaughterhouse-Five* attempt to perform psychoanalytic readings of what triggers certain journeys for Billy, and while this can indeed be fascinating, such is beyond the scope of our purposes here. What's of importance is that Billy first comes "unstuck" and retreats into himself (and into illusion) as a direct response to the horrors of war. This is precisely how Tralfamadorian time works.

Billy explains the Tralfamadorian concept of time like this: "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 the moments are, and they can look at any moment that interests them” (34). In this framework, everything which ever will happen has already happened. Nothing can change it. The Tralfamadorians even know how the Universe ends—it is unceremoniously blown-up by simple error when a Tralfamadorian test pilot is experimenting with new fuel for flying saucers. “If you know this,” Billy asks, “isn’t there some way you can prevent it?” Yet the question is both absurd and irrelevant on Tralfamadore because the test pilot “has *always* pressed [the ignition button which signals the end of the Universe], and he always *will*. We *always* let him and we always *will* let him. The moment is structured that way” (149). This is precisely the perspective which Billy adopts, and the illusion within which he loses himself.

Two aspects of this illusion are most appealing to Billy Pilgrim, and through Billy, Vonnegut offers this idea to readers as ways of approaching life, particularly its grittiest and most unbearable griefs. The first is that there is no rational basis for reality. When he is abducted by the Tralfamadorians, Billy reasonably asks why he was selected. “That is a very *Earthling* question to ask,” he is informed. “Why *you*? Why *us* for that matter? Why *anything*?” After all, “There is no why” (97). An inherently meaningless universe, for Billy as for us, makes “why” a moot question. Individual responsibility follows suit and becomes equally inconsequential for Billy thanks to the Tralfamadorians. As one Tralfamadorian scolds him, “If I hadn’t spent so much time studying Earthlings, I wouldn’t have any idea what was meant by ‘free will.’ I’ve visited thirty-one inhabited planets in the universe, and I have studies reports on one hundred more. Only on Earth is

there any talk of free will” (109). By choosing to accept free will as meaningless, Billy no longer has to accept any responsibility, for his actions or the actions of others. This too is a very Nietzschean idea. In establishing the groundwork for perspectivism in *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche argues that “It is our needs that interpret the world; our drives and their For and Against. Every drive is a kind of lust to rule; each one has a perspective that it would like to compel all other drives to accept as norm” (267). Billy allows his “needs” to interpret not only his world, but the Universe, and Vonnegut endorses this illusion as a valid response to modernity.

Perhaps Billy’s most basic need, and the perspectival aspect of Tralfamadorian time which renders existence meaningful, for him, is selective empowerment. There have always been wars, and there always will be. The same can be said for an infinite number of daily tragedies and horrors. Billy’s perspectivism allows him to *choose* which moments he inhabits. Consider the words of his Tralfamadorian captor: “Today we [are at peace]. On other days we have wars as horrible as any you’ve ever seen or read about. There isn’t anything we can do about them, so we simply don’t look at them. We spend eternity looking at pleasant moments” (150). Robert Tally’s reading of Tralfamadorian time as the “cosmology of the eternal return” (79) is absolutely correct in a Nietzschean sense. Each moment recurs infinitely. Again though, I would argue that it is perspectivism which gives Billy the control, outside the context of free will, to determine which moments he *chooses* to visit eternally. Charles B. Harris’ “Illusion and Absurdity: The Novels of Kurt Vonnegut” has long been an influential early (1971) essay in Vonnegut studies, and rightfully so. Along with Reed and Klinkowitz, Harris was among the first-wave of serious Vonnegut scholars who explored the systemic framework of

Vonnegut's world—a world in which characters, themes, and setting reappear in various novels. Particularly, Harris views *Slaughterhouse-Five* as a culmination, noting that Vonnegut's "novels have progresses from satire to absurdity, from the early protest of *Player Piano* to the almost total resignation of *Slaughterhouse-Five*" (140). From one perspective, Billy's retreat into the world of self can be viewed as a resignation of sorts. However, more broadly, Billy affirms life instead of resigning from it, and in this sense, he achieves in illusion what other characters in the novel (and more broadly Vonnegut's novels in general) can only attempt: contentment and happiness.

Indeed, the other major characters in *Slaughterhouse-Five* attempt and ultimately fail in adopting illusions to protect themselves. Consider Roland Weary's illusion that during the Battle of the Bulge he and two other infantry scouts become "The Three Musketeers" who end up as decorated war heroes. The reality is that the scouts ignore him and abandon him the first chance they get. Weary ends up dying a few days later of gangrene which sets in after wearing ill-fitting clogs. Consider Paul Lazarro, who creates the illusion of himself as a renegade with a taste for vengeance—"People fuck with me, and Jesus Christ are they ever fucking sorry" (176). His reality? "He was tiny, and not only were his bones and teeth rotten, but his skin was disgusting" (106). Consider poor Edgar Derby, who constructs the illusion while in Dresden that his wife "needn't worry, that the war was nearly over, that he would be home soon" (183). In reality, he would be dead in a matter of days, a victim in a universe so absurd that a soldier can survive a war and endure a firebombing only to be executed by a firing squad for taking a teapot from the charred wreckage of Dresden. Above all, consider Vonnegut a character in his own novel. Jerome Klinkowitz suggests that "*Slaughterhouse-Five* is a novel about the author

challenging his own process and bringing himself into the center of his fictional activity” (*Kurt Vonnegut* 69). Vonnegut brings himself into his fiction precisely because he shares the struggles of his characters. Elizabeth Abele notes that Vonnegut, as character, “is as fallible as any of the other characters” (74), and of course this is true. Vonnegut the character is realistically and authentically rendered in the self-portrait Vonnegut the author adds on the last page of *Breakfast of Champions*—wide-eyed with a tear spilling down his cheek as he confronts the horrors of life. Like Billy Pilgrim, like *all* of his characters, Vonnegut is a creator of illusions and a crafter of fictions. It seems only fitting that Vonnegut the author and Vonnegut the character should have the final word: “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. Still—I am going to spend eternity visiting this moment and that, I’m grateful that so many of those moments are nice” (269). *Cat’s Cradle* and *Galapagos*, to which we will now turn, are similarly concerned with the nature of truth and the power of illusion, and these texts serve as companions-pieces to *Slaughterhouse-Five* in that they offer alternative methods for discovering such “nice moments” in modernity. At the same time, they unveil the horrors of how we are often creators of our own misery and destruction.

### ***Cat’s Cradle* and *Galapagos*: Apocalypse, Villainy, and the Problem With “Big Brains”**

In his introduction to *Happy Birthday, Wanda June*, Vonnegut reflects that “one of the last things [my father] said to me was that I had never written a story with a villain in it,” and he goes on to explain one of the structural shortcomings of the play is that he “did not have the balls to make Harold or anybody thoroughly vile” (ix). This realization

proves to be of lasting importance, because he returns to it years later in *Fates Worst Than Death*: “And I have just named the villains in my books, which are never individuals. The villains again: culture, society, and history” (31). *Slaughterhouse-Five* bears this out. He honors his promise to Mary O’Hara, and there isn’t “a part for Frank Sinatra or John Wayne” in the novel (19). Just as important, though, is that there are also no parts for Peter Lorre or Edward G. Robinson. Even the (literally) rotten and senselessly violent Paul Lazzaro is more victim than villain. While Vonnegut depicts the destruction of much of Western society in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, in *Cat’s Cradle* and *Galapagos*, he destroys the *entire world*, not once but twice. And yet, there are no parts for Lorre or Robinson in these novels either. The problem at the heart of both novels is humanity. Paul L. Thomas suggests that “when Vonnegut holds a mirror up to us” in *Cat’s Cradle*, “it is for us to see more clearly how we persist in failing each other” (38), but the problem ultimately runs much deeper in both *Cat’s Cradle* and *Galapagos*. We aren’t just failing each other; first and foremost, we are failing ourselves, and in doing so, we usher in the apocalypse.

Even though Vonnegut goes without mention in David J. Leigh’s *Apocalyptic Patterns in Twentieth-Century Fiction*, this useful text helps bring Vonnegut’s apocalypse—or, more accurately, his apocalypses—into conversation with those of Walker Percy, Thomas Pynchon, and Don DeLillo among others. As Leigh explains: “Among the themes of apocalyptic literature ... are an imminent end-time, a cosmic catastrophe, a movement from an old to a new age, a struggle between forces of good and evil (sometimes personified in angels and demons), a desire for the ultimate paradise (often parallel to an original paradise), the transitional help of God or a messiah, and a

final judgement and manifestation of the ultimate” (5). This definition explains Vonnegut’s exclusion from the study, and points to the central way he works outside the typical conventions of a rather bleak genre. In Vonnegut’s world, there is no God, no angels or demons, and no final judgement. Even more, terms like good and evil become problematic, not because of a lack of morality—morality in the form of decency reigns supreme for Vonnegut—but because of a lack of traditional villains...and by extension, traditional heroes. Leigh later adds “a quest for transcendence and wholeness” (38) as a characteristic of apocalyptic literature, and this *is* present in Vonnegut. What must be transcended, or, to use Nietzsche’s term, “overcome,” is the self.

The chief obstacle to transcendence in Vonnegut’s world is articulated by Francine Peferko in *Cat’s Cradle*. Francine is an important recurring character in Vonnegut’s fiction. In *Breakfast of Champion*, she occupies the dual roles of secretary and mistress to Dwayne Hoover. In *Cat’s Cradle*, she is a secretary at the General Forge and Foundry Research Laboratory, manufacturer of the atomic bomb. “You scientists think too much” she instinctively blurts out, and this is the problem. As Jonah, the novel’s narrator, observes, “She hated people who thought too much. At that moment, she struck me as an appropriate representative for almost all mankind” (33).

Throughout the novel, the pinnacle of human achievement, the grandest gesture which all that “thinking” results in, is the atomic bomb. First published in 1963 during a time when global tensions were extremely high, and the threat of nuclear destruction was a daily reality, *Cat’s Cradle* is as much an anti-nuke novel as *Slaughterhouse-Five* is an anti-war novel. Initially, Jonah sets out to write a book called *The Day the World Ended*, which would be “an account of what important Americans had done on the day when the

first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, Japan” (1). He actually ends up writing an altogether different book about the end of the world—*Cat’s Cradle*—except this time the world ends not by way of nuclear war but instead through ice-nine, a newly-invented substance which is capable of instantly freezing any liquid it comes into contact with. Ice-nine is created by Dr. Felix Hoenikker, one of the inventors of the atomic bomb in the world of the novel, after a conversation with a Marine general who was looking for a way to prevent his troops from spending so much time crawling through mud and marshes. Surely there must be a way science can remedy such a messy problem, he pleads. The result is ice-nine, and after Dr. Hoenikker’s sudden death, his three children divide the only known trace of the substance amongst themselves. This becomes their bargaining chip with life...and with fate.

In short order, the three unremarkable children of the world-famous doctor find themselves leading the good life, yet they are lives based on illusion. Their possession of ice-nine gives them access to the things they want most—lonely Newt experiences an erotic tryst with a Ukrainian dancing midget; emotionally-isolated Angela soon finds herself married to a handsome, successful businessman; socially-awkward Frank becomes major general and second in command to the dictator of The Republic of San Lorenzo. Like their father, all three children are incredibly bright. On some level they must realize that all the good fortune which comes their way has less to do with them than it does with their possession of ice-nine, a substance with infinite possibilities. And yet they cling to the illusion that *they* are responsible for their outcomes. This is a perfect microcosm of the types of deception most of us engage in daily. We’d like to believe that *we* are responsible for our own successes, that the people who love us do so for no other

reason than that they see something remarkable and unique within us, something which makes us lovable as a thing-in-itself. Of course, reality complicates this notion, and every reality is based on numerous truths. Telling ourselves that we are responsible our own fates is an illusion, but it's an important one.

Bokononism, a religion based entirely on lies, is the religion on the island of San Lorenzo because the lies people were telling themselves in their daily impoverished lives had lost their potency. Remember Eliot Rosewater's assessment in *Slaughterhouse-Five*: "I think you guys are going to have to come up with a lot of wonderful new *lies*, or people just aren't going to want to go on living" (129). This is precisely what Lionel Boyd Johnson does when he christens himself Bokonon and creates an entire religion to fill the existential void articulated by Rosewater. This religion's chief text, *The Books of Bokonon*, is added to daily, as necessity dictates. Johnson/Bokonon, a native of Tobago, washes up on the shores of San Lorenzo through a series of coincidental events. "Johnson had developed a conviction that something was trying to get him somewhere for some reason" (105), and his religion becomes his attempt to make life make sense for him. There is no greater practitioner of Bokonon, and there is no one who needs it more, than Bokonon himself.

In a practical way, Bokonon can be read as a representation of Vonnegut in *Cat's Cradle* much as Kilgore Trout serves as a proxy in *Slaughterhouse-Five* and elsewhere. Like Bokonon, Vonnegut is making it all up as he goes along, and his writing reveals a systematic attempt to make sense out of his own life. This is, of course, evidenced by his appearance within his own texts, whether as a character in the narratives (*Slaughterhouse-Five*, *Breakfast of Champions*, *Timequake*) or the crafter of the

autobiographical introductions which lead in to the narratives (*Mother Night*, *Slapstick*, *Deadeye Dick*, *Jailbird*). Bokononism is Vonnegut's second major attempt at creating a religion—in *The Sirens of Titan*, discussed in chapter one, he invents The Church of God the Utterly Indifferent, and it too attempts to make sense of modernity. Like Bokononism, it is based entirely on lies as well, but, as Vonnegut would clarify, they are “useful” lies, and that makes all the difference. In fact, Vonnegut directly makes the reader an accomplice at the outset of *Cat's Cradle*, where, through Jonah, he warns, “Anyone unable to understand how a useful religion can be founded on lies will not understand this book” (5-6). To understand *Cat's Cradle*, then, requires an understanding of the necessities of the *foma*, or harmless lies, which make up a religion whose sacred text begins with the following line: “All the true things I am about to tell you are shameless lies” (5).

Bokononism is created to provide comfort and joy, two commodities in short supply in the world of the novel. As Jonah explains the religion, “Truth was the enemy of the people, because truth was so terrible, so Bokonon made it his business to provide people with better and better lies” (172). In this sense, Bokonon is distinctly anti-Nietzschean. Remember the proclamation in *The Gay Science*: “God is dead; but given the way people are, there may still for millennia be caves in which they show his shadow. —And we—we must still defeat his shadow as well!” (109). God may be dead, but rather than defeating his shadow, Bokonon wishes to preserve it for a simple reason—people need it. Vonnegut certainly understood this. 2005's *A Man Without a Country* allows Vonnegut to offer his final word in many of his ongoing preoccupations. Here, he quotes Marx's well-known assessment that “religion is the opium of the people.” However, he

adds, “Marx said that back in 1844, when opium and opium derivatives were the only effective painkillers anyone could take. Marx had taken them himself. He was grateful for the temporary relief they had given him. He was simply noticing, and surely not condemning, the fact that religion could also be comforting to those in economic or social distress” (12). For Vonnegut, religion may be an anodyne, but it is a necessary one, and from his perspective, accepting comforting illusion is much more important than seeking absolute truth. As Bokonon writes in one of the Calypsos for his holy book:

I wanted all things  
To seem to make sense,  
So we all could be happy, yes,  
Instead of tense.  
And I made up lies  
So that they all fit nice,  
And I made this sad world  
A par-a-dise (127)

Yet tension must exist, even in paradise. This is why Bokonon, in collaboration with the Corporal Earl McCabe, decided to have Bokononism banned. “It was the belief of Bokonon that good societies could be built only by pitting good against evil, and by keeping the tension between the two high at all times” (102). This tension is fed by the illusion that Bokonon is an outlaw, and that his religion is banned. When Jonah arrives at San Lorenzo to write a story of Julian Castle, an eccentric millionaire who founded a free hospital in “the jungle” of the island, he notices a sign in the airport: “ANYBODY CAUGHT PRACTICING BOKONONISM IN SAN LORENZO WILL DIE ON THE HOOK” (134). No one was ever intended to die for practicing this religion, and its

forbidden-ness is as artificial as its most sacred tenets. It's perspective, not truth, which matters in San Lorenzo.

Leonard Mustazza's reading of *Cat's Cradle* in *Forever Pursuing Genesis* highlights the importance of invention and fabrication within the novel. Lionel Boyd Johnson invents Bokonon/Bokononism in the same way that Dr. Felix Hoenikker invents the atomic-bomb and ice-nine. According to Mustazza, "However, they seem to have little or no control over the outcomes of their inventions, nor do they take much responsibility for those inventions" (76). While this assessment is certainly true in the case of Dr. Hoenikker, Bokonon *does* take responsibility for his creation, as much as is possible anyway. Within Bokononism, there is only one holy object, one thing which is unequivocally sacred: "Man. That's all. Just man" (211). After ice-nine destroys the world through a series of comical, completely unpredictable accidents, Jonah, one of the few survivors, encounters Bokonon in the icy tundra, and he is contemplating the final sentence of *The Books of Bokonon*, which he has just drafted. Importantly, the final sentence of the holy book is also the last sentence of Jonah's book (and Vonnegut's novel): "If I were a younger man, I would write a history of human stupidity; and I would climb to the top of Mount McCabe and lie down on my back with my history for a pillow; and I would take from the ground some of the blue-white poison that makes statues of men; and I would make a statue of myself, lying on my back, grinning horribly, and thumbing my nose at You Know Who" (287). Bokonon ultimately realizes how little control he has, over his religion or his own life. He places humanity at the center of his teaching, and makes the human a sacred object. In the end, though, he realizes that this too is illusion, and humanity is ultimately responsible for its own destruction. That

doesn't stop him from thumbing his nose at God in defiance, though, and this final act of rebellion suggests the importance of his invention. For Nietzsche, the problem with religion, especially Christianity, is its promise of an elsewhere. As he writes in *Human, All Too Human*, "one could assert nothing at all of the metaphysical world except that it was a being-other, an inaccessible, incomprehensible being other" (15). Bokononism's greatest achievement is that it makes the "being-other" accessible here, now. In the end, it is ill-equipped to keep humanity from killing itself and destroying the world, but it makes life more bearable in the moment, and that is a significant accomplishment in and of itself. For Vonnegut, it's not succeeding which matters most—it's trying in the first place.

Over twenty years later, Vonnegut revisits the apocalypse again in 1985's *Galapagos*. Robert Tally considers it "Vonnegut's most hopeful novel" (xx), but I would suggest it is in many ways his coldest and bleakest. It is certainly his most anti-human, and indeed, the only way which the human is able to survive is to evolve into furry seal-like creatures with flippers. I suggest that *Galapagos* serves as a companion to *Cat's Cradle* not because both texts focus on end-of-the-world scenarios but instead because if *Cat's Cradle* is a novel about illusion and self-deception, *Galapagos* is a novel about what happens in the absence of these necessities. *Galapagos* takes place in a world wholly devoid of the comforts of Bokononism...or comforts of any kind beyond technology, commerce, and gadgetry. Donald Morse suggests that Vonnegut is at his best when he "offers alternatives for American society" and acts as "an agent for change" (3-4), and I couldn't agree more. *Galapagos* is so haunting because there are no alternatives available, and change is only possible through biological evolution. From a

Nietzschean perspective, not only is God dead in the novel, but his shadow has been “defeated” as well.

In large part, it seems the overall tone of *Galapagos* is influenced by the extremely difficult personal circumstances under which it was written. In *Fates Worse Than Death*, Vonnegut describes a failed suicide attempt: “I was carted off to the Emergency Room of St. Vincent’s Hospital in the middle of the night to be pumped out. I had tried to kill myself. It wasn’t a cry for help. It wasn’t a nervous breakdown ... No more jokes and no more coffee and no more cigarettes: I wanted out of here” (181). Vonnegut directly references his suicide attempt in a March 22, 1984, letter to Walter Miller: “As Offit may or may not have told you, I was in the short-termer nut-ward at Saint Vincent’s ... Now I’m an outpatient, allowed to carry matches again” (*Letters* 301). A month later, in a letter to Peter Reed, he writes, “The Darwinian novel, *Galapagos*, has been a perfect son-of-a-bitch to write” (*Letters* 303). The correspondence before and after his letter to Walter Miller show Vonnegut struggling with finishing *Galapagos*. I mention this here because one of the central arguments I wish to advance with this dissertation is one of Vonnegut’s central preoccupations was himself, and this is the place from which his philosophy stems. At the heart of his work is a desire to make life make sense, not just for his characters and his readers, but for himself. While it would be conjecture to try to connect Mary Hepburn’s suicide attempt in the novel to Vonnegut’s own in 1984, we *can* establish that he was dealing with the same existential impulse to end his life as his character.

For Mary Hepburn, the decision to commit suicide does not come easily. Vonnegut painstakingly explores her suicide attempt in great detail. As he writes, “The

widow Mary Hepburn, who had been taking all her meals in her room, was curing her own brain sotto voce for the advice it was giving her, which was to commit suicide. ‘You are my enemy,’ she whispered. ‘Why would I want to carry such a terrible enemy inside of me?’” (25-6). A sentiment which best describes the mood of the novel is uttered not by Mary but her husband, Roy, who, on his deathbed, says to a dying dog: “So long, old pal. You’re going to a different world now. It’s sure to be a better one, since no other world could be as bad as this one is” (42).

What’s so chilling is that suicide makes so much sense in the world of *Galapagos*. The novel is narrated by a decapitated ghost—Leon Trout, Kilgore Trout’s son—from the vantage point of exactly one million years in the future, looking back on 1986 A.D. as the beginning of the end of the world and humanity as we know it. A handful of characters are set to embark on The Nature Cruise of the Century aboard a ship aptly named *Bahia de Darwin*. Before the ship can set sail from Guayaquil, a disastrous financial calamity signals the collapse of the global economy, and pandemonium is followed by an apocalypse. Leon, the headless ghost narrator, is much more concerned with *Bahia de Darwin*’s passengers, and his focus, like Vonnegut’s, remains squarely on the human. This in itself is significant, for *Galapagos* is not a story about how the world ended but about how people survived...and evolved. *Bahia de Darwin* becomes “A Second Noah’s Ark,” which Leon muses would be a fitting title for his story.

Just as in *Cat’s Cradle*, humanity is directly responsible for its own destruction. *Galapagos* reads at times like an accusatory indictment against humanity though. Leon, in his phantasmagoric omnipotence, realizes this: “But the planet a million years ago was as moist and nourishing as it is today—and unique, in that respect in the entire Milky

Way. All that had changed was people's opinion of the place" (25). In other words, people's perspective had changed, and this is due to the antagonist of the novel—"big brains."

Many Vonnegut novels have a chorus of sorts, an ironic phrase or idea or even a joke which is repeated throughout the text to establish a central point. *Slaughterhouse-Five* provides the most representative example with "So it goes," but "Hi ho" serves a similar purpose in *Slapstick*. In the *A Man Without a Country*, he dispenses with subtlety entirely and even goes so far as to announce, "And I realize some of you may have trouble deciding whether I am kidding or not. So from now on, I will tell you when I'm kidding" (23), and "I'm kidding" then becomes the chorus. In *Galapagos*, humankind's "big brain" acts as the novel's mantra, but it lacks the sense of closure provided by "So it goes" or the absurdity of "Hi ho." Instead, it offers a near-constant reminder that humanity is responsible for its own undoing.

Francine Pefko's admonition in *Cat's Cradle*--"You scientists think too much"--is fully realized in *Galapagos*. More precisely, it's not so much that people think too much but rather that they think in the wrong way. "So I raise the question, although there is nobody around to answer it: Can it be doubted that three-kilogram big brains were once nearly fatal defects in the evolution of the human race?" the ghost of Leon Trout asks, before providing the answer--"This was a very innocent planet, except for those great big brains" (9). Evolution takes care of this problem in time. "This sort of confusion would be impossible in the present day, since nobody has a name anymore--or a profession, or a life story to tell. All that anybody has in the way of reputation anymore is an odor which, from birth to death, cannot be modified. People are who they are, and

that is that” (104). Darwinistically-speaking, evolution operates on a basic principle—in order to survive, a species will adapt to its environment by shedding the traits which are most harmful and developing the traits which are most needed. In the seal-like future, “pretending” is no longer required. The problem first posed in *Mother Night* thus becomes moot—“We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful what we pretend to be.”

Yet pretending and adopting a perspectival illusion are not the same. Many of the characters in *Galapagos* pretend to be something other than what they are—Willard Flemming is actually James Wait, a “notoriously successful swindler” (8) working on a hustle incognito; Andrew MacIntosh is a morally-shady financier to offer but two examples. Pretending, though, is a way of advancing their own selfish agendas, and serve as microcosms of the corrupt selfish schemes which trigger the financial crises that bring about the end of the world. As Leon puts it: “Even at this late date, I am still full of rage at a natural order which would have permitted the evolution of something as distracting and irrelevant and disruptive as those great big brains of a million years ago. If they had told the truth, then I could see some point in everybody’s having one. But these things lied all the time” (189).

The limitations of the brain is a recurring theme in Vonnegut. In his *Playboy* interview from a decade earlier, he tells David Standish: “And everything is a lie, because our brains are two-bit computers, and we can’t get very high-grade truths out of them. But as far as improving the human condition goes, our minds are certainly up to that. That’s what they were designed to do. And we have the freedom to make up comforting lies. But we don’t do enough of it” (*Conversations* 77). *Galapagos* is the full realization

of this idea, for Vonnegut presents a world in which there are *no* comforting lies, and as such, nothing standing between the human and the wretchedness brought about by its own big brain.

In “Humane Harmony: Environmentalism and Culture in Vonnegut’s Writings,” Said Mentak suggests that “in *Galapagos*, it is the human race and its damage to the environment that anger [Vonnegut] most” (282). This is undeniably true, yet at the same time, environmental degradation is just one of the many charges that Vonnegut brings against humanity. Overall, the text at times reads like an indictment against the human condition. A bright future is possible (consider the ways in which Mandarax could be used to bridge global communication gaps, for instance), but humanity’s big brain finds a way to make the world uninhabitable and inhospitable. For instance, the global market collapse is a case in point: “The financial crisis, which could never happen today, was simply the latest in a series of murderous twentieth-century catastrophes which had originated entirely in human brains” (25). Throughout the novel, Vonnegut then offers a litany of evils caused by big brains. War, of course, is a human creation, and Leon Trout explains that “during my entire lifetime, there wasn’t a day when somewhere on the planet, there weren’t at least three wars going on” (156-7). Slavery too is an entirely human injustice. “Now, there is a big brain idea I haven’t heard much about lately: slavery. How could you ever hold somebody in bondage with nothing but your flippers and your mouth” (192). If there is a bright spot in *Galapagos*, it is evolution that saves humanity from itself by making famine, war, and slavery biologically impossible. What’s troubling, though, is that humanity must transcend the human and become something else entirely in order to become cured of these evils.

Leon Trout, as narrator, ultimately does something which Vonnegut, as we have seen, was unable to do—identify a villain in his tale. “Again, I trot on stage the only real villain in my story—the oversize human brain” (296). *Galapagos* is Vonnegut at his most relentless, and the novel offers his most urgent warning. To find the true value of Tralfamadorian escape or Bokkonistic illusion, we need look no further than the hopeless future depicted *Galapagos*.

In conclusion, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, *Cat’s Cradle*, and *Galapagos* serve as examples of Vonnegut’s ongoing engagement with the world, and his work represents an attempt to instill meaning into a life lived in the shadow of sorrow and suffering. Such engagement showcases his insistence that the good life is possible, and that life can be good. That said, his focus in these novels is largely on affirmation at the individual level, and this presents a particular limitation. Todd Davis’s excellent study *Kurt Vonnegut’s Crusade* focuses on the social dimensions of Vonnegut’s work. “Vonnegut’s main theme,” Davis argues, “remains his call to common decency and his hope that we will learn to respect one another before we destroy ourselves and the planet” (11). Such communal “hope” is largely missing in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, *Cat’s Cradle*, and *Galapagos* because they focus so much on individual perspective, which is isolating even at best. Billy Pilgrim is perfectly happy on Tralfamadore, but his captivity is a lonely one, and his happiness is based in illusion. For all the comforts that Bokkonism can offer, the religion’s *foma* aren’t enough to save the world from ice-nine. Ultimately, the “big brains” which lead to the destruction of humanity are overcome, but at what cost? Perspectivism is powerful, but it is almost always provincial. Alexander Nehamas

articulates the problem of Nietzschean perspectivism: “If every view is only an interpretation, and if, as perspectivism holds, there are no independent facts against which various interpretations can be compared [...] then it may be impossible to decide if any interpretation is or is not correct” (2). The same charge can’t, however, be leveled at illusion-based perspectivism in Vonnegut’s work. It matters very little whether Tralfamadore is real or if Bokonon is full of shit—these lies, these illusions, these *perspectives*—make life bearable. They don’t, however, make the world a better place beyond the self, and they prove insufficient at preventing loneliness, war, or the apocalypse. Illusion is a necessity, but in and of itself, it isn’t a definitive answer. In order to transcend the individual, illusion must be shared, and only then can it become transformative on a communal level. The next two chapters will explore this process by looking at how artistic creation (chapter three) and community by way of artificial extended families (chapter four) are essential components of illusion (or perspective) sharing which lead to the good life in Vonnegut’s work.

### CHAPTER III:

#### BETTER LIVING THROUGH ART: VONNEGUT AND THE TRANSFORMATIVE NATURE OF AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

In 1997's *Timequake*, his last published novel, Vonnegut begins and ends his opening chapter with two assertions, both of which articulate two organizing themes which run throughout his fiction— “Being alive is a crock of shit” (3) and “a plausible mission of artists is to make people appreciate being alive at least a little bit” (1). Just as in his preface to 1968's *Welcome to the Monkey House* he shares the realization that “the two main themes of my novels were stated by my siblings: ‘Here I am cleaning the shit off of practically everything’ and ‘No pain’” (xiv), I'd argue that the above two observations which bookend *Timequake*'s first chapter also represent his lifelong commitment to showing how art and aesthetic experience occupy a position of profound significance in his worldview.

Throughout his work, Vonnegut describes existence as in dualistic terms, life being a state in which the self is frequently divided. The true self, which he often refers to as the soul, remains at odds with the flesh, or as he repeatedly calls it, the *meat*. He describes himself as follows: “I am six feet two and weigh nearly two hundred pounds and am badly coordinated, except when I swim. All that borrowed meat does the writing” (*Monkey House* xiii). Almost twenty years later, in *Bluebeard*, Rabo Karabekian describes his own corporeal predicament: “My soul knows my meat is doing bad things, and is embarrassed. But my meat just keeps right on doing bad things” (273)

Such division of self is a (and, I would argue, *the*) defining aspect of Arthur Schopenhauer's philosophy. For Schopenhauer, existence is ruled by the will, and to be human is to be driven by forces and appetites which are not only beyond one's control but often beyond one's comprehension as well. Gunter Zoller uses the term "phenomenological dualism" to define this dichotomy, which he suggests "is supplemented by a monistic doctrine regarding the deep structure of the self that underlies the latter's division into will and body" (28). If all of Vonnegut's protagonists, from Paul Proteus to Billy Pilgrim to Kilgore Trout, share a single personality trait, it is that their journeys are characterized by their attempts to navigate and negotiate the phenomenological dualism of the meat and the soul.

In "Vonnegut's Melancholy," critic Kathryn Hume charts a convincing list of the "presuppositions" which serve as uniting themes in Vonnegut's fiction. Her analysis includes randomness, helplessness, absurdity, and loneliness. To this list I would add self-alienation. In Vonnegut's world, his characters' struggle with life and the cosmos is second only to their struggles with themselves. Hume is correct in noting that Vonnegut's universe is one in which "people cannot control their circumstances" (229), but fundamentally, being ill-equipped to understand, let alone control, themselves is at the root of his characters' struggles. Hume goes on to suggest that "Virtually none of Vonnegut's characters enjoy life" (235), and this is certainly true. However, transcendence is always a possibility in Vonnegut's world, and as for Schopenhauer, aesthetic experience is unique in its ability to "make people appreciate being alive at least a little bit" (*Timequake* 1).

In this chapter I will be offering a reading of *Deadeye Dick* and *Bluebeard*, Vonnegut's novels which deal most explicitly with art through the lens of Schopenhauerean aesthetic theory. While all of Vonnegut's novels explore the nature of art, either directly or indirectly, *Deadeye Dick* and *Bluebeard* are particularly unique in that they offer a singularly cohesive aesthetic perspective. In that sense, when *Deadeye Dick* and *Bluebeard* are brought into conversation with one another, the privileged role that Vonnegut assigns artistic creation and aesthetic experience becomes clear. To date, the definitive study of Vonnegut's aesthetic outlook is David Andrews' "Vonnegut and Aesthetic Humanism." Andrews argues that "Vonnegut's belief that aesthetic experience should be a communal activity designed to increase human kindness" (41) ultimately provides an answer to the question: "what are the arts for?" (18, 41). By offering an analysis of Vonnegut's fiction in the context of Schopenhauer's philosophical system, I propose an alternate reading. At the outset, I offer two caveats: 1). My position is not that Vonnegut modeled his aesthetic perspective on Schopenhauer's philosophy but rather that his unique aesthetic sensibilities are in the Schopenhauerean tradition. 2). Vonnegut's theory of aesthetics, like Schopenhauer's, is ultimately limited. In both views, art allows for temporary rather than sustained transcendence, and as such it is unable to offer lasting escape from the horrors of existence. In her introduction to *The Pessimist's Handbook*, Hazel Barnes' observation that "our condition is incurable. What is required is a total salvation which may enable us to cease being ourselves" (viii) could just as easily be applied to Vonnegut's worldview as to Schopenhauer's. While both Schopenhauer and Vonnegut could be accused, fairly, of offering a bleak view of the human experience, they are staunch advocates of the transformative power of art, and

while it may ultimately be incapable of delivering the type of salvation Barnes describes, it *can* give meaning, if not overall purpose, to life. In short, for Vonnegut, the good life might not be possible through art alone, but any life lived well is one in which the arts play a central role.

### **Schopenhauer's Aesthetics**

In order to fully appreciate the complexity of Schopenhauer's aesthetic theory, it is first necessary to understand his concept of the will. He offers both theories in his seminal two-volume masterwork *The World as Will and Representation*, and while a some of his (in)famous ideas come from the later *Parerga and Paralipomena*, the full scope of Schopenhauer's views on aesthetics can be found in *The World as Will and Representation*. "But the word *will*," he writes, "is to reveal to us the innermost essence of everything in nature" and "every force in nature [can] be conceived as will" (*World as Will* I 111). For Schopenhauer, will is the driving force which stands at the center of his system, and the natural world is governed by this impulse, which he calls the "thing-in-itself" (*World as Will* I 110). In this sense, everything from sunsets to volcanic eruptions, from fruit falling in orchards to black holes, can be understood as manifestations of the will.

Similarly, Schopenhauer places will at the center of his view of human experience as well. After all, "the world in which we live and have our being is, by its whole nature, through and through will" (*World as Will* I 162). The problem with being governed by the will is that it is both unavoidable and unknowable, and even at best, it renders life, and the self, unknowable, at least to a point. That's not to say that humanity doesn't have free will. Yet the will supersedes consciousness, and since it is largely unknowable, so

too is existence. Schopenhauer most clearly articulates this existential dilemma as follows: “Every person invariably has purposes and motives by which he guides his conduct; and he is always able to give an account of his particular actions. But if he were asked why he wills generally, or why in general he wills to exist, he would have no answer; indeed, the question would seem to him absurd” (*World as Will* I 163). Will, then, is the force that animates the world and pushes it forward, but it is so fundamentally innate that it is difficult to articulate and rationalize. In *Schopenhauer and the Wild Years of Philosophy*, Rudiger Safranski suggests that in the strictest sense, “will was a primary, vital striving and movement which, in the borderline case, might become aware of itself and which only then acquired the awareness of an aim, an intention, a purpose” (205). Even in these unique instances, however, such aim doesn’t encompass the thrust of the will in its totality. At a basic level, then, for Schopenhauer, to be human is to be governed by a set of forces which are in most cases beyond the grasp of total comprehension.

The problem is that the will is never satisfied, and it can never be satiated. There is no end of willing, and this is the source of existential tension which complicates existence. Volume II of *The World as Will and Representation*, which supplements the main argument built in the first volume, paints a much bleaker view of the will. Here, he argues that “Since, on the contrary, the will wills life absolutely and for all time, it exhibits itself at the same time as sexual impulse which has an endless series of generations in view” (II 568). The sexual metaphor is certainly fitting. Lust, expressed in the sexual act, isn’t fulfilled through experience. Rather, desire is momentarily quenched, but after a brief metaphorical and literal refractory period, it returns, seeking

more of the same. Hunger offers another way of understanding the will. A great meal is momentarily satisfying, but soon the individual is hungry again, regardless of the quality or quantity of the meal. Existence for Schopenhauer is a virtually uninterrupted metaphorical journey of horniness and hungriness, forever and ever.

Another extended example Schopenhauer offers for the will at work is his theory of the will-to-life. This applies not only to humanity but more broadly to every aspect of the universe. “Every glance at the world, to explain which is the task of the philosopher, confirms and establishes that the will-to-live, far from being an arbitrary hypostasis or even an empty expression, is the only true description of the world’s innermost nature” (*World as Will II* 350). This will-to-life becomes cruel and more than a little ironic in light of the fact that “the cares and troubles of life are out of all proportion to the yield or profit from it” (*World as Will II* 354). Vonnegut most directly offers his take on the will-to-life conundrum in *Breakfast of Champions*, where he describes Kilgore Trout’s existential dilemma as follows: “I<sup>1</sup> had given him a life not worth living, but I had also given him an iron will to live” (72). In the clutches of such a paradox, existence becomes cruelly ironic. Indeed, from this perspective life becomes a prolonged exercise in frustration, yet one which we are compelled to endure. For both Schopenhauer and Vonnegut, the game may be rigged, but to be human is to be driven by the desire to stay at the table for as long as possible. The dice may be loaded and the deck stacked, but after all, “it’s the only game in town” (*Timequake* 188).

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<sup>1</sup> The commonly used Delta and Dial paperbacks both carry a significant typo here and mistakenly feature “It” in place of “I” here, which fundamentally changes the meaning of this line. The Delacorte hardback offers the correct version.

Trout's will-to-live amidst the wreckage of a life frequently not worth living is a predicament Vonnegut was intimately familiar with himself. In *Keeping Literary Company*, Jerome Klinkowitz offers a haunting account of Vonnegut's presence at an Iowa City party during the 1960s in which Vonnegut "began to mutter, 'I want...I want...'" before breaking off incoherently. Later, Gordy Menninga, Klinkowitz's friend, added: "'He said he wanted to be dead'" (34-5). Vonnegut's daughter, Nanette, offers an intimate glimpse of a fear she carried through life in her revealing introduction to *We Are What We Pretend to Be: First and Last Works*, writing that she "worried that he would not answer the door and I might find him dead. Growing up, suicide was always considered a possible and even logical outcome of my father's life. But my father always answered the door, and I usually found him in the act of writing" (xi). To paint too bleak a picture of Vonnegut's disposition would be both unfair and inaccurate. The tributes and personal reflections which fill *Happy Birthday, Kurt Vonnegut*, a festschrift commissioned by Jill Krementz, or Jim O'Loughlin's richly illuminating recent *Kurt Vonnegut Remembered* reveal that he was warm, compassionate, charitable, and above all, funny and charming. It is worth noting, however, that like many of his characters, Vonnegut frequently found himself struggling through the "striving, suffering, and erring" (*World as Will II* 573) which dominate Schopenhauer's will-centric universe.

In the face of this struggle, Vonnegut remained aware of his audience, and the sense of obligation towards his readers is ever-present. He recounts a defining moment in his career as a public speaker during which "a circuit breaker in my head snapped out" (*Wampeters* xiii). After delivering an address before the Library of Congress, a member of the audience asked, "You are a leader of American young people. What right do you

have to teach them to be so cynical and pessimistic?" (*Wampeters* xiv), and this had a profound impact on Vonnegut. He realized that he was expounding on problems for which he was ill-equipped to offer solutions, and this troubled him. In this sense, he differs from Schopenhauer considerably. I would argue that the central weakness to be found in Schopenhauer's philosophy is its lack of a solution to the horrors of existence. After meticulously building his argument that to be human is to be ruled by will, he explains that "our state or condition is rather something that it were better should not be" (*World as Will* II 577). Yet he offers nothing practical to fill this void. Camus' resistance and Nietzsche's affirmation are wholly absent in Schopenhauer's work. Suicide for Schopenhauer is not only understandable, but "it is obvious there is nothing in the world a man has more incontestable right to than [choosing to end] his own life" (*Essays and Aphorisms* 77). In this framework, suffering can only be momentarily suspended, and this is the ultimate value of art for Schopenhauer.

Schopenhauer's theory of aesthetic experience makes allowances for natural beauty, but primary it focuses on artistic contemplation, which results in a state of "bliss and peace of mind...free from all willing" (*World as Will* I 212). The transcendental qualities of this experience, peppered with 19<sup>th</sup> century terms like "sublime," are obviously of their time, but "bliss" aside, what's of importance here is the notion that art allows the individual to momentarily transcend the self. If human suffering comes from the will, the value of aesthetic contemplation is that it allows for "pure, will-less" experience (*World as Will* I 212). As Cheryl Foster describes it, for Schopenhauer, "aesthetic contemplation as a means of achieving objective, intuitive cognition serves as a source for meaning in life" (214). Art is privileged in Schopenhauer's estimation

because it is the site at which this meaning is constructed. “The pleasure of everything beautiful, the consolation afforded by art,” he explains, allows the individual to momentarily “forget the cares of this life,” which is otherwise “constant suffering, and is partly woeful, partly fearful” (*World as Will I* 267). The central limitation is that once the artistic encounter is over, the insatiable will once again reigns supreme and unchecked. The cycle never ends.

In “Schopenhauer’s Pessimism,” Christopher Janaway carefully constructs the thoughtful argument that the bleakness at the heart of Schopenhauer’s work is incredibly nuanced, and that ultimately, “a pessimistic description of life is compatible with an affirmation of it” (335). One of Janaway’s most important contribution to Schopenhauer studies, in this essay, in his entry in Oxford’s *Past Masters* series, and as general editor of multi-volume Cambridge Edition of Schopenhauer’s work, is in charting this complex relationship between the self and the world. As he notes in his *Past Masters* monograph: “Schopenhauer’s philosophical pessimism resides in two connected theses: that for each individual it would have been better not to have been born, and that the world as a whole is the worst of all possible worlds,” (96). However, he goes on to suggest, “Schopenhauer’s arguments for these extreme pessimist doctrines therefore fail to convince” (97) which he supports by asserting that the presence of suffering doesn’t render life without value and reward. This is undeniably true, of course, but it also draws attention to the unavoidable despair found at the core of Schopenhauer’s work.

Kathryn Hume’s “Vonnegut’s Melancholy” serves as a fascinating companion piece to Janaway’s “Schopenhauer’s Pessimism,” and she too nuances the sense of despair which is found in much of Vonnegut’s work. Vonnegut “is pessimistic about

government and social organization,” she convincingly illustrates. However, her assertion that “the reasons for the melancholy become clearer when you ask how Vonnegut feels about people. Basically, he seems unable to believe in them or work up any strong emotions over them” (235) doesn’t fully take into account the genuine sense of humanistic purpose which is central to all of Vonnegut’s fiction. To be human in Vonnegut’s world is to be vulnerable and frequently alone in an absurd universe devoid of any meaning, but one of the aims of this dissertation is to show how he continually attempts, to “bring chaos to order” (*Breakfast* 215) for his characters, for himself, and for his readers. Two-thirds of the way through *Breakfast of Champions*, he interrupts the narrative to declare, “there is no order in the world around us, [so] we must adapt ourselves to the requirements of chaos instead. It is hard to adapt to chaos, but it can be done. I am living proof of that: It can be done” (215). For Vonnegut, adapting the chaos involves reconciling daily life with the central obstacle to contentment which he finds at the core of human experience—not will, but embarrassment.

### **Will, Embarrassment, and Aesthetic Experience**

So how does Schopenhauer’s will factor into Vonnegut’s philosophical system? For the answer, we must turn to Vonnegut’s nonfiction, which offers some of his most personal writing. His essays, articles, and commencement addresses allow him to speak candidly on any number of issues, and as such, the significance of Vonnegut’s substantial body of nonfiction cannot be overstated. *Palm Sunday* and *Fates Worse Than Death* help bring the novels into conversation with each other, and the autobiographical connective tissue of these works help situate the themes explored within the novels in the context of his own life. While these texts serve as anthologies of articles, speeches, commencement

addresses, such previously published/delivered material is connected by intensively personal, often revealing asides and observations. Vonnegut refers to *Palm Sunday* as a “new literary form” for which “a new name should be created.” He proposes blivit, “a word which during my adolescence we defined by peers as ‘two pounds of shit in a one-pound bag’” (xi-ii). In *Vonnegut in Fact, The Public Spokesmanship of Personal Fiction*, Jerome Klinkowitz offers the first comprehensive study of Vonnegut’s non-fiction. “Vonnegut’s own method,” he explains, “implicit in his fiction and explicit in his public spokespersonship, is to organize ideas and images so that a space can be opened for a freedom of fresher thought” (9). Such organization, of course, is a life’s work, particularly when it involves not only adapting to chaos but also “bring[ing] chaos to order” (*Breakfast of Champions* 215).

The chaos which resides at the core of Schopenhauer’s philosophy is that unfulfillment precedes essence. The all-consuming will renders life a perpetual state of frustration in which “every enjoyment is always only half an enjoyment, every gratification introduces its own disturbance, every relief new worries and troubles” (*World as Will II* 577). In Vonnegut’s framework, this cellular sense of frustration is driven rather by deep-rooted embarrassment. He devotes an entire chapter to the subject in 1981’s *Palm Sunday*, where he writes:

A friend of mine once spoke to me about what he called the “existential hum,” the uneasiness which keeps us moving, which never allows us to feel entirely at ease. He had tried heroin once. He said he understood at once the seduction of that narcotic. For the first time in his life, he was not annoyed by the existential hum. I would describe the hum which is with me all the time as *embarrassment*. I have somehow disgraced myself (169).

The language Vonnegut uses here is deliberately philosophical. The existential hum in question is ongoing and largely inescapable—it is a feeling which “is with me all the

time.” In the rest of the chapter, he candidly discusses how embarrassment has overshadowed significant moments and events in his life. For example, his uncle Alex, to whom Vonnegut dedicated *The Sirens of Titan*, refused to read the novel. His aunt Ella, who owned a bookstore here in Louisville, refused to carry his books because “she found them degenerate” (169). The dissolution of his first marriage was so painful to him, in part, because he was only the second Vonnegut to be divorced since his family arrived in America. “So I am embarrassed about the failure of my first marriage. I am embarrassed by my older relatives’ responses to my books. But I was embarrassed before I was married or had written a book” (172). At the same time, he explains that his embarrassment stems from a much deeper and more personal source. “A bad dream I have dreamed for as long as I can remember may hold the clue. In that dream, I know that I have murdered an old woman a long time ago. I have led an exemplary life ever since” (172-3). Charles Berryman, who has written extensively on the connection between Vonnegut’s life and work, suggests that this particular dream shapes and informs “all five of his novels from *Slaughterhouse-Five* to *Deadeye Dick*” (96). Vonnegut offers no psychoanalytic interpretation as to what this dream may signify, and he never explicitly mentions it again. However, he saw this dream as a key to understanding the life-long feeling of embarrassment, and he would go on to explore the themes of murder, guilt, and embarrassment in *Deadeye Dick*, a novel which is certainly in part an attempt to work through this recurring nightmare.

Vonnegut also reflects on the existential hum of embarrassment in a 1980 address delivered at the First Parish Unitarian Church in Cambridge Massachusetts. Interestingly, he uses the language of dreams here as well. “This is only a dream,” he

explains. “I know that this is only a dream. I have had it before. It is a dream of cosmic embarrassment. I stand before a large and nicely dressed audience. I have promised to speak on the most profound and poetic of all human concerns—the dignity of human nature. Only a maniac would make such a grandiose promise, but that is what I have done—in this dream” (*Palm Sunday* 192). In many ways, this short speech serves as a microcosm of Vonnegut’s entire career of bringing “chaos to order.” Dignity, after all, is the antithesis of embarrassment, and this is the tension which runs throughout Vonnegut’s work. If life is “a crock of shit,” how can it have meaning? More to the point, how can the individual experience dignity in the face of cosmic embarrassment?

Vonnegut’s correspondence offers another clue to understanding this paradox. It also adds an eerie metaphysical component to both his work and his philosophical outlook. In a 1972 letter to his first wife Jane, he randomly adds, “I still believe that a dog is going to kill me, and it scares me—and it pisses me off” (192). This is the only published mention of this particular fear. However, fast forward to March 14, 2007, the day of the accidental fall which would lead to his death: “Outside the brownstone, as he and Flour [his dog] reached the bottom steps, the little dog spun around to see if he was coming. He tripped over her leash, pitched forward full-length, and struck the right side of his face on the sidewalk, losing consciousness instantly” (Shields 415). Vonnegut never again regained consciousness and died on April 11, 2007. For over 35 years (at least), he harbored the fear that he would be killed by a dog, only to have this fate tragically (if indirectly) realized. This fear partially explains the cosmic embarrassment which was part of Vonnegut’s worldview. Edgar Derby surviving the firebombing of Dresden only to be executed for stealing a teapot from the wreckage in *Slaughterhouse-*

*Five* is not only tragic—it is a fate lacking in dignity, and as such, it is an embarrassment. The same could be said of Vonnegut ultimately. Surviving Dresden’s firebombing, innumerable personal tragedies, and a failed suicide attempt to ultimately be killed by a dog isn’t just ironic—it’s cosmically cruel. As Vonnegut reminds us in his 1991 autobiographical collage, there are indeed *Fates Worse Than Death*.

Repeatedly, Vonnegut returns to the idea of embarrassment in his novels, and it is one of the defining traits present in virtually all of his protagonists. Consider Billy Pilgrim’s absurd uniform in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Eliot Rosewater’s inability to accept his reality in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, Malachi Constant’s intergalactic wanderings in *The Sirens of Titan*, or Howard W. Campbell Jr.’s war crimes in *Mother Night*. The trait they all share is chronic embarrassment, not because of what they’ve done so much as *who they are*. In *Hocus Pocus*, Eugene Debs Hartke arrives at the following realization, and it could be spoken just as easily by any of these characters: “How embarrassing to be human” (309). In large part, Vonnegut becomes a character in his own fiction again and again not just as a postmodern conceit or simply because he was jumping on the metafictional bandwagon which became normalized in the 1970s but rather because the line separating fiction and non-fiction becomes increasingly blurred throughout his career. The novels *become* more personal. This culminates with his final novel, *Timequake*, where *he* is the protagonist as much as his alter ego, Kilgore Trout. When he writes in the opening chapter, “It appears to me that most highly evolved Earthling creatures find being alive embarrassing or much worse” (1) he is writing about himself as much as any of the other fictional/real “characters” which populate the novel.

Ultimately, cosmic embarrassment for Vonnegut occupies the role that will does for Schopenhauer. It is a source of near-constant existential discomfort and the chief obstacle to contentment. Unfortunately, for both Vonnegut and Schopenhauer, the condition is terminal. For the will, “its desires are unlimited, its claims inexhaustible, and every satisfied desire gives birth to a new one. No possible satisfaction in the world could suffice to still its craving, set a final goal to its demands, and fill the bottomless pit of its heart” (*World as Will II* 573). Two interviews conducted in the last two years of his life offer glimpses of Vonnegut at his most Schopenhauerean. “Absurd is too weak a word,” he told David Nason of *The Australian* in 2005. “I find life preposterous.” Around the same time, in an aborted interview with Tasha Robinson which she describes as “my greatest professional appointment to date,” Vonnegut spoke for ten minutes about “how mankind is doomed. We have to hope. There is no future. We’ve ruined our environment and ruined ourselves” before cancelling the interview altogether, calling it “too lugubrious” to continue. Both Nason and Robinson conclude, unfairly so, that Vonnegut had given in to despair at the end of his life. This same misguided notion serves as perhaps the single greatest limitation of Charles Shields’ biography. Other interviews and appearances from the same era as the Nason/Robinson interviews show Vonnegut to be both enthusiastic and hopeful—see his *Daily Show* appearance or J. Rentilly’s and Heather Augustyn’s interviews collected in *The Last Interview and Other Conversations*. That said, gloom and pessimism can be found throughout Vonnegut’s work. Again, my goal here is not to suggest that the antecedents of Vonnegut’s “existential hum” can be traced back to Schopenhauer. Rather, I wish to explore how contentment and happiness are not inalienable rights for either Schopenhauer or

Vonnegut. In a world of suffering and chaos, they must be constantly negotiated. Just as aesthetic experience allows the individual to transcend the will for Schopenhauer, it plays an equally-important role in Vonnegut's philosophical framework in that it allows the individual to transcend the embarrassment of being alive. The failed novelist Paul Slazinger's assertion in *Bluebeard* that "the human condition can be summed up in just one word, and this is the word: *Embarrassment*" (14) is best understood in the context that he, like Rabo Karabekian, no longer engages with art, and in Vonnegut's world, this removes the possibility of transcendence.

### **Transcending the "Shit" of Life**

More than serving as an alter ego of sorts for Vonnegut himself, Kilgore Trout in many ways serves as the definitive character in Vonnegut's fiction, an everyman of sorts tasked with navigating the absurdities of modernity. While fame, fortune, comfort, and success elude him for most of his life, he succeeds where Eliot Rosewater, Billy Pilgrim, Dwayne Hoover, and, with the exception of Rabo Karabekian, the rest of Vonnegut's protagonists fail—he adapts to the "requirements of chaos" (*Breakfast of Champions* 215). When he writes in *Timequake* that Trout "could tune out the crock of shit being alive as long as he was scribbling, head down, with a ballpoint pen on a yellow legal pad" (8), Vonnegut is offering the culmination of a line of thought he's explored since the beginning of his career. Work, religion, illusion, and being "busy, busy, busy" serve as mere distractions, whereas aesthetic creation leads to something much more profoundly transcendental. "I think that life is no way to treat an animal, and not just people, but pigs and chickens, too. Life just hurts too much," he said during a lecture a 2004 address at Eastern Washington University, before adding, "But when you stop to think about it,

only a nutcase would want to be a human being, if he or she had a choice. Such treacherous, untrustworthy, lying, and greedy animals we are” (*If This Isn't Nice* 48-9). This is Vonnegut at his most Schopenhauerean, but it also encapsulates his systematic view of the universe and the human condition. The fault is in both the stars *and* ourselves. It is into this paradox that Vonnegut introduces an aesthetic theory not in which art comes galivanting to the rescue and saves the day, but rather, where art allows the individual to momentarily bring chaos to order by making “at least one little part of [the universe] exactly as it should be” (*If This Isn't Nice* 86).

The extreme importance of art in Vonnegut's work and in his personal life cannot be overstated. For example, in a personal aside in *Timequake*, he describes his “knack for finding in great books, some of them very funny books, reason enough to feel honored to be alive, no matter what else may be going on” (182). As for Schopenhauer, artistic experience offers both escape and transcendence for Vonnegut. In his introduction to *Bagambo Snuff Box*, he compares short fiction to “Buddhist catnaps” in explaining the commonalities between stories and Buddhist meditation, both of which allow the individual to momentarily forget the problems of the world (6).

Much more so than Schopenhauer, however, Vonnegut establishes a pronounced distinction between aesthetic experience and aesthetic creation. He repeatedly refers to creation as an act of “becoming” (*Like Shaking Hands* 33). For instance, in a 1972 letter to Jose and Maria Donoso, Vonnegut writes about his depression, explaining, “My understanding is that I am so odd emotionally and socially that I had better live alone for the rest of my days.” However, he adds, “I still have life in me as an artist” (*Letters* 191). This candidly-unflattering admission is far from uncharacteristic. In many ways, it serves

as a microcosm of a position Vonnegut (and many of his protagonists) give voice to repeatedly—namely, art’s ability to offer respite in the midst of isolation and personal catastrophe. David Andrews convincingly argues that “Insofar as art forges a bond between creator and perceiver...art’s communicative function is most important to Vonnegut” (19). Indeed, for Vonnegut, artistic creation serves not only as a way to live with isolation but also a way to overcome it. It is in *Fates Worse Than Death* where he muses most directly on the interplay between readers and writers: “Literature, unlike any other art form, requires those who enjoy it to be performers. Reading is a performance, and anything a writer can do to make this difficult activity easier is a benefit to all concerned. Why write a symphony, so to speak, which can’t be played by the New York Philharmonic?” (55). For Vonnegut, writing is an act of engagement, a method for entering into a collaborative performance with the reader. In this way, artistic creation serves as the ultimate form of aesthetic experience, allowing the artist to meaningfully connect with others. As we will see in the next chapter, creation in and of itself is insufficient in Vonnegut’s framework for overcoming isolation—a more traditionally direct form of community is needed for this—but art is always an act of engagement for Vonnegut.

Yet engagement itself is not the ultimate aim of art for Vonnegut. For that matter, neither is sharing a particular message (the didactic model) or even making a living (the commercial model). That’s not to say Vonnegut didn’t see the need for both. Dave Eggers praises the “moral instruction” which runs through much of Vonnegut’s fiction, particularly the early short stories (*While Mortals Sleep* viii), and Vonnegut himself has written and spoken at length about the frequent critical accusations that he has built a

career “pervert[ing] art for money” (*Palm Sunday* 94). To be sure, over the course of his career, Vonnegut’s fiction became both more directly instructive and more commercially viable, even, paradoxically, while it became more experimental and more personal. Yet these aspects are secondary—for Vonnegut, an artist’s ultimate reward is in the act of creation. “The arts are not a way to make a living,” he writes in *A Man Without a Country*. “They are a very human way of making life more bearable. Practicing an art, no matter how well or badly, is a way to make your soul grow, for heaven’s sake. Sing in the shower. Dance to the radio. Tell stories. Write a poem to a friend, even a lousy poem. Do this as well as you possibly can. You will get an enormous reward. You will have created something” (24). It is *creation* that makes art rewarding or fulfilling for Vonnegut more than anything else.

What is the value of art, then, in Vonnegut’s philosophical framework? As we have seen, it serves two purposes, both of which are intricately interwoven: it “bring[s] chaos to order” (*Breakfast of Champions* 215) and it “mak[es] life more bearable” (*A Man Without* 24). As such, art exists not so much for its own sake, but primarily, for the sake of the artist. In fact, whether the art ever finds an audience is in some ways irrelevant—creation is the site at which the work of art takes on meaning. To illustrate this point, Vonnegut repeatedly returns to the idea of the writer/artist who creates without the possibility of an audience. In *Cat’s Cradle*, for instance, the narrator, Jonah, is writing a book about the end of the world after the world has ended, at which point there is no one left to read the book. It’s no accident that Jonah ends his book with an encounter with Bokonon, who shrugs and hands him the last sentence of *The Book of Bokonon* on a scrap of paper. For Jonah and Bokonon, it’s the act of writing which is its

own reward precisely because it allows them to make sense of the chaos which surrounds them. Similarly, in *Slapstick*, Wilbur-Daffodil-11 Swain finds himself writing a book addressed simply to “To Whom It May Concern” after the world has been ravaged by the mysterious Green Death. “And who will read all this?” he asks (27). Not only is there no audience, but there can be no audience in the world of the novel. The writing itself is an act of ordering and its own reward.

The author-with-no-audience motif is employed most directly in *Galapagos*. As we saw in the previous chapter, *Galapagos* is a novel about the end of the humanity which is narrated by a ghost. Importantly, it too is presented in the form of a text. “And by golly if I haven’t become a writer, too, scribbling away like Father, without the slightest hint that there might be a reader somewhere. There isn’t one. There can’t be” (280), explains the narrator, Leon Trout, near the end of the novel. Just because there can be no reader, however, doesn’t mean that there can be no text. It is the act of creation which allows Leon to render meaningful what he sees and experiences. Even though he concludes, “I have written these words in air—with the tip of the index finder of my left hand, which is also air” (318), this doesn’t diminish the value of the work he has created in the least. Art may be ephemeral, but aesthetic experience and artistic creation are invaluable. On this point Schopenhauer and Vonnegut would undoubtedly agree.

Having established Vonnegut’s view of aesthetics, we will now turn to two underappreciated late-period novels, both of which are joined by a singular aesthetic theory. When brought into conversation, 1982’s *Deadeye Dick* and 1987’s *Bluebeard* reveal themselves to be Vonnegut’s novels of aesthetics, both of which offer variations of transcendental aesthetic experience and artistic creation in the Schopenhauerean tradition.

### ***Deadeye Dick: Saving Pianos from Termites***

Along with *Slapstick*, which we will explore in chapter four, *Deadeye Dick* is among Vonnegut's most tragically underrated novels. It is also one of the most frequently misread. Overall, it is certainly among the most directly personal of Vonnegut's novels, and if *Slapstick* is Vonnegut's attempt to capture "what life *feels* like to me" (1), *Deadeye Dick* is his attempt to render shame, guilt, and embarrassment intelligible in the most personal terms possible. In the preface, Vonnegut announces that he will "explain the main symbols of the book" (xii). The "unappreciated, empty arts center," for example, "is my head as my sixtieth birthday beckons me" and "the neutered pharmacist who tells the tale is my declining sexuality" (xii-xiii). Among this analysis, however, is the following line, which shapes and informs any reading of the novel: "The crime [Rudy Waltz, the novel's narrator] committed in childhood is all the bad things I have done" (xiii). *Deadeye Dick* turns out to be a novel which is obsessively fixated on Rudy's childhood's crime as it is *the* defining event of his life, the single act which colors the lens through which everything else is viewed. In this sense, given Vonnegut's prefatory analysis, the novel is also Vonnegut's attempt to come to terms with the guilt of his own past. Simply put, Rudy Waltz's narrative of shame and embarrassment offers an important insight into what life "feels like" for Vonnegut, and the parallels between how Rudy and Vonnegut cope with life are unmistakable. If for no other reason, *Deadeye Dick* is an essential novel for understanding the full scope of Vonnegut's philosophical project.

*Deadeye Dick* is a novel in two parts—the first part focuses on how Rudy Waltz accidentally becomes a murderer at the age of twelve; the second is how he attempts to

make sense of life afterwards—more specifically, how he uses art to transcend the agony of life, thereby overcoming a personal history dominated by almost unbearable guilt and shame. Two critical perspectives help frame the rather unusual place the novel occupies in Vonnegut’s oeuvre. Benjamin DeMott treats *Deadeye Dick* as an amusing but altogether unremarkable novel, noting that “the book’s tone, content, arrangements and assumptions nowhere diverge from this writer’s norms” (246). By insisting on reading *Deadeye Dick* within the larger context of Vonnegut’s body of work, he misses the profoundly personal dimensions of the novel. This is a highly unusual novel by Vonnegut’s standards, and it’s his first major work to maturely explore art not as escape but as legitimate coping mechanism. Loree Rackstraw conversely argues that “*Deadeye Dick* will likely stand as Vonnegut’s most tightly crafted and complex work to date” (“The Vonnegut Cosmos” 54), which is perhaps too generous an assessment. Given the narrative and stylistic innovations of *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Breakfast of Champions*, Rackstraw’s position is somewhat overstated. By Vonnegut standards, *Deadeye Eye* isn’t a particularly engaging novel. The characters are thinly-drawn, none more so than the protagonist, Rudy Waltz. This is due to Vonnegut breaking one of his long-established rules of fiction writing—“Every character should want something, even if it is only a glass of water” (*Bagombo* 12). No character in all of Vonnegut wants *less* than Rudy Waltz, whose life philosophy can be summed up as follows: “I don’t really belong on this particular planet” (199). His story is one of extreme withdrawal, and given the first-person narration, readers spend over 250 pages looking at the world through the eyes of a self-described “emotional neuter.” Try as he might, Rudy can’t get it up for existence, his perpetual metaphoric impotence serving as a chronic condition.

Throughout the novel, Vonnegut attempts to show how art can give meaning to life. The event which dominates Rudy's life is the accidental double murder of a woman and child on Mother's Day, 1944, when Rudy was twelve years old. Apropos of nothing, Rudy ascends to the cupola in his ancestral home and randomly discharges his father's Springfield .30-06 into the air, seemingly without even thinking. Inadvertently, the bullet travels eight blocks and strikes the pregnant Eloise Metzger between the eyes as she vacuums her apartment, killing her and her unborn child instantly. Like Camus' Meursault, Rudy is completely incapable of offering an explanation of what made him fire the rifle that morning, yet the freakish accident transforms the child into "a notorious murderer known as 'Deadeye Dick'" (23), a cruel nickname for someone skilled with a firearm which follows Rudy throughout his life. Upon *becoming* Deadeye Dick, Rudy Waltz effectively ceases to exist. The child grows into a man who is defined not by the sum of his actions but rather by a particularly heinous accidental mishap from his youth. Decades later, while serving as a third-shift pharmacist at an all-night drugstore in town, Rudy is continuously reminded of his past, what he has done, and who he is. "Hardly a night passed that some young person, feeling wonderfully daring and witty, no doubt, would telephone and ask me if I was Deadeye Dick. I always was. I always will be" (141). In short, Rudy *is* Deadeye Dick, not just to the residents of Midland City, but also to himself.

It's significant that Rudy describes his initial reaction to the double murder as embarrassment. "Because of my age," he explains, "I could not be prosecuted...So I felt safe, although embarrassed" (83). Shame and guilt are inextricably woven into the fabric of Rudy's daily life, but above all is a sense of embarrassment which he unable to shake.

As noted earlier, for Vonnegut, embarrassment is “the hum which is with me all the time” (*Palm Sunday* 169), and given his life-long recurring dream of murdering a woman in the past (*Palm Sunday* 172-3), the parallels between Rudy’s existential dilemma and Vonnegut’s own become clear. In this way, *Deadeye Dick* is a novel very much about an individual’s attempt to come to terms not just with the past, but existence altogether and at the same time Vonnegut’s own attempt to explore his own existential angst.

Like so many of Vonnegut’s protagonists, Rudy attempts to escape reality by retreating from it. “The is my principle objection to life, I think,” he suggests early in the novel. “It is too easy, when alive, to make perfectly horrible mistakes” (6). To avoid making mistakes, he removes himself from life through physical and emotional detachment. He repeatedly refers to himself as a “neuter” in the novel, and the term carries both physical and psychological connotations. Sex, both as a means of pleasure and as an act of shared intimacy, is something which Rudy chooses to deny himself. More to the point, intimacy is something which he feels himself unworthy of and thus unable to experience. He uses the word “egregious” to describe the state of neuterdom, which he defines, with a nod to Nietzsche, as “outside the herd” (150). For Rudy, existence is, above all, egregious. His tragedy is not that he chooses to be a neuter but that he doesn’t know how to be anything else. In Schopenhauerian terms, Rudy’s existence is pure will, a prolonged exercise in unfulfillment.

This is where art factors into the novel. For Rudy, life can only be understood in aesthetic terms. He fully realizes Nietzsche’s notion of becoming a “poet of the self” in the most reductively literal way. “I have a trick for dealing with all my worst memories. I insist that they are plays. The characters are actors. The speeches and movements are

stylized... I am in the presence of art” (94). His narrative is continuously interrupted by these internal dramas, moments of artistic creation which he fashions to make sense of key events in his life. The act of creation provides Rudy with relief outside of himself, giving him authority over artificial internalized narratives in a way he is incapable of commanding in life. In Schopenhauerean terms, aesthetic experience provides fleeting “bliss and peace of mind...free from all willing” (*World as Will I* 212) while artistic creation allows him to bend the past to his will. Examples of Rudy’s fashioning the past into plays in his head include “Duplex,” which tells the story of his role in the dissolution of his brother Felix’s marriage, and an untitled play in which Celia Hoover, former town beauty and eventual wife of Dwayne Hoover, runs amok in the pharmacy because Rudy won’t issue her pills without a prescription. What these plays allow Rudy to do is momentarily *not* be Deadeye Dick, if only in his own mind. As such, they provide, in Schopenhauer’s framework, an escape from the self.

Tragically, Rudy ultimately forms a problematic relationship with art. His awareness that he “always will be” (141) Deadeye Dick is unshakable, and rather than attempt to establish his identity *as* Rudy Waltz, he passively accepts the identity of Deadeye Dick. For him, art offers momentary respite but no lasting escape. This last point is particularly important because with *Deadeye Dick* Vonnegut is interested in art’s ability to improve the quality of human life. This is a concern which will dominate his work in the final decades of his career. In *Deadeye Dick*, Vonnegut is suggesting that art *can* make life worth living, but unlike in previous novels (*Mother Night*, *God Bless You*, *Mr. Rosewater*, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, *Breakfast of Champions*) here he advances the position that life cannot be lived in purely aesthetic terms. A life well-lived, Vonnegut

suggests, requires both community and engagement (as we shall see in chapter four), and Rudy has neither.

Throughout the novel, Rudy repeatedly explains life as being a peephole, “the idea of birth’s being an opening peephole, and of death’s being when the peephole closes again” (81). The space between the opening and the closing is where living takes place, when the “eye” of existence is momentarily opened. David Cowart argues that the peephole is “the novel’s most prominent metaphor” (181) in “Culture and Anarchy: Vonnegut’s Later Career,” and this clearly shapes his reading of *Deadeye Dick*, which he calls a “cheerless” (181) novel set in “an environmental chaos that Rudy can do virtually nothing to alleviate” (182). Given Rudy’s repeated insistence that death is little more than the closing of one’s peephole, Cowart’s reading is convincing. However, the central metaphor of the novel is not the peephole but rather “the termites and the piano,” one of Vonnegut’s most carefully-crafted and self-contained parables. Just before her death, and with her brain ravaged by tumors, Rudy’s mother shares the story from her childhood of “walking into the music room of her father’s mansion, which she had believed to be indestructible as a little girl, and seeing what looked like foam, boiling out of the floor and a baseboard near a grand piano, and out of the legs and keyboard of the piano itself” (248). The foam turned out to be “billions and billions” of termites, and when her father kicks the piano leg, it “crumpled like it was made out of cardboard. The piano fell down” (248). This memory is haunted by the insistence that “Nobody had played the piano for years. If somebody had played it, maybe it would have driven the bugs out of there” (248). This image perfectly encapsulates Vonnegut’s theory of aesthetics. It’s not enough to simply *own* a piano; it’s necessary to *play* the damn thing. Rudy’s tragedy is that he

disappears into art, much like the termites into the piano, without fully exploring the instrument's potential.

Rudy's life-as-drama approach to existence is capped by his belief that "if a person survives an ordinary span of sixty years or more, there is every chance that his or her life as a shapely story has ended, and all that remains to be experienced is epilogue" (235). Clearly, he is incapable of viewing life in anything but aesthetic terms, and this is the source of his anguish. Rather than serving as the protagonist in his own narrative, he becomes an antagonist, a role which he passively accepts. We must remember that Vonnegut wrote *Deadeye Dick* "as my sixtieth birthday beckons me" (xiii). David Cowart's dismissal of the novel as "undistinguished" (181) is the critical norm, but such readings don't take into account the complex Rudy/Vonnegut parallel, even though Vonnegut emphatically establishes it in the preface. *Deadeye Dick* is ultimately a novel in which Vonnegut is trying to convince himself that there is more to life than epilogue on the eve of his sixtieth birthday. In this sense, Vonnegut himself is as much a character in the text as Rudy Waltz, and *Deadeye Dick* is every bit as metafictional as *Breakfast of Champions*, the experimental novel Vonnegut coincidentally wrote a decade earlier as "my fiftieth-birthday present to myself" (4). Rudy's tragedy is that he falls into epilogue at the age of 12, never to return again. In the end, Vonnegut's achievement in *Deadeye Dick* is that perched on the edge of epilogue himself, he refused to go, gently or otherwise, into that good night. Rather than letting the termites eat the piano from the inside out, he chooses to play, to compose, and the novel itself is more than a work of fiction—it is an act of Schopenhauerean defiance in a world of will. In *Bluebeard*, Vonnegut takes this theme of defiance even further.

## **From *Breakfast of Champions* to *Bluebeard*: Seeing Through “The Mist of Objective and Subjective Contingencies”**

If, as we have seen, *Deadeye Dick* is one of Vonnegut’s most personal novels, 1987’s *Bluebeard* is certainly his most directly aesthetic. Here, art is used not as motif but instead as focal point. *Bluebeard* is a novel *about* art, and more to the point, it is a novel about an individual’s promethean relationship *to* art over the course of several decades. In Rabo Karabekian, Vonnegut creates a recurring character who is no less important to his philosophical project than Kilgore Trout. Specifically, Rabo appears briefly in *Deadeye Dick* and the earlier *Breakfast of Champions*, illustrating Vonnegut’s growing preoccupation with art in the second half of his career. Thomas F. Marvin perceptibly parallels Rabo’s transition from abstract to realistic art as being representational of the style Vonnegut adopts for the novel, noting that in *Bluebeard* “Vonnegut revisits his major themes in a realistic mode and reaffirms that fundamental importance of telling a good story” (136), and this is certainly true, but the parallels between Rabo and Vonnegut don’t stop there. As for Vonnegut himself, existence is an ongoing state of embarrassment for Rabo. Paul Slazinger, failed artist and best friend to Rabo, says that “the human condition can be summed up in just one word, and this is the word: *Embarrassment*” (*Bluebeard* 14). Remembering Vonnegut’s personal admission from *Palm Sunday* that “I would describe the hum which is with me all the time as *embarrassment*” (169), my goal here is explore how Rabo’s successful attempt at transcending “embarrassment” (or Schopenhauerean “will”) mirrors Vonnegut’s attempt to do the same through aesthetic creation.

For Schopenhauer, “the world in which we live and have our being is, by its whole nature, through and through *will*” (*World as Will* I 162), yet “the great problem of historical painting...is to present, immediately and for perception, the Idea in which the will reaches the highest degree of its objectification” (*World as Will* I 220). In this sense, art becomes representational by necessity. As the Idea is rendered in perceptible terms, it tells us something about both the world and our place in it. It is precisely this type of discovery that Rabo attempts in *Bluebeard*. The novel’s subtitle is *The Autobiography of Rabo Karabekian (1916-1988)*, a detail which makes the novel not just a narrative but an act of artistic creation in itself. Like Howard W. Campbell Jr. (*Mother Night*), Jonah (*Cat’s Cradle*), Wilbur Daffodil-11 Swain (*Slapstick*), Leon Trout (*Galapagos*) and Eugene Debs Hartke (*Hocus Pocus*), Rabo is actively creating and aesthetically shaping rather than passively relating his narrative. While on the surface, *Bluebeard* is the autobiography of a failed artist, one who no longer practices his craft—“I don’t paint at all anymore” (11) he emphatically suggests at the outset of the novel—at the same time, it is the story of a painter who ultimately becomes an artist in Schopenhauerean terms.

The aim of art for Schopenhauer is clear: “Every work of art really endeavors to show us life and things as they are in reality; but these things cannot be grasped directly by everyone through the mist of objective and subjective contingencies. Art takes away the mist” (*World as Will* II 407). By transcending will, and thus the self, the work of art allows the artist to see through—and beyond—the mist, catching a fleeting glimpse of the thing-in-itself, the Ideal. Over the course of three novels, Rabo Karabekian learns to develop this relationship with art, and as I intend to show, it is precisely this relationship

which Vonnegut both sought in his own work and advocated as the ultimate aim of artistic creation.

Rabo first appears in *Breakfast of Champions*, where he is attending a celebration in honor of the opening of the Mildred Barry Memorial Center for the Arts. His recent painting, *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*, had recently been purchased for the Barry Memorial Center, and Vonnegut interrupts the narrative flow of the novel to add, “It was a scandal what the painting cost...Midland City was outraged. So was I” (213). To call the painting minimalist or abstract would be to give it too much credit. It consists of nothing more than a single vertical orange stripe of reflecting tape applied to a canvas of green wall paint. What offends Vonnegut, though, is not the work’s jarring simplicity or the outrageous price it fetched, but rather Rabo’s relationship with and to his creation. When novelist Beatrice Keedsler admits to Rabo from her neighboring barstool, “This is a dreadful confession, but I don’t even know who Saint Anthony was,” before asking, “Who was he, and why should anybody have wanted to tempt him?,” he replies, “I don’t know, and I would hate to find out” (214). As a creator, Rabo has a completely disingenuous relationship with his work. Rather than taking away the Schopenhauerean mist, his creation remains shrouded in it. For a second time, Vonnegut interrupts to narrative structure of the novel to note that Rabo “was in my opinion a vain and weak and trashy man, no artist at all,” (225), allowing him to offer not just an assessment but an aesthetic judgment of both Rabo and his work. What’s significant here is Vonnegut’s dismissal of a particular type of aesthetic perspective. Rabo creates, and he makes a tremendous amount of money for his work, but for Vonnegut, this does not an artist make. Rabo’s grave aesthetic transgression is that he is completely alienated from, and

unchanged by, his own work. It signifies nothing other than itself, and in this sense, his “product” is purely commercial.

Both Rabo and “The Temptation of Saint Anthony” turn up fleetingly in *Deadeye Dick* when the Rudy’s mother is outraged at The Barry Memorial Center’s acquisition of the painting. In an irate letter to the local paper, she calls “The Temptation of Saint Anthony” “an insult...to the memory of every serious artist who ever lived” (213), an assessment Vonnegut is in complete agreement with. This scene allows him to juxtapose two distinct approaches to aesthetic creation. One of Vonnegut’s most longstanding aesthetic principles, which he articulates most directly in 1976’s *Slapstick* and again 1999’s *Bagombo Snuff Box*, is that audience awareness is essential to creation. “Any creation which has any wholeness and harmoniousness,” he writes in the preface to *Slapstick*, “was made by an artist with an audience of one in mind” (17). Over two decades later, in offering his rules of creative writing at the end of his career in *Bagombo Snuff Box*, he suggests that it is necessary to “Write to please just one person” (12). What these passages illustrate is just how consistent Vonnegut’s aesthetic philosophy remained throughout the second half of his career, and they provide a framework for assessing the achievements of Rudy Waltz and Rabo Karabekian. With the exception of his play *Katmandu*, which had a disastrous premiere on Broadway, the rest of Rudy’s plays are written in his mind, for an audience of one—Rudy himself. Rabo, in sharp contrast, is creating with *only* a mass audience (and the resulting commercial rewards) in mind, which is tantamount to disaster for Vonnegut. “If you open a window and make love to the world, so to speak, your story will get pneumonia” (*Bagambo* 12).

In defense of “The Temptation of Saint Anthony,” Rabo argues, “I now give you my word of honor that the picture your city owns shows everything about life which truly matters, with nothing left out. It is a picture of the awareness of every animal. It is the immaterial core of every animal, the ‘I am’ to which all messages are sent” (*Breakfast* 226). The fact that the painting is nonsensical, and that Rabo has no interest in discovering who Saint Anthony is fully encapsulates his worldview. Existence is abstract and unknowable for Rabo, and what’s more, he has no interest in making sense of it. His proclamation that “Our awareness is all that is alive and maybe sacred in any of us” (226) is tragic in light of the fact that he lacks awareness about the nature of his own work. For Rabo, creation, which for Vonnegut is an act of discovery, is little more than resigning to the Schopenhauerean mist which clouds perception.

*Bluebeard’s* dramatic tension lies in charting Rabo’s transformation from artistic charlatan to aesthetic craftsman who creates in the midst Schopenhauer’s mist, and this is the novel’s chief concern. “In the paintings which have greatness birth and death are always there” (91) Rabo writes in his autobiography, and his failure as an artist is that in spite of acclaim and financial success, these qualities have been wholly absent in his work throughout his career. Lawrence R. Broer astutely uses the term “esthetics of renewal” to describe “the existential possibilities of authoring one’s own identity in life as art” (74), and he sees this exploration as being central to Vonnegut’s novels which begin with *Slapstick*, making up the body of work he refers to Vonnegut’s “second career” (74). I’d suggest, however, that Rabo is more directly authoring his own identity *in art*. Rabo’s failure as an artist is specifically attributable to the fact that he has spent his life hiding in and being altogether missing from his own work. Early on, “I

discovered something as powerful and irresponsible as shooting up with heroin: if I started laying on just one color of paint to a huge canvas, I could make the whole world drop away” (154). Like shooting up, art created in this fashion is a means of escape, an act of hiding, from both the world and the self. Perhaps much of Rabo’s success is linked to identification on the part of the audience with escaping in this way. That’s not to minimize the value in and importance of escapist art. For every *Guernica*, perhaps the world needs a *Rosebud Cottage* to balance the Apollonian and Dionysian dimensions of the art world, and there is certainly enough creative space for both Picasso and Thomas Kincade to build empires. Yet for Vonnegut, as for Schopenhauer, if art is to be transformative, and thus an integral component of the good life, it must allow the artist and the audience to see *through* the mist.

The impetus for Rabo’s aesthetic evolution is that his work has no lasting impact. Literally. It consumes itself. Due to a chemical reaction between his canvases, the acrylic tape, and the Sateen Dure-Luxe paint which were his creative hallmarks, his paintings “destroy themselves” in an act of metaphoric aesthetic suicide. His legacy, such as it is, is erased and his paintings are reduced over time to puddles and stains on the floors of the museums and homes which house them. Rabo’s mistake is in choosing the wrong “materials” for his art, not only in his career, but much more damningly, throughout his life as well.

A perspective which Vonnegut goes to great lengths to articulate through Rabo’s transformation is that for art to have merit, and for it to have lasting impact and value, it must be created from the proper metaphoric “materials.” In his 1977 *Paris Review* interview, Vonnegut states that “I think it can be refreshing if a creator of literature has

something on his mind other than the history of literature so far. Literature should not disappear up its own asshole, so to speak” (*Palm Sunday* 94), and with *Bluebeard*, he extends this idea to the visual arts. Any work of art, from a text to a painting to a sculpture, loses primacy when it takes itself too seriously, or, too use Vonnegut’s term, when it becomes intentionally epiphanic. Rabo’s friend, the painter Terry Kitchen, introduces him the value of the non-epiphanic moment: “That is a perfect description of a non-epiphany,” Kitchen explains, “that rarest of moments, when God Almighty lets go of the scruff of your neck and lets you be human for a little while” (184). These rare autonomous moments allow the individual to exist outside the context of will, God, or any other organizing cosmic principle, and serve as counterpoints to the fleeting moments of “aesthetic contemplation” Schopenhauer describes as “pure, will-less knowing” (*World as Will I* 212).

Before he can paint his metaphoric and literal masterpiece, Vonnegut first requires Rabo to confront his own failures, both as an artist as a person. Late in the novel, in describing how he imagines his entry will read in the Big Book on Judgement Day, he offers the following nakedly candid self-assessment:

Solider: Excellent.

Husband and Father: Floparroo.

Serious artist: Floparroo. (258)

These twin realizations are not accidental. Vonnegut is deliberate in establishing that just as having a partner and children does not make someone a success as a husband or father, achieving critical and commercial success does not equal artistic value. To this end, Rabo’s perceived interpretation of how he views his legacy is further revealed in his

estimation of how he might be remembered with the following imaginary dictionary definition:

kara.a.bek.i.an (kar-a-'bek-e-an), n. (from Rabo Karabekian, U.S. 20<sup>th</sup> cent. painter). Fiasco in which a person causes total destruction of own work and reputation through stupidity, carelessness or both. (286)

Rabo's own self-assessment matters much more, of course, than how the dictionaries of the future will remember him, yet he is tortured by thoughts of his own legacy and how little he has actually accomplished. He realizes that he is responsible for his own failure and that he is the creator of his own misery. "I can't help it," he tells Terry Kitchen. "My soul knows my meat is doing bad things, and is embarrassed. But my meat just keeps right on doing bad dumb things" (273). This is an inevitability to which Vonnegut himself could relate. In a 1987 interview with Allen and Smith conducted just after *Bluebeard's* release, Vonnegut establishes a direct parallel between his own work and Rabo Karabekian's art: "He becomes a dominant person in my life after I've written enough about him. And what he did was, in fact, all he could do. It was his only option, and that's the way I feel about my work, too. I'm a certain kind of flower, and that's just how I'm going to bloom. There isn't much that can be done about it" (*Conversations* 265). And yet the "soul" and the "meat" can be brought into harmony to overcome the all-consuming mist of embarrassment which Vonnegut, like so many of his characters, spent his life trying to work through. There is more to the self than either meat or will. As for Schopenhauer, art plays a privileged role in laying the foundation for this harmony.

Ultimately, it's precisely this relationship between soul and meat, between life and art, which Vonnegut is exploring throughout *Bluebeard*. This relationship is much

more central to the novel than the art itself. Donald E. Morse offers a thought-provoking reading of the novel, pointing out that “Vonnegut advocates in *Bluebeard* that the true artist employ technique to serve human beings and their feelings—whether it be putting paint on canvas or putting words on paper” (148). Morse correctly establishes the parallel between Rabo and Vonnegut. At the same time, however, Vonnegut is also suggesting that art must first “serve” the artist before it can have an impact on an audience. After all, Rabo *is* Bluebeard the pirate because his final painting is kept completely locked-up in the potato barn on his property, and his instructions are that no one is to open the door to see what’s inside. The dramatic tension of the novel/his autobiography lies in whether his muse, successful writer Circe Berman—or us, as readers—will be allowed to see what’s on the side of the forbidden door. At the end of the novel, when he unlocks the door and shares “Now It’s the Women’s Turn,” his final work with Circe, and the readers of his autobiography, he rectifies the central problem which has plagued his work—for the first time, he is fully present in his work, metaphorically and literally. The painting depicts, in Rabo’s own words, “where I was when the sun came up the day the Second World War ended in Europe” (298), and sprawled across an enormous canvas is a cast of 5, 219 characters, including Rabo himself. The spare abstraction of “The Temptation of Saint Anthony” has given way to a final work so realistic that “it might have been a photograph” (298). Farrell argues that “Now it’s the Women’s Turn” is actually the “culmination of art.” As she explains, “Although an impossible feat in the real world, Vonnegut has imagined a painting that depicts all of life, that is somehow equivalent to life itself” (109). This is absolutely true.

At the same time, the “success” of the work lies in Rabo being *present* in his own work, and as such, part of the very life he is depicting.

“My father believed in Art...” Nannette Vonnegut writes in her introduction to *Kurt Vonnegut: Drawings*. “Whether it was music, literature, theater, or the visual arts, he believed practicing art saved lives” (10). His ongoing advocacy of the arts, in his work and throughout his life, is central to his philosophical project. For Vonnegut, as for Schopenhauer, a life well-lived must involve aesthetic experience and artistic creation. Yet while art may provide momentary respite from will (Schopenhauer) and embarrassment (Vonnegut), it is incapable of providing lasting escape. This is the primary limitation of both Schopenhauer’s and Vonnegut’s theories of aesthetics. Schopenhauer goes all-in on art, and the principle problem with aesthetic experience is that it doesn’t last. For him, the will can never be overcome. Vonnegut differs from Schopenhauer in that he suggests while artistic creation is an essential part of a well-lived life, it is but one of several necessary elements. “Life is no damn good,” the generally jovial bandleader George M Helmholtz declares in “The Kid Nobody Could Handle,” and as we have seen, this is a realization which Vonnegut struggled with for much of his life. How can art make a difference? Vonnegut allows the bandleader to provide the answer as well. “Our aim is to make the world more beautiful than it was when it came into it. It can be done. You can do it” (*Monkey House* 283). How do we do this? Saving the piano from the termites is a good start, and there’s one way to do it. We must play. As Vonnegut repeatedly suggested in his speaking engagements around the country, “Practicing an art, no matter how well or badly, is a way to make your soul grow” (A

*Man Without* 24). Schopenhauer's insistence that "life by no means presents itself as a gift to be enjoyed, but as a task, a drudgery, to be worked through" (*World as Will* II 357) may prove to be accurate in the final analysis, but certainly no more so than Vonnegut's belief that "we are here on Earth to fart around" (*Timequake* 219). Chaos *can* be brought to order. For Vonnegut, art is what allows us to see through the Schopenhauerean mist, and as we will see in the next chapter, this clarity of vision is essential, not just for the good life, but for establishing meaningful communities as well.

CHAPTER IV:  
“LONESOME NO MORE!”: VONNEGUT’S EXTENDED FAMILY MODEL  
AS EXISTENTIAL DIASPORIC COMMUNITY

In Vonnegut’s final published interview, conducted a month before his death at 84, he spoke about what he saw as “the great American disease”: loneliness. “We no longer have extended family. But I had one [as a child]. There were lots of Vonneguts in the phone book ... and I was surrounded by relatives all the time. It was heaven” (*Last Interview* 166-7). It’s altogether fitting that Vonnegut should introduce extended family as a topic of conversation in his final interview insofar as the notion served as his primary preoccupation throughout the second half of his career.

Much has been written about Vonnegut’s experience as a German prisoner of war in Dresden during the Second World War and its corresponding influence on his fiction; to date, surprisingly little has been written about Vonnegut’s trip to Biafra in January of 1970 in the final moments of the ill-fated republic. The savagery, brutality, horror and sense of community he witnessed there would profoundly shape his work, his philosophy, and his life afterwards. This chapter will explore the ways in which Vonnegut’s advocacy of Americans’ need for large “extended families,” which first appears in 1974’s *Wampeters, Foma & Granfaloons* and remains a consistent theme all the way through 2007’s *A Man Without a County*, is a *direct* response to his Biafran experience. If, as

many critics suggest, Dresden is the key to understanding Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (and more generally, the bulk of his pre-1969 work), Biafra, I would argue, is the key to understanding what he wrote afterwards during the second half of his career. Vonnegut's concept of the extended family can best be understood when examined through the lens of diasporic theory. The sense of community which emerges from Vonnegut's diasporic artificial extended family is central to overcoming loneliness and leading a productive life, and the extended family is one of Vonnegut's most strongly-advocated requirements for the good life in modernity.

### ***Mother Night: Nationless Inclinations from a Citizen of Nowhere***

Vonnegut's earliest extended exploration of community and identity is *Mother Night*, a novel first published in 1961 and written nearly a decade before his transformative Biafran experience. Said Mentak suggests that it's in Vonnegut's final published book, 2005's *A Man Without a Country*, where Vonnegut "defines himself in terms of national space" (287), and this is certainly true. Written over four decades earlier, *Mother Night* serves as a companion piece for *A Man Without a Country* in that the novel's protagonist, Howard W. Campbell Jr, is *wholly incapable* of defining himself in terms of national space. An American expatriate who becomes an Allied spy during World War II, he too is a man without a country. More to the point, he is a man without a community, without a family, without an ideological diaspora, and the lack thereof renders life meaningless and ultimately unbearable for him. I offer the following reading of *Mother Night* here because it showcases Vonnegut's attempt to work through "the great American disease of loneliness" (*Last Interview* 166) before he had been transformed by his Biafran experience or developed his prescriptive cure (artificial

extended families) a decade later. In this sense, it serves as a companion to both *Slapstick* and *Timequake*. Just as *Deadeye Dick* and *Bluebeard* are Vonnegut's aesthetic novels (chapter three), *Mother Night*, *Slapstick*, and *Timequake* form a trilogy of texts designed to address and combat loneliness<sup>2</sup>.

On the surface, *Mother Night* is Campbell's confession, written from an Israeli jail while awaiting trial for his war crimes. Even among the early Vonnegut novels, it is relatively straightforward and plot-driven. Yet like Vonnegut's frequently derided prose style, *Mother Night* is deceptively simple. "This is the only story of mine whose moral I know," Vonnegut writes in the introduction to the 1966 edition, before adding one of his most quotable (and unfairly-reductive) Nietzsche-like adages: "We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful what we pretend to be" (v). Of course, this moral *does* sum up Campbell's tragedy. In becoming such a wholly effective undercover spy, and by broadcasting coded messages to the Allies over propaganda-laced radio broadcasts, Campbell *does* promote the perverse cause of the Third Reich. As Werner Noth, Berlin police chief and his father-in-law, informs him on their last meeting, whether he is a spy or not is incidental, "Because you could never have served the enemy as well as you served us. I realized that almost all the ideas that I hold now, that make me unashamed of anything I may have felt or done as a Nazi, came not from Hitler, not from Goebbels, not from Himmler-but from you" (99).

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<sup>2</sup> As an aside, I fully realize that "loneliness" isn't the most sophisticated or philosophical word choice, and "alienation" might conjure more attention in academic circles, but I use it nonetheless in this chapter for two reasons: 1) loneliness, not alienation, is the term Vonnegut used again and again, and 2) just as importantly, it is the *right* word in the end for the condition Vonnegut's characters encounter.

Throughout the novel, Vonnegut is much less interested in Campbell's guilt or innocence than in the provincial philosophical perspective through which he views both the world and his place in it. Yet many critics focus on the creative and rhetorical aspects of his confessions...and for good reason. Farrell, for instance, suggests that "Campbell's life as a double agent is simply wishful thinking on his part, a lie he tells to justify his own reprehensible behavior" ("A Convenient Reality" 228). Similarly, Freese refers to Campbell as "a highly unreliable narrator," one who "is apparently also an advanced schizophrenic who can sanely assess the degree of his schizophrenia, and a man who can alternately explain his behavior by claiming that he is mentally ill and by convincingly insisting that in contrast to others he is not at all insane" (150). My goal here is not to challenge the convincing arguments made by either Farrell or Freese; rather, I'd like to propose an alternative reading of the novel, one in which the questions of Campbell's guilt, innocence, and ultimate responsibility are secondary to what I see as his singular tragic flaw-- his inability to be part of anything outside of and larger than himself.

"I am an American by birth, a Nazi by reputation, and a nationless person by inclination," (1) Campbell defines himself in the opening paragraph, and over the course of his confessions/the novel, he offers neither defense nor justification for this nationlessness. He simply presents it as fact. It is who he is. When he matter-of-factly informs Frank Wirtanen, his "Blue Fairy Godmother" who recruits him to covertly serve the Allied cause at the outset of the war, that "Nationalities just don't interest me a much as they probably should," (35), he acknowledges this as a source of personal failure. He *should* be more interested in the world outside himself, and on an immediate level, he realizes it. When asked if he hates America, he replies, "That would be as silly as loving

it. It's impossible for me to get emotional about it, because real estate doesn't interest me. No doubt it's a great flaw in my personality, but I can't think it terms of boundaries" (133). When he is branded by the Republic of Israel as "a citizen of nowhere" (160), the accusation is undeniably true, and he makes no attempt to deny it. He truly *is* a citizen of nowhere.

And yet Campbell *does* find a nation of sorts to which he is willing to pledge allegiance—his "Nation of Two" with Helga, his wife. At one point he imagines a play about his all-consuming love for Helga: "It was going to show how a pair of lovers in a world gone mad could survive by being loyal only to a nation composed of themselves—a nation of two" (34). The love becomes a drug for him, one which numbs out everything beyond the confines of his own bedroom. "My narcotic was what had got me through the war; it was an ability to let my emotions be stirred by only one thing—my love for Helga. This concentration of my emotions on so small an area had begun as a young lover's happy illusion...and finally became the axis about which my thoughts revolved" (47). Tally uses the term "sexual solipsism," which he defines as "a merging of two bodies that excludes the rest of the world" (46), to describe the marriage. "In turning away from any notion of nationhood beyond the romantic and erotic love the two shared," Tally suggests, "Campbell tries to triumphantly alienate himself from his fellow man" (46). Yet such alienation isn't possible, and this is precisely Vonnegut's point. The "Nation of Two" fails because there is no other possible outcome. Borders and boundaries are temporary, and the flesh is subject to decay. Decades later, in *A Man Without a Country*, Vonnegut would articulate the inherent limitations of all "Nations of Two": "When a couple has an argument nowadays, they may think it's about money or power or sex or

how to raise their kids or whatever. What they're really saying to each other, though, without realizing it, is this: 'You are not enough people!'" (48). Ultimately, "A husband, a wife, and some kids is not a family," he adds. "It's a terribly vulnerable survival unit" (48).

Campbell's nationless existence, experienced from his misguided survival unit, makes him one of Vonnegut's most tragic and sympathetic protagonists. He is a study on the ravaging effects of loneliness. At one point, he interrupts the narrative of his confessions to address his former friend, Heinz Schildknecht: "Hello, out there, Heinz, in case you read this. I was really fond of you, to the extent that I am capable of being fond of anybody" (118). Campbell's suicide in the last sentence of the novel is inevitable, and his story could hardly end any other way. His is an existence without human connection or cultural identity.

For Vonnegut, culture is necessary, and life becomes unbearable without it. "I have no culture," Vonnegut writes in the preface to *Breakfast of Champions*, "no human harmony in my brains. I can't live without a culture anymore" (5). Each of Vonnegut's post-*Slaughterhouse-Five* novels, of which *Breakfast of Champions* is the first, focus on not just why community is essential for the good life, but more importantly, how communities can be formed and nurtured. What brought about this change in focus? In December of 1969, Vonnegut received a unique invitation from his friend, fellow novelist Vance Bourjaily, to accompany him on a trip to Biafra. The trip was arranged and sponsored by Miriam Reik. As Vonnegut explains in "Biafra: A People Betrayed," an uncharacteristically somber article he originally wrote for *McCall's*, "She was head of a pro-Biafran committee and had already flown several American writers into Biafra"

(143). The purpose of the trip (and Reik's committee for that matter) was to draw attention to and support for Biafran independence. She asked Vonnegut to write about what he experienced and saw, which he did. What she couldn't have known, and neither could Vonnegut, was his experience would define and shape the rest of his career.

### **Vonnegut in Biafra: Filiation, Affiliation, and the Origins of the Artificial Extended Family Model**

Vonnegut's trip, it's important to note, came at the very end of Biafran independence. He landed on January 3, 1970 and flew out on January 9. The republic fell to Nigeria on January 17, so the conditions, admittedly, were at their most deplorable. Yet it is genuine admiration, not pity, which punctuates "Biafra: A People Betrayed." "[Biafran] General Ojukwu gave us a clue, I think, as to why the Biafrans were able to endure so much so long without bitterness: They all had the emotional and spiritual strength that an enormous family can give. We asked the general to tell us about his family, and he answered that it was three thousand members strong" (149-150). Especially remarkable to Vonnegut was that General Ojukwu *knew* every single member of his immense family by name. The beauty of the Biafran family model is that it provided each person with a deeply rooted support system, a genuine diasporic community, even in times of wretched poverty.

Shields describes Vonnegut's arrival as follows: "As Vonnegut and Bourjaily stepped down from the plane, Ibo children surged forward crying 'Hello, Father, Hello!' Most [of the children] had huge rounded bellies, discolored hair, running sores, and everted rectums that swung like pink snouts between their legs" (268). The children were starving to death. As Vonnegut himself describes the encounter in his article, "I admire

Miriam, though I am not grateful for the trip she gave me. It was like a free trip to Auschwitz when the ovens were going full blast. I now feel lousy all the time” (143-4). The comparison to Auschwitz is particularly important given Vonnegut’s cultural heritage and World War II experiences. Yet what he experienced, and what he later celebrated, was human beauty in the midst of a living hell.

In Biafra he found a potential solution for the plague of existence in the modern world: loneliness. The answer was simple: diasporic community, or, as he called it, extended family. He elaborates on this notion in his 1974 commencement address at Hobart and William Smith Colleges, stating, “What should young people do with their lives today? Many things obviously. But the most daring thing is to create stable communities in which the terrible disease of loneliness can be cured” (*Palm Sunday* 180). Vonnegut’s graduation speeches and nonfiction from the 1970s onward are filled with similar admonitions in which he encourages youth to build communities. As Vonnegut lamented in a *Playboy* interview from 1973:

Until recent times, you know, human beings usually had a permanent community of relatives. They had dozens of homes to go to. So when a married couple had a fight, one or the other could go to a house three doors down and stay with a close relative until he was feeling tender again. Or if a kid got so fed up with his parents that he couldn’t stand it, he could march over to his uncle’s for a while. And this is no longer possible. Each family is locked into its little box. The neighbors aren’t relatives. There aren’t other houses where people can go to and be cared for. When Nixon is pondering what’s happening to America ... the answer is perfectly simple. We’re lonesome. We don’t have enough friends and relatives anymore. And we would if we lived in real communities. (*Conversations* 79-80)

While it’s possible to read Vonnegut’s plea for community as a yearning to return to the Indianapolis of his youth—an Indianapolis populated by Vonneguts—a much closer

parallel is the Biafra of General Ojukwu, one consisting of *thousands* of family members living together in diasporic harmony.

In the fame which followed the publication of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and in response to his 1970 trip to Biafra, Vonnegut found himself wrestling a particular kind of familial and cultural rootlessness. In 1973's *Breakfast of Champions*, his much-anticipated follow-up to *Slaughterhouse-Five*, he freely writes about his severe depression, suggesting that "this book is my fiftieth-birthday present to myself. I feel as though I am crossing the spine of a roof—having ascended one slope" (4). Indeed, *Breakfast of Champions* is a far more personal book than *Slaughterhouse-Five* or anything he had written up to that point. The financial success brought about by his "Dresden book" was liberating in that it allowed him to write what he wanted, how he wanted, when he wanted. "Well, I felt after I finished *Slaughterhouse-Five* that I didn't have to write at all anymore if I didn't want to. It was the end of some sort of career (*Conversations* 107). Success may have brought him creative autonomy, but it failed to bring him either contentment or a sense of community.

Case in point—1971's *Happy Birthday, Wanda June*. I mention this text again here for a couple of reasons. First, and this is important—for a fleeting moment in 1970, Vonnegut swore off fiction entirely and vowed to devote the rest of his career to drama. As he told his older brother Bernard at the time, "I'm writing a play. It's plays from now on" (*Happy Birthday* vii). Secondly, Vonnegut turned to theater in an attempt at both personal and familial recreation at the height of his career. As he explains in the introduction: "This play is what I did when I was forty-seven years old—when my six children were children no more. It was a time of change, of good-bye and good-bye and

good-bye. My big house was becoming a museum of vanished childhoods—of vanished young manhood as well. I was drinking more and arguing a lot and I had to get out of that house. [With the play] I was writing myself a new family and a new early manhood” (vii). He adds in a 1973 interview with Frank McLaughlin, “Every American author my age has tried a play sometime between the ages of 40 and 60. This is because of loneliness. Families disperse, children become grown, and somewhere during that time writing is an extremely lonesome business” (*Conversations* 71). From this 1970 onward, Vonnegut’s fiction similarly searches for ways to overcome loneliness. In his preface to 1974’s *Wampeters, Foma & Granfaloons*, Vonnegut drops his characteristically sardonic mask for a moment and candidly announces his plan: “My long-range schemes have to do with providing all Americans with artificial extended families of a thousand members or more. Only when we have overcome loneliness can we begin to share wealth and work more freely. I honestly believe we will have those families by-and-by, and I hope they will become international” (xxii). *Slapstick*, his next novel, is a comedic attempt to illustrate the need for such families.

Edward Said’s distinction between cultural filiation and affiliation is a key critical concept which can help contextualize Vonnegut’s extended family within the framework of diasporic theory. In “Secular Criticism,” Said defines culture as “an environment, process, and hegemony in which individuals (in their private circumstances) and their works are embedded” (8). The central limitation of culture, however, is that it “dominates from above without at the same time being available to everything and everyone it dominates” (9). Said argues that Western culture is inherently Eurocentric and that these Eurocentric values are used to alienate and disenfranchise those who do not

subscribe to them. The outsider, in other words, is destined to remain an outsider, creating the necessity for creating *new* cultures. Vonnegut refers to this phenomenon as “the dot” in “Biafra: A People Betrayed,” where he writes, “Those intellectuals had once fanned out all over Nigeria, where they had been envied and lynched and massacred. So they retreated to their homeland, to the dot” (148). The “dot” may be a tiny spot on a map, but philosophically speaking, it is an ideological homeland at the same time.

While filiation and affiliation are terms Said uses in the context of literary criticism, they can just as easily be used in a broader cultural sense. Simply put, filiation is a matter of birth or nationality; affiliation can be based on “social and political conviction, economic and historical circumstances, voluntary effort, and willed deliberation” (25). In this sense, an individual can belong to a culture by filiation but not by affiliation (and vice versa). As an example, in the prologue to *Slapstick*, Vonnegut describes how he and his older brother Bernard, both “belong to artificial extended families which allow [them] to claim relatives all over the world.” As he writes: “He is a brother to scientists everywhere. I am a brother to writers everywhere” (5). Even an “artificial” extended family, Vonnegut seems to be suggesting, one based on something as arbitrary as vocation, has all the makings of a culture.

Much to that end, the existential center for much of Vonnegut’s work is formed by his attempt to make sense of life outside of traditional Western culture. *Breakfast of Champions* finds him wrestling with this very issue. As he writes in the introduction: “I have no culture, no humane harmony in my brains. I can’t live without a culture anymore” (5). Vonnegut’s problem here is one of affiliative alienation, the very condition he proposes to rectify with extended families.

Interestingly, Wole Soyinka offers a contrasting view of culture in “Between Self and System: The Artist in Search of Liberation,” which he defines as “a rather assertive environment in which one exists, willy-nilly-at all times and in all places. If there were an escape from it, it could be ignored” (40). From Soyinka’s perspective, culture is inevitable. While this may be true in a strict sense, if Avtar Brah is correct and borders are metaphoric, culture can be defined intellectually as well as geographically.

For Vonnegut, Biafra’s greatest (if ultimately short-lived) achievement was the creation of an autonomous ideological “homeland” consisting of extended families within the broader context of Nigerian culture. In Vonnegut’s Hobart and William Smith Colleges graduation speech, he adds, “[Biafran citizens] could look out for one another, without any help from the central government, because every Biafran was a member of an extended family. Some Biafrans had thousands of relatives or more” (*Palm Sunday* 187). What’s important about this speech, other than reflecting the deep influence the Biafran experience had on his thought in the 1970s, is that it documents Vonnegut’s first usage of the term “extended family.” With *Slapstick*, published two years later, he would go on to employ the term in his fiction.

### ***Slapstick*: Diasporic Community and Artificial Extended Families**

First, to address the elephant in the room—by almost any standard imaginable, *Slapstick* isn’t Vonnegut’s most cohesive or successful novel. In his own assessment of his work from *Palm Sunday*, one in which he issued a grade to each novel, he assigned a “D” to *Slapstick*. It is a strange novel, more of an extended dream than a logically coherent narrative. As Stanley Schatt writes, “Vonnegut’s tone [in the novel] lies somewhere between the cosmic detachment in *Cat’s Cradle* and the frenzied involvement

in *Breakfast of Champions*” (117). Much like *Happy Birthday, Wanda June*, *Slapstick* is an anomaly, an unusual text which, at least on the surface, is an outlier among the rest of Vonnegut’s work. Perhaps because of this very reason, it has yielded some of the most diverse, provocative, consistently original criticism of any of Vonnegut’s major works. For instance, Sumner, tracing the autobiographical references in the novel’s prologue, suggests that the relationship between Wilber and Eliza Swain is based largely on Vonnegut’s sense of survivor’s guilt after the death of his sister, Alice. “It is primordial feeling he was never able to shake,” Sumner writes. “In terms of worldly success, why her and not me?” (175). He goes on to argue that of all Vonnegut’s novels, *Slapstick* most closely resembles a fully-realized version of a Kilgore Trout text brought to life, ultimately critiquing it by adding, “Perhaps it had been a mistake to dismiss his alter ego Kilgore Trout as a vehicle for such fantasies” (186).

Taking a different approach altogether, and exploring Vonnegut’s humor as a way of addressing the “serious intellectual concerns” (59) of modernity, Beck focuses on the physical aspects of the novel, where the self is explored as a freakish, alien construction. “Long noses, wild hair, elongated bodies, collapsed bodies, over-/undersized genitalia, or animal-like physiognomy: the bodies in physical comedy are not those of classic aesthetics but are rather ‘grotesque’” (61), he writes, suggesting, finally, that this is a metaphor for the sense of bone-deep otherness the characters experience. “The characters are plagued by their bodies and bodily functions, so that the century’s turmoil receives a physical corporality from which there is no escape” (63). And yet, at the very core of the novel is the possibility of escape, and that will be my focus here. *Slapstick* is

Vonnegut's most direct attempt in fiction for creating the framework for extended families, the diasporic communities he wishes all Americans to be part of.

What is diaspora? This is a question which James Clifford spends a good deal of time wrestling with his in seminal "Diasporas." The answer is far from simple. An essential element of any diasporic community is "an experience of displacement" which results in "constructing homes away from home" (302). By way of Safran, Ong, and Gilroy, Clifford explores the term in different contexts—the "ideal" Jewish diaspora, the black British diaspora, etc. Ultimately, Clifford suggests, sharing a "real or symbiotic homeland" is not necessary; neither is "the projection from a specific origin" (306). On a basic level, Clifford defines the term as "dispersed networks of peoples who share common historical experiences of dispossession, displacement" (309) before acknowledging that a static and precise definition is not possible (310). Diasporic communities, after all, vary widely from one to the next, and to become too prescriptive is to run the risk of exclusion. What's important, here, at least as far as Vonnegut is concerned, is that a diasporic community need not necessarily share ancestral/cultural roots or a particular destination. The journey, one which is always figurative for Vonnegut, can be metaphoric.

Similarly, Avtar Brah's "Diaspora, Border, and Transnational Identities" works towards meaningfully defining the term as well. If Clifford focuses more on the importance of *routes* to diasporic communities, Brah is much more interested in the *roots*. For Brah, "at the heart of the notion of diaspora is the image of a journey" and "diasporic journeys are about settling down, about putting roots elsewhere" (616). Additionally, borders figure prominently in diasporic theory, and Brah argues that

borders are “arbitrary constructions” which are “always metaphoric” (625).” A crucial area where she differs from Clifford, however, is that “a homing desire is not the same thing as a desire for a homeland” (614-615). With these definitions of diaspora in mind, with the reminder of the chapter I will explore Vonnegut’s artificial extended family as a metaphoric diasporic community, one with both roots and routes in modernity.

*Slapstick*’s protagonist, Dr. Wilbur Daffodil-11 Swain, is the current King of Manhattan and the former President of the United States. At the time of the novel’s opening, American has been devastated by plague, a mysterious “Green Death” which has wiped out most of the population, leaving only a few scattered survivors behind in a post-apocalyptic wasteland. The narrative consists of a lengthy autobiography written by Swain. In his prologue, Vonnegut explains, “This is the closest I will ever come to writing an autobiography. It is about what life *feels* like to me” (1). Two points become apparent. 1) Vonnegut is directly establishing a parallel between himself and Swain—they are both, after all, writing autobiographies—and 2) to borrow Augé’s term, American culture had become a meaningless “non-place” for Vonnegut. Swain, like Vonnegut, has no home, no culture, no point of direction. In other words, they have no diasporic community like what Vonnegut had given witness to in Biafra. The loneliness and despair he describes literally in *Breakfast of Champions* becomes a metaphoric plague in *Slapstick*. As such, I would argue the only way to read the novel is allegorically.

Swain describes himself and his twin sister, Eliza, as “monsters,” born “so ugly that our parents were ashamed” (29). This sense of ugliness, however, has less to do with their abnormal height and extra fingers, toes, and nipples than it does with their parents’

reactions to and limited interactions with them. The children are “entombed” (32) in a mansion filled with servants, orchards, and secret chambers and only visited by their parents once a year, on their birthdays. The paradox is that while all of their physical needs are met, none of their emotional needs are attended to. In time, this leads to emotional aloofness. In describing his mother, Swain observes, “And, while I never learned to love her, or to love anyone for that matter, I did admire her unwavering decency towards one and all” (73). Here, Swain is giving voice to a sentiment Vonnegut himself explores in the prologue, where he writes that love “does not seem that important to me...I wish that people who are conventionally supposed to love each other would say to each other, when they fight, ‘Please—a little less love, and a little more common decency’” (2). Swain’s parents end up marginalizing their children and making them feel like (as opposed to merely looking like) monsters not because they don’t love them, but rather, because they prove incapable of showing them common decency.

Like Howard Campbell, Swine is a member of an ill-fated nation of two with Eliza. “The two of us not only a single mind but a thoroughly populated universe,” (60) he writes. When they are separated after revealing their intelligence, he explains, “Thus did Eliza and I destroy our Paradise—our nation of two” (77). In describing this relationship, Vonnegut again explores the inherent limitations of all such nations. To return to his dot metaphor for Biafra, the dot continuously shrinks. Yet the homelands and nations are two different things entirely. Anthropologist Daniel Jordan Smith has written extensively on the Igbo and the lasting impact of the Biafran diaspora in Nigeria. As he states in “Legacies of Biafra: Marriage, ‘Home People,’ and Reproduction Among the Igbo of Nigeria,” “Some of the most powerful aspects of Igbo culture and

demography are reinforced through the production and circulation of collective memories of Biafra” (30). Even after the fall of the republic, Biafra remains a homeland through shared experience and collective memory, even though the dot no longer has geographic reality on any map. Such is Swain’s nation of two with Eliza, and his attempt to create the shared communities they imagined as children involves forging “artificial” extended family among the disposed masses who share no collective homeland.

Ultimately, Swain becomes President of the United States with a very simple campaign. Indeed, his platform consists of a single idea-- “Lonesome No More!” Like Vonnegut, he sees loneliness as the great American disease, so he enacts a ludicrous scheme for reorganizing America into thousands of artificial extended families. Each citizen is given a new name. The middle name consists of a randomly selected noun, followed by a number between one and twenty. For instance, let’s take the protagonist. Everyone with Daffodil for a middle name is his cousin; everyone with Dafodil-11 as a middle name is his sibling. While it seems absurd, Swain’s “anti-loneliness plan” proves to be wildly popular because it allows people to be part of something larger than themselves. For instance, someone can walk into a random bar anywhere in America and bond with a fellow “Uranium.” “Raspberries” and “Chipmunks” are all given an artificial extended families of brothers and sisters in every city. How do these families serve one another? “By watering their houseplants while they are away; by taking care of their babies so they could get out of the house for an hour or two; by telling them the name of a truly painless dentist; by mailing a letter for them; by keeping them company on a scary visit to the doctor; by visiting them in jail or a hospital” (195). And so on. If, as Brah suggests, borders can be “arbitrary constructions” (625), so too can families.

Mengouchi and Mouro borrow Deleuze and Guattari's term assemblage, which they define as "a collection of multiplicities that are brought together in an act of reterritorialization, thus giving life to an idea or an identity that never existed before" (410) to describe Wilber and Eliza Swain, who they suggest "represent a marginalized group" (413). More broadly, however, assemblage perfectly defines artificial extended families as well. Mengouchi and Mouro go on to argue that "The two siblings deterritorialize the traditional sense of family because it abandoned them and denied them love; hence the new stratum that later becomes a nation-wide system" (419). I would add that this (re)deterritorialized familial space is based directly on the Igbo family model Vonnegut encountered in Biafra. As Vonnegut writes in "Biafra: A People Betrayed": "Families met often, men and women alike, to vote on family matters. When war came along, there was no conscription. The family decided who should go. In happier times, the families voted on who should go to college—to study what and where. Then everybody chipped in for clothes and transportation and tuition" (150). In *Slapstick*, Vonnegut similarly creates and describes in detail a family meeting which takes place among the Daffodils in, of all places, Indianapolis, the homeland of Vonnegut's own dispersed extended family. "With a little luck, I might have become Chairperson of the meeting," Swain writes, "although I had been in town for less than a day. The Chairperson was chosen by lot from all assembled. And the winner of the drawing that night was an eleven-year-old black girl named Dorothy Daffodil-7 Garland" (242). The fact that Dorothy leads the meeting so effectively while commanding unconditional respect from her relatives illustrates the absence of racism, sexism, and ageism with the artificial extended family model, much as these boundaries were nonfactors among the

Biafran families, where men and women made decisions as equals. Also, as in the Biafran family meeting Vonnegut describes, among the Daffodils, “The most pressing business [during the meeting] had to do with selecting four replacements for the fallen Daffodils in the army” (243). The Daffodils, like the Igbo Vonnegut encountered, vote on who will go to war to fight for the family.

Ultimately, *Slapstick* is more than abstract allegory—it’s also satire. By offering such an absurd solution to the problem of loneliness, Vonnegut is encouraging his readers to find practical alternatives by creating communities and joining families, artificial or otherwise. Over his next few novels, Vonnegut continued to explore the need for extended families, and in speeches throughout the 70s and 80s, he advocated compassion, kindness, and understanding. Towards the very end of his career, however, particularly in his final novel, he would return to these themes with a renewed sense of excitement.

### ***Timequake: Implications in an Enormous Implication At Last***

In *Timequake*, which, finally, serves as a summing-up for Vonnegut’s career as a novelist, he adds four new Amendments to the Constitution which succinctly summarize what he’s spent the previous five decades advocating in thirteen previous novels and countless short stories, essays, interviews, and commencement addresses:

**Article XXVIII:** Every newborn shall be sincerely welcomed and cared for until maturity.

**Article XXIX:** Every adult who needs it shall be given meaningful work to do, at a living wage. (176)

**Article XXX:** Every person, upon reaching a statutory age of puberty, shall be declared an adult in a solemn public ritual, during which he or she must welcome his or her new responsibilities to the community, and their attendant dignities.

**Article XXXI:** Every effort shall be made to make every person feel that he or she will be sorely missed when he or she is gone.

Such essential elements in an ideal diet for the human spirit, of course, can be provided convincingly only by extended families (202)

It's no accident that *Timequake* is Vonnegut's final novel. He announces in the prologue that "my last book is done" (xvii), and throughout the text, he makes repeated references to his career as a novelist coming to a close. In this sense, the novel serves as Vonnegut's attempt to lend cohesion to his body of work, or, to use Dave Eggers' term, which he offers in his forward to *Complete Stories*, to bring "moral clarity" to "a knotted world" (xiii). Paradoxically, as a swan song, *Timequake* is one of Vonnegut's *least* accessible novels. Davis describes it as "a published novel within a memoir within a failed, unpublished novel within a sociological tract (replete with strong admonitions about ways to live ethically)" (133), and to be sure this is accurate, if perhaps a bit semantically overcomplicated. *Timequake* is all of these forms. Yet that's only part of it. In *Kurt Vonnegut's America*, Jerome Klinkowitz offers a decidedly different take: "Vonnegut infuses the narrative's making with a sense of himself, not just the writer of it all (which would be metafictional, a stylistic exercise at best) but as an identifiable person with values and beliefs" (112). Another way of thinking about *Timequake* is that Vonnegut isn't simply in the novel—he *is* the novel. He, as much as Kilgore Trout, is the protagonist, and *Timequake* is his story. Just as it was necessary to develop a new form in order to create the autobiographical collage that is *Palm Sunday* (Vonnegut named it "blivit"(xii), so too does *Timequake* require it's own form.

Structure aside, *Timequake* charts a singular journey, namely Kilgore Trout's journey from a life where "being alive is a crock of shit" (3) "on a planet where the smartest animals hate being alive" (5) to acceptance of being "teensy-weensy

implications in an enormous implication” (28). In other words, by novel’s end, Trout achieves what was unattainable to Howard Campbell and never full-realized by Wilbur Swain—an extended family as part of a metaphoric diasporic community.

Avtar Brah’s work can help contextualize Trout’s transformation. Brah’s chief contribution to diasporic theory is the notion of a diasporic space, which she proposes and defines as “the point at which boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, of belonging and otherness, of ‘us’ and ‘them’ are contested” (632). The importance of this concept is that it doesn’t make a journey a required trait; a group/community in a diasporic space can “stay put” and at the same time have its autonomy recognized (and ideally accepted/respected) by the larger culture of which it is a part. When Trout attests that, “If I hadn’t learned to live without a culture and a society, acculturation would have broken my heart a thousand times” (33), he takes a misguided approach to what culture is and isn’t. Prior to his heroic actions after the end of the timequake for which the novel is named, he in fact *did* exist without a culture, yet this resulted in him existing without a community as well. As we saw in the previous chapter, for Vonnegut, artistic creation is a method for transcending the horrors of daily life, and Trout “could tune out the creak of shit being alive was as long as he was [writing], head down, with a ballpoint pen on a yellow legal pad” (8). At the same time, Trout is homeless, has no cultural or national identity, and has been “throwing away stories instead of offering them to publications” for over twenty years (53). There are no boundaries of inclusion or exclusion in Trout’s world precisely because he chooses not to engage. In this sense, Trout rejects even the possibility of Brah’s “us.”

Trout's decision to discard rather than share his stories contrasts sharply with what Vonnegut establishes as humanity's central responsibility. As he writes, "Humanists try to behave decently and honorably without expectation of rewards and punishments in the 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" (82). Community is reality. In "Global Journeys: From Transnationalism to Diaspora," Nadja Johnson suggests that diasporic identity is always in a state of change, and "this identity, though in constant fluctuation, eventually results in a sense of belonging to a common identity" (48). Drawing from Clifford, Brah, and Johnson, the requisite elements for a group to be considered a diasporic community include a sense of displacement, a journey (be it geographical or ideological), and the establishment of "roots" in the midst of cultural/social otherness. These metaphoric roots can be manifested in an attempt to improve the quality of daily life. For Vonnegut, this was Trout's greatest achievement, and his own ultimate goal. "The basis of every great advertisement is a credible promise. Jesus promised better times in the afterlife. Trout was promising the same thing in the here and now" (179). When Monica Pepper, a minor character in the novel, spray paints "Fuck Art" on the door of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, she is making a statement about the ultimate limits of art; when Trout removes a painting from the wall and prepares to weaponize it to destroy a ringing smoke alarm, he is using art to make the world a better place. "At least I could make that little part of the Universe exactly as it should be," he says when he describes how he carefully replaced the painting and ensured that it was

hanging straight. “I was grateful for the opportunity to do that” (179). Art is as practical as it is ornamental, and it plays a privileged role in Vonnegut’s worldview.

Throughout *Timequake*, Vonnegut returns to his insistent argument for the necessity of community. As he writes towards the end of the novel: “Yes, and Trout harped on the need for extended families, and I still do, because it is so obvious that we, because we are human, need them as much as we need proteins and carbohydrates and fats and vitamins and essential minerals” (200). Vonnegut also returns to Biafra in the final pages of his final novel, reminding readers one last time to consider the Biafran model for family. “I was in southern Nigeria in 1970, at the very end of the Biafran War there, on the Biafran side, the losing side, the mostly Ibo side...I met an Ibo father of a new baby. He had four hundred relatives! Even with a losing war going on, he and his wife were about to go on a trip, introducing the baby to all its relatives” (201). This echoes and helps contextualize Trout’s rather crude assertion earlier in the novel that “In my entire career as a writer, I created only one living, breathing, three-dimensional character. I did it with my ding-dong in a birth canal” (72). In fathering his son, Leon, Trout contributed to his community, an act which Vonnegut regards as his greatest achievement.

The novel ends in a triumphant celebration, a clambake which takes place on the beach at Xanadu, a writers’ resort in Rhode Island. Trout is the guest of honor, and by giving his alter-ego, rather than himself, such a prestigious position, Vonnegut allows *his work* to take center stage. In a Capra-esque finale, virtually *everyone* who played a role in Vonnegut’s career as a writer is present. Close friends and critics Jerome Klinkowitz, Asa Pieratt, Loree Rackstraw, Robert Weide, and Marc Leeds are there, and so are Nick

Nolte and Kevin McCarthy, both of whom acted in adaptations of Vonnegut's work; they are joined by teachers and classmates from Shortridge High School who file in next to Jill Krementz, Knox Berger, Don Farber, Sidney Offit beside look-alikes for the dead who helped define Vonnegut's career, among them his father, his "war buddy" Bernard V. O'Hare, his first wife, Jane, and Ida Young, the nanny who helped raise him in Indianapolis. Earlier in the novel, Vonnegut refers to the far-spread family and friends from his Indianapolis youth as a "Diaspora!" (152), and in the final pages of his final novel, his entire diasporic community is brought together for a magical moment of communal revelry. Taylor suggests that *Timequake* offers "a celebration of literature...as a bulwark against loneliness and absurdity, and as a fertile ground for the cultivation of new selves and new histories." At the same time, as the novel--and Vonnegut's career--conclude—it is also a celebration of community and an acknowledgement that art and community are inseparable. Trout's pleas for Vonnegut to "*Make me young, make me young, make me young!*" (302) at the end of *Breakfast of Champions* go unanswered. Instead, Vonnegut offers his most famous character and alter ego a gift more important, and certainly more lasting, than youth when he explains that the cast of characters assembled for the clambake "all wanted Trout to feel that he was home at last, and a vital member of an extended family" (228). Finally, and for the first time in his life, Trout realizes that he truly is an implication in an enormous implication. At last, Trout's journey is complete, and Vonnegut provides him with an extended family, a culture, and a metaphoric homeland.

In closing, Vonnegut frequently writes about his training as a cultural anthropologist, and his work in this field deserves exploration. A goal of this chapter, and this dissertation as a whole, is to advance Vonnegut studies in this under-explored direction. Notions of nations and cultures and families abound in his work. In fact, as he argues in his contribution to 1995's *An Unsentimental Education: Writers and Chicago*, "My ironic distance as a novelist has a lot to do with having been an anthropology student. Anthropology made me a cultural relativist, which is what everybody ought to be. People the world over out to be taught, seriously, that culture is a gadget, and that one culture is as arbitrary as another" (*If This Isn't Nice* 150). Not only is culture arbitrary, but to Vonnegut, it is an act of creation as well. More importantly, it is a human construct, with the emphasis always squarely on the human. "After going through the war and all, I thought man was the thing to study" (*If This Isn't Nice* 148). In that respect, his focus remained unchanged, throughout both his life and his career.

A testament to Vonnegut's sensitivity as a cultural anthropologist can be found in his keen awareness of diasporic theory. In *Timequake*, he actually refers to the far-spread family and friends from his Indianapolis youth as a "Diaspora!" (152) and this is certainly no accident. "Yes, and a dream of taking better care of our people [is futile] without some scheme for giving us the support and companionship of extended families, within which sharing and compassion are more plausible than in an enormous nation" (190) he writes towards the end of his final novel, and the antecedent of this conviction can be found in 1954's "Adam," one of his earliest published short stories. After Heinz Knechtmann, a Holocaust survivor, receives the ecstatic news that his wife has just given birth to a healthy son, he searches futilely for someone to join him in celebrating the miracle of

human life, only to be met with indifference and disdain. “There are too many of us,” he mumbles alone, “and we are all too far apart” (313). Reducing this gap between self and other through the formation of artificial extended families, similar to what he found in Biafra in the dying days of a doomed republic, proved to be one of the chief goals of his philosophical project. In the end, he may have been *A Man Without a County*, but he certainly had a culture and a diaspora.

## CONCLUSION:

### KURT VONNEGUT, NAME-GIVER

**Playboy:** “In some of your books—especially *The Sirens of Titan* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*—there’s a serious notion that all moments in time exist simultaneously, which implies that the future can’t be changed by an act of will in the present. How does a desire to improve things fit with that?”

**Vonnegut:** “Understand, of course, that everything I say is horseshit.”

1973 Interview (*Conversations* 77)

Vonnegut contextualizes *Slaughterhouse-Five* in the final chapter by placing the novel in a particular historical context—his own. “Robert Kennedy, whose summer home is two miles from the home I live in all year round, was shot two night 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” (268). By bringing his most celebrated novel into conversation with a precise historical moment, Vonnegut reveals both the immediacy and timelessness of his work.

In the early spring of 2022, faced with today’s realities, how would Vonnegut have responded to the following headlines?

The planet is ravaged by a virus which continues to mutate. To date, over six million people have died from COVID-19. According to the World Health Organization, as of this morning, the exact number is 6, 047, 653. So it goes.

Last month, Vladimir Putin invaded Ukraine. The day before yesterday, UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres made headlines when he matter-of-factly stated potential nuclear conflict is “now back within the realm of possibility.” So it goes.

Vonnegut lamented towards the end of his life, “The last thing I ever wanted was to be alive when the three most powerful people on the whole planet would be named Bush, Dick, and Colon” (*A Man Without a Country* 40). Mercifully, he didn’t hang around long enough to hear the *Access Hollywood* tape where a soon-to-be elected president instructed *another* Bush to “grab ‘em by the pussy”...or to experience an America where such a statement is not only accepted but also immortalized on t-shirts and trucker hats from sea to shining sea. So it goes.

These are strange times. It’s altogether fitting that readers are (re)turning to Vonnegut and that his work is receiving both increased attention and renewed critical interest. After all, viruses, despotic dictators, the threat of nuclear annihilation, and incompetent presidents abound in Vonnegut’s fiction and non-fiction alike.

In September of 2020, Ryan North and Albert Monteys released a wildly popular and critically lauded graphic novel adaptation of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. So it goes. Three months later, Edith Vonnegut published *Love Kurt, The Vonnegut Love Letters 1941-1945*, which offers an intensely personal account of Vonnegut as a young soldier and lover. Last November, long-time Vonnegut friend and confidant Robert Weide released *Unstuck in Time*, a documentary four decades in the making about KV’s life and legacy on American literature and culture. That same month, Tom Roston published *The Writer’s Crusade: Kurt Vonnegut and the Many Lives of Slaughterhouse-Five*, a fascinating text which uses archival research to construct what is in many ways a

biography of Vonnegut's most famous novel. Slated for an October 2022 release by Seven Stories Press, Christina Jarvis's *Lucky Mud & Other Foma: A Field Guide to Kurt Vonnegut's Planetary Citizenship* promises "a deep dive into Kurt Vonnegut's oeuvre and legacy, illuminating his unique perspective on environmental stewardship and our shared connections as humans, Earthlings, and stardust." Contextualizing this influx of critical and popular attention is the 2017 release of Jerome Klinkowitz and Dan Wakefield's invaluable *Kurt Vonnegut: Complete Stories* (2017) which joins all of Vonnegut's previously published shorter fiction with additional stories recently unearthed from the vast Lilly Library archives. So it goes. These texts, released during a pandemic, reveal the ongoing relevance of Kurt Vonnegut more than a decade after his death. On a deeper level, at a time when the daily headlines read like Vonnegut novels with the apocalyptic undertones cranked up to eleven, renewed interest in Vonnegut also reveals the comfort in someone, somewhere, reminding us that, "I feel and think much as you do, care about many of the same things you care about... You are not alone" (*Timequake* 221).

In 1990's *Critical Essays on Kurt Vonnegut*, Robert Merrill predicts, "I suspect that Vonnegut criticism is about to undergo a marked resurgence" (22). Almost 20 years later, in *New Critical Essays on Kurt Vonnegut*, David Simmons argues that "With the death of Vonnegut in 2007, now seems like an appropriate time to set about reassessing the author's extensive body of work" (xi). In post-Trump America, Vonnegut is entering a new phase a critical reassessment.

My aim in this dissertation has been to offer a new reading of Kurt Vonnegut's work, one which uses philosophy and diasporic theory to contextualize his body of work

firmly in modernity. Like Nietzsche before him, Vonnegut's philosophical project is one of saying yes to life in a defiant response to Camus' "one truly serious philosophical problem"-- suicide. Vonnegut suggests in a 1980 interview that, "The most horrible hypocrisy or the most terrifying hypocrisy or the most tragic hypocrisy at the center of life, I think, which no one dares mention, is that human beings don't like life much" (*Conversations* 232). This belief informs and unites all of his work. "Do you realize that all great literature," he asks in *A Man Without a Country*, is "about what a bummer it is to be a human being?" (9). At the same time, "a plausible mission of artists is to make people appreciate being alive at least a little bit" (*Timequake* 1). For Vonnegut, the good life is precisely that—being able to appreciate being alive just a little bit, if only once in a while. Purpose, *foma*, art, and community make this possible in Vonnegut's systemic critique of daily life. In the preceding chapters, my goal has been to bring Vonnegut into conversation with Camus, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, and diasporic theory to illustrate the philosophical achievement of his life-long project.

Vonnegut's popularity, cultural influence, and lasting legacy stem in large part from his philosophical originality. Nietzsche defines originality in *The Gay Science* as the ability "to *see* something that still has no name; that still cannot be named even though it is lying right there before everyone's eyes. The way people usually are, it takes a name to make something visible at all. —Those with originality have usually been the name-givers" (151). Philosophically speaking, what makes Vonnegut "original" in a Nietzschean sense is not his (post)modern style, unique plots, or metafictional narratives, but rather his life-long attempt to give name to the maladies of modernity. For Vonnegut, purposelessness, embarrassment, hopelessness, shame, and loneliness are *serious*

philosophical problems, and his work represents a systematic and incredibly cohesive attempt to combat them.

Robert Morace suggests that Vonnegut's unified vision is the result of his "weaving individual works into a larger extended family of fictions," and "if you've read one Vonnegut book, you've read them all, or will" (156). Morace rightly points out the singularity of vision which guides all of Vonnegut's work. All of Vonnegut's characters are all engaged in the same battle: daily life. Connecting each narrative is Vonnegut himself, not just the creator of but also a character within his own fictions. It's Vonnegut, after all, who, to borrow Henry James' term, is the string the pearls are strung on. No one suffers more in all of Vonnegut than Vonnegut himself. No one laughs more either. His readers experience life *with him*, as it happens, because his work is ultimately about him, and he is telling a single story—his own. So many of Vonnegut's novels are fictional autobiographies dressed up as novels. *Mother Night*, *Cat's Cradle*, *Slapstick*, *Deadeye Dick*, *Galapagos*, *Bluebeard*, and *Hocus Pocus* are autobiographies of tragically-flawed characters who are trying to make sense out of life. Kilgore Trout's stories are attempts to work towards the same goal. In the end, Vonnegut offers such a place of privilege to autobiographers because he himself is one. The lines between fiction and non-fiction become increasingly blurred throughout Vonnegut's career, to the point his final novel, *Timequake*, and his final work of non-fiction, *A Man Without a Country*, are at times difficult to differentiate. Like *Palm Sunday*, they too are *blivits*. In "The Death of the Author," Barthes suggests that the conventional, widely-practiced notion of authorship is problematic and in need of reconsideration. The "author" as a concept is a product of modernity and a result of post-Renaissance humanism. The

central problem Barthes finds with contemporary criticism is this: “The image of literature to be found in ordinary culture is tyrannically centered on the author, his person, his life, his tastes, his passions [...] The *explanation* of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it” (1466). Benjamin Widdis provocatively problematizes Barthes contentions in *Obscure Invitations*. His view of authorship (which he applies to literature, non-fiction, and film) is that the author never *really* died at all. As he explains, “the most cursory examination of the arts pages of our newspapers, the profiles in glossy magazines, the discussions abounding online and on the radio and on the road ... indicates that we have never stopped caring about authors” (3). He refers to the author as an “intentional being,” one whose identity is constructed from both texts and the media. Few authors are as intentionally present as Vonnegut, and in the later books particularly, the text and the author are one and the same.

What unifies Vonnegut’s philosophical project is his stubbornly-persistent attempt to answer a single question, the one Kilgore Trout found scrawled on the men’s room wall of a porn theater, the question with which this dissertation opens: what is the purpose of life? “What mankind hoped to learn,” Vonnegut writes in 1959’s *The Sirens of Titan*, “was who was actually in charge of all creation, and what all creation was all about” (1). In 1973’s *Breakfast of Champions*, Dwayne Hoover has a single request when asked what he wants most: “Tell me what life is all about” (169). At the end of his life and career, Vonnegut was still in search of an answer, and in 2005’s *A Man Without A Country*, he states, “When you get to my age, if you get to my age, and if you have reproduced, you will find yourself asking your own children, who are themselves middle-aged, ‘What is life all about?’” (65-66). This is the question which Vonnegut set out to

answer. To that end, Vonnegut's work offers a guide to a "good life" in modernity, one based on foundational principles of resistance, harmless self-deception, artistic creation, and community. That's not to say, however, that he found existence any easier than the rest of us. To use Widdis' term, Vonnegut's "intentional" presence in his work offers an example of his life-long struggle. He makes his mother's suicide, his experiences in Dresden, and the tragic death of his sister *part* of his work. As readers, we experience the dissolution of his marriage, his struggles with depression, his declining libido, and his suicide attempt as they happen to him, not because they inform his work, but because they are written *into* the work itself. According to Jim Adams, Vonnegut's nephew who he raised after the death of his sister, "there was a definite disconnect between the kind of guy you would imagine Kurt must be from the tone of his books...and the reality of his behavior on a daily basis. He was a complicated, difficult man...I think he admired the idea of love, community, and family from a distance, but he couldn't deal with the complicated emotional elements they included" (Shields 214-15). Throughout his life, he struggled with the very principles he advocated, reminding us that the good life is possible, but it is always an act of negotiation between the self and the world.

In his prologue to 1979's *Jailbird*, Vonnegut recounts a letter he'd recently received from John Figler, a high school student who suggested he could sum up the totality of Vonnegut's work with a single sentence: "Love may fail, but courtesy will prevail" (2). "This seems true to me," Vonnegut writes, "and complete. So I am now in the abashed condition...of realizing that I needn't have bothered to write several books. A seven-word telegram could have done the job. Seriously" (2). Near the end of the

novel, Walter Starbuck suggests, “We are here for no purpose, unless we can invent one. Of that I am sure” (301). Such is the challenge Vonnegut sets before us. Just as importantly, it is the challenge he set before himself. With purpose, *foma*, art, and community, Vonnegut tells, us, virtually anything can be bearable. Even modernity.

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## CURRICULUM VITAE

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#### EDUCATION

##### **University of Louisville**

Doctorate of Philosophy in the Humanities

May 2022

##### **Eastern Kentucky University**

MA in English

December 2002

Emphasis in Composition and Rhetoric

##### **Berea College**

BA in English

May 2001

#### TEACHING EXPERIENCE

##### **Sullivan University**

Chair, Humanities & Fine Arts

2018 to Present

Chair, English Department

2011 to 2018

Faculty

2004 to Present

##### **Spalding University**

Instructor—English Department

2004

##### **Indiana University Southeast**

Instructor—English Department

2004-2006

**Eastern Kentucky University**  
Visiting Lecturer—English Department 2003-200

**Eastern Kentucky University**  
Instructor—English Department 2001-2003

**Eastern Kentucky University**  
Graduate Assistant—English Department 2001-2002

**SULLIVAN UNIVERSITY PROGRAM**  
**INVOLVEMENT AND COMMITTEE WORK**

**Representative Selections**

The SUS Faculty Retreat Executive Planning Committee  
(2009-Present)

The Sullivan University Academic Council

The Sullivan University Mentor Program Co-Coordinator  
(2008-2018)

Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion Committee Member

The Sullivan University Acceptance of Academic Credit  
Committee (Chair) (2014)

The Sullivan University Curriculum Committee (2010-  
2013)

**SCHOLARSHIP AND RESEARCH**

**Publications**

**Review:** 2017

Review of *Beyond Gatsby: How Fitzgerald, Hemingway, and Writers of the 1920s Shaped American Culture* in *The Popular Culture Studies Journal*, 4(1-2), 459-462

**Review:** 2016

Review of *Puritanism and Modernist Novels: From Moral Character to the Ethical Self* in *James Joyce Quarterly*, 53 (1-2), 160-170

**Article:** 2004

”’This Promising of Great Secrets’: Literature, Ideas, and the (Re)Invention of Reality in Kurt Vonnegut's *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater, Slaughterhouse-Five*, and *Breakfast of Champions* or ‘Fantasies of an Impossibly Hospitable World’: Science Fiction and Madness in Vonnegut's Troutean Trilogy” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 45(3).

**Book (chapter):** 2006

“Billy Pilgrim and Science Fiction” in Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five* (Bloom’s Guides). Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House Publications.

**Book (chapter):** 2008

”’This Promising of Great Secrets’: Literature, Ideas, and the (Re) Invention of Reality in Kurt Vonnegut's *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater, Slaughterhouse-Five*, and *Breakfast of Champions* or ‘Fantasies of an Impossibly Hospitable World’: Science Fiction and Madness in Vonnegut's Troutean Trilogy” in *Kurt Vonnegut (Bloom's Modern Critical Views)*. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House Publications.

### **Academic Conference Presentations/Panels**

Vonnegut in Biafra, Or, How KV Discovered Better Living Through Community in the Final Days of an African Republic.

Presentation delivered Granfalloon: A Kurt Vonnegut Convergence.

Bloomington, Indiana, May 1-12, 2019

Vonnegut and the Good Life.

Presentation delivered Granfalloon: A Kurt Vonnegut Convergence.

Bloomington, Indiana, May 1-12, 2018

Moving Beyond the Anecdotal: Assessment in the Writing Classroom

Co-presenter. Presentation delivered at the 2016 IUPUI Assessment Institute Conference

Indianapolis, Indiana, October 16, 2016

Moving Beyond the Anecdotal: Assessment in the Writing Classroom

Co-presenter. Presentation delivered at the 2016 Sullivan University Faculty Retreat

Louisville, Kentucky, October 15, 2016

Everything Noble, Exalted, Deep, True, and Moving: Joyce, Autofiction, and the Creation of *Ulysses*

Presentation delivered at the **XXIV International James Joyce Symposium**

**Utrecht, The Netherlands**, June 15-20, 2014

Magnolious Molly and Sustainability: An International Round-Table II (Panelist)

Presentation delivered at the **XXIV International James Joyce Symposium**

**Utrecht, The Netherlands**, June 15-20, 2014

Am I Doing This Right?: A Grassroots Approach to Improving/Creating a Student/Faculty Centered Student Success Program

Presentation delivered at the 2013 National College Survival Conference

New Orleans, LA, June 19-21, 2013

Teaching Isn't Just Teaching Anymore: Tips for Avoiding  
Burnout and Making Teaching Fun...Again!

Presentation delivered at the Lilly Conference on College & University Teaching  
and Learning Bethesda, MD, May 30-June 2, 2012

Banquo's Ghost: The Conflict between Autonomy and  
Faith in Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer* and *Lancelot*.

Paper presented at the Kentucky Philological  
Association Conference  
Frankfort, KY, March 2003

"No Man is an Island": Collaboration, Composition, and the Classroom.

Paper presented at the Kentucky Philological  
Association Conference  
Frankfort, KY, March 2002