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A Satiric Quest for Knowledge: Kurt Vonnegut's Legacy (1922-2007)

In his perceptive essay on Vonnegut's masterpiece *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Salman Rushdie comments that the first time he read the novel, in 1972, he felt the presence in its pages of the Vietnam War. Despite the fact that Vonnegut's classic book deals with the Second World War and its psychological aftermaths, Rushdie argues that "people's feelings about Vietnam have a good deal to do with the novel's huge success" (2019, 2). Nevertheless, the literary and emotional achievements of the novel have extended for decades after the end of the Vietnam War, which may bring to mind the idea that *Slaughterhouse-Five* is still a powerful book because wars have never stopped. Vonnegut's novel, Rushdie perceives, "sees war as a tragedy so great that perhaps only the mask of comedy allows one to look it in the eye" (3).

Born in Indianapolis on November 11, 1922, Kurt Vonnegut Jr. would soon follow the existential lead of modernism, even if his love for science took him to write a very peculiar type of fiction. He was the son of a wealthy architect and the proud younger brother of Bernard Vonnegut, who was to become an expert scientist in the chaotic field of climatology. Kurt's childhood, as he sparingly commented, was happily spent within his large family household until the economic effects of the Great Depression dramatically changed his upper-class upbringing. In effect, his family's financial problems produced a deep influence in the political and social views that the future writer was going to offer in his books.

Donald E. Morse brilliantly summarizes the role Vonnegut plays in the history of American literature: "There is a good case to be made for seeing Kurt Vonnegut as the representative post-World War II American writer. He adapted and extended popular literary forms, such as science fiction, the spy novel, prison narrative, hoax autobiography, memoir, and so forth while experimenting extensively with literary technique—experiments now labeled 'postmodern'" (2000, 395).

In 1969, writer Ronald Sukenick had famously argued in his novella *Death of the Novel* that the time had come for a *post-realism* because all "absolutes had become absolutely problematic" (1969, 41). At the time, the mimetic and the self-referential were stylistic options that critics still used to separate creative writers in two different factions, realists and metafictionists. At that stage of postmodernism, before Jameson declared the commodification of all, Sukenick was among those authors who used radical metafictional strategies, which soon won them the qualification of *postmodern* on account of the capacity metafiction has to question traditional ideological ways to represent reality. Other writers—frequently literary critics and university professors—such as John Barth, Raymond Federman, William Gass, and Gilbert Sorrentino also belonged to this group that, for a few years, seemed to be the exclusive representative of the postmodern ethos in fiction, with terms such as "surfiction," "metafiction," or "post-realism" to qualify them as a distinctive school of writing (see Linda Hutcheon 1991). However, even if not yet nominated to become a member of the postmodern *élite*, by 1969 Vonnegut had already written some examples of "post-realist" fiction, such as his second novel *The Sirens of Titan*. In 1969, he finally published his long-delayed book about the destruction of Dresden, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, a novel that, as the author's narrating persona confessed in its first pages, he had been trying to write for more than 20 years.

Soon after the publication of his masterpiece, critics established Vonnegut as one among the most relevant postmodern novelists, together with Thomas Pynchon, E. L. Doctorow and Don DeLillo, to revise both American culture and the realist post-war novel in the light of the scientific revolutions of modern times.

In the 1950s, at the beginning of his writing career, Vonnegut writes a large number of short stories that deal with the representation of post-war US middle-class and with the changes brought about by the new consumer's society; from the traditional large family, Americans have now moved into a new type of family relation based on a nuclear unit of three or four members who are frequently on the move, in search for better job opportunities. Soon the analysis of manners in the USA will take the form of the disguised science-fiction satiric parable, one of the most remarkable literary strategies used by Vonnegut to analyze American life.

Following in the steps of his older brother, Kurt Jr. had spent three years at Cornell, mostly taking courses on chemistry and biology, a university education that, after serving as an infantry soldier in the Second World War, he complemented by enrolling at the University of Chicago's graduate program in anthropology where, between 1945 to 1947, he drafted and had rejected three MA theses. In 1952 he published *Player Piano*, a bitter and prophetic dystopia about the replacement of human beings by machines that did not bring him much money until it was later released as a pulp-paperback and had its title changed to *Utopia-14*. In this first novel, Vonnegut ponders on post-war life in the USA and foresees that unemployment is going to be one of the biggest problems of post-industrial societies. In 1959 he publishes, directly in paperback form, his remarkable second novel, *The Sirens of Titan*, a book with which Vonnegut consciously departs from what critics at the time still considered to be "serious writing." With the help of a cover that featured semi-nude females, this novel repositioned him as a sci-fi writer. His relocation from the field of "serious writing" literally gives life to Vonnegut's metafictional *alter ego* in the invented character of sci-fi author Kilgore Trout, a figure that was to feature in many of his novels and that seemed to impersonate Vonnegut's own fears to be a second-rate pulp-fiction writer for the rest of his life (Klinkowitz 1982). More novels followed in a popular mix of genres, including the remarkable *Mother Night* (1961), and in all of them attentive readers could perceive the writer's humane approach underneath his often bitter and satiric comments about post-war American life and manners. However, it is not till he completes *Slaughterhouse-Five*

in 1969 that he becomes recognized as a *serious* top writer and social analyst. Not surprisingly, Vonnegut's entrance in the canon of "serious writing" also coincides with the end of a period that is strongly connected to the affluence of American post-war economy (Temperley and Bradbury 1989, 302-21). By 1969 affluence and political conservatism have given way to the counter-cultural and postmodern ethos characterized by the fight for social freedom, literary experimentation, and technical saturation, and Kurt Vonnegut clearly fits into the spirit of the times.

Slaughterhouse-Five represents the beginning of Vonnegut's aura as a postmodern author despite the fact that he had already introduced non-mimetic techniques in his earlier fiction, thus highlighting the power story-telling has in our interpretation of reality. His careful combination of scientific beliefs with the deployment of metafictional strategies to metaphorize those beliefs became his most remarkable stylistic attribute. The novel, Vonnegut seemed to think, could not be a simple depiction of the way in which human senses perceive reality. In clear agreement with other novelists of the period such as Sukenick or Barth, for Vonnegut classic realism was dead and the writer had to provide the novel with new formulas for its replenishment. Together with his persona's report, in the introductory chapter of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, of the reasons why he decided to write a book about the destruction of Dresden, his plain style and syntax, and the obvious defamiliarization of traditional topics became the most efficient strategies that explain the book's long success. In his second novel, *The Sirens of Titan* (1959), Vonnegut has Rumfoord and his dog traveling in the space-time continuum, thus imitating the behavior of the wave/particle entity, as studied in quantum mechanics. Similarly, *Slaughterhouse-Five* meant the metaphorization of space-time traveling. In a highly innovative way, Vonnegut combined notions related to the new physics with actual reports on historical events concerning the destruction of Dresden, which he had witnessed twenty-four years earlier. The result was a historiographic metafictional book, belonging to that typical subgenre of postmodern fiction with which Linda Hutcheon referred to those novels that "are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages" (1988, 5). Eventually, this type of self-conscious but historical fiction discovers for its readers one of the most controversial arguments defended in the postmodern period by some of its most influential theorists, especially Derrida and Lacan. For them, humans are always already trapped in language and all knowledge is thus mediated by human narratives. By showing his persona's hand in his historiographic metafictional book, Vonnegut invited his readers to think about the artificiality existing in any textual construct, be it *fictional* novel or *factual* historical report. Both types of narratives seem to have the same epistemological status and therefore belong into the same ontology, a state of being that, as Vonnegut's contemporary critics ceaselessly repeated (Smyth 1991; Hite 1991; Newton 1997), cannot escape from cognitive uncertainty and indeterminacy. Breaking with traditional thinking, postmodern interpretations of life were no longer trapped in a set of eternal or universal truths but in the interpretations of the writer, be it a novelist or an historian. Accordingly, fiction writers suggested in their works that their interpretation of reality could be as valid as the ones provided by historians and that creative literature could be even more honest than traditional historiography because the metafictional novelist does not disguise his or her story as a report of what "truly" happened.

In this way, fact and fiction, remembrances and conscious invention go together in Vonnegut's celebrated novel to make readers think about the concept of historical truth. For many years, the firebombing of Dresden had been classified information, as the narrator abundantly points out while contrasting the few available historical records with the direct report of his own persona, as he had witnessed the destruction of the German city and the massacre of its civilians, an event that even surpassed the deadly statistics of either Hiroshima or Nagasaki.

Stylistically, *Slaughterhouse-Five* is also the product of Vonnegut's impeccable use of Shklovsky's notion of defamiliarization (1925, Chapter 1). The novelist connects it to the feeling of the Absurd, a predominant trait of European existential thinking in the 1950s and 1960s. Thus, Vonnegut presents very tragic events—he is mostly dealing with death and war—wrapped with a simple, plain, even irreverent style; the result being the defamiliarizing subversion of the seriousness with which Western society has traditionally treated war, death, and human suffering. Critics soon catalogued Vonnegut's novel as "black humor," a label that in this case may also be associated to the more traditional definition of the burlesque (Jump 1972, 3). In addition, with a formal arrangement of the story as an apparently disordered presentation of events in small episodes, *Slaughterhouse-Five* also exemplified the sense of fragmentation and destruction combined with the pessimism that two world wars had brought to the 20th Century.

John Russell Taylor's definition of the Absurd in the *Penguin Dictionary of Theatre* may help readers to clarify further Vonnegut's strategies in his famous novel:

> ***Absurd, Theatre of.*** **Term applied to a group of dramatists in the 1950s who did not regard themselves as a school but who all seemed to share certain attitudes towards the predicament of man in the universe: essentially those summarized by Albert Camus in his essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942). This diagnoses humanity's plight as purposelessness in an existence out of harmony with its surroundings (absurd literally means out of harmony). Awareness of this lack of purpose in all we do [...] produces a state of metaphysical anguish which is the central theme in the writers in the Theatre of the Absurd. [… In this Theatre] the ideas are allowed to shape the form as well as the content: all semblance of logical construction, of the rational linking of idea with idea**

> **in an intellectually viable argument, is abandoned, and instead the irrationality of experience is transferred to the stage. (Quoted in Hinchliffe 1969, 1)**

In *Slaughterhouse–Five* the ideas of existential absurdity that "are allowed to shape the form as well as the content" are reflected in a variety of strategies that can be listed as follows: the lack of chronology in the presentation of the story (with a line of events frequently interrupted by the narrative voice), the metaphorization of relativity and quantum theories in Billy Pilgrim's time traveling, the mise-en-abymic type of fiction written by the Tralfamadorians[1] and their satirical secondary world, the repetition of linguistic tags that suggest the vicious and repetitive character of language ("so it goes"), or the announcement at the introductory chapter of the novel of the words used at the beginning and end of the story. All these devices resulted in a new type of experimental and metafictional narrative, paradoxically absurd but very readable and entertaining at the same time, that the writer kept on using in his later fiction, gradually dropping some of these techniques and replacing them with new ones.

A fundamental critical issue also to be considered here is that Vonnegut wrote a long-lasting story about *traumatic* experiences, which may also help readers to understand why he consciously resorted to experimental fiction and, more specifically, to those metafictional techniques that openly questioned the book's own validity as a truthful report of the narrated events. The traditional division between the factual and the fictional seemed to be of no concern for the American writer. As early as the first page of the metafictional introductory chapter, readers have to cope with the sentence "All this happened, more or less." Then the narrator claims that "the war parts" are "pretty much true" but, what about the rest of the reported events? Why does *Slaughterhouse-Five* still have such an impressive ethical effect on its readers even if it openly draws attention to its own fictional condition? To answer these questions, the use of experimental devices in *Slaughterhouse-Five* needs to be analyzed with reference to the author's capacity to work through his own traumatized memories (see LaCapra 2001, Chapter 1). *Slaughterhouse-Five* offers an intense example of Vonnegut's capacity to integrate notions related to contemporary science with his own traumatic experiences, while also resorting to the postmodernist concept that humans are mediated by a web of textual discourse. By the time the novel was published, the writer was playing on new grounds in literature by supporting 20th-century scientific views on reality that strongly questioned the Newtonian interpretation of the Universe. Trauma Studies had not yet seen the light and the understanding of reality provided by such scientific views as relativity theory and quantum mechanics some decades earlier had not been sufficiently grasped by the common public yet. However, the effects of WWII—refracted by the war in Korea and the escalating of the Vietnam War—were still present in the American ethos. In a sense, we may imply that the situation has not changed much since 1969; most people understand reality exclusively from a Newtonian, sensorial perspective and the implications of the Holocaust, for instance, still provide arguments for critical discussion. Probably, such lack of cultural and scientific assimilation is the main factor that still makes many readers react to Vonnegut's mixture of scientific theories on reality, war trauma, and experimental techniques, and produce the lasting ethical effects of the novel. For many years, *Slaughterhouse-Five* was understood as a devastating denunciation of the *status quo* and political lies, but also as a prototypical product of postmodern experimentation. The author's capacity to anticipate themes and use techniques that are still relevant many years later quickly transports the unaware reader from humor to tragedy and human failure, but also from post-Newtonian perspectives about reality to political denunciation and trauma.

As hinted above, the novel is divided in two clear parts. On the one hand, there is the first chapter, with a narrator who comments on the process of writing the story that follows; the narrator is also the protagonist in this chapter. On the other, stands the rest of the book, which consists of a fragmented presentation of chapters in which readers are invited to follow Billy Pilgrim's jumps in time and space. Spatial and temporal disorder as well as other experimental strategies are common in this second part, in which the narrator is not the protagonist of his report anymore. On the contrary, explicitly representing Vonnegut's persona, the narrative voice from the second chapter onwards becomes at times a direct witness of the war events depicted in the novel. However, at some other times he also becomes an omniscient non-participant figure when reporting the events pertaining Billy's life as a civilian on earth or as an abducted Earthling on planet Tralfamadore. From a narratological perspective, then, we can also imply that the narrator is a figure that "jumps" in his roles as protagonist, witness, or omniscient voice-over. That is to say, he shares the same characteristic that defines Billy: his restless, alternating condition, a feature that also symbolizes the behavior of the electron in quantum mechanics. Both, the narrator and Billy, suggest in their own narrative representations that Newton's law of cause and effect and the classic linearity of time do not have to apply to them or, by extension, to our understanding of reality.

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[1]The reading of the following extract from *Slaughterhouse–Five*, often quoted by Vonnegut's critics, is a clear example that the writer was in fact referring to the avant-garde type of novel he himself was actually attempting in his book: "The Trafalmadorian books were laid out—in brief clumps of symbols separated by stars […] 'each clump of symbols is a brief, urgent message—describing a situation, a scene. We Trafalmadorians read them all at once, not one after the other. There isn't any particular relationship between all the messages, except that the author has chosen them carefully, so that, when seen all at once, they produce an image of life that is beautiful and surprising and deep. There is no beginning, no middle, no end, no suspense, no moral, no causes, no effects'" (1979, 62-63).

However, a complementary explanation for the double structure of the book is also possible from the framework of Trauma Studies, with authorial distance and therapeutic purposes as key-issues for such interpretation. As Susanne Vees-Gulani perceptively argues, *Slaughterhouse-Five* features a fusion of autobiography and fiction that helps the author to keep the distance from the text and its implications, that is to say, to work through his own traumatic experiences:

> **Vonnegut tries not to face his suppressed memories directly but to get to the core by slowly uncovering layer after layer. The novel reflects this process of narrowing in on himself through the two trauma stories. Billy's story allows an indirect and detached exploration of the effects of the Dresden bombing because the character is mostly fictional. The narrator's story parallels Vonnegut's on one level, but on another level, it is an integral part of a work of fiction. Removing himself from the factual to the fictional plane by creating the narrator allows Vonnegut a degree of distance from himself and his experiences. Consequently, the final point of recovery in this process of self-therapy is not achieved in the novel but rather comes with its completion. (2003, 182)**

As mentioned above, in the first chapter the narrator discloses the fictionality of, at least, part of the story that follows while also affirming the historical quality of some of the reported events. Furthermore, he openly announces his role as the author of the book and provides his readers with the reasons why he decided to write it, also anticipating the type of novel he wanted to write. In other words, the introductory chapter is a text about writing a text. Thus, so early in the novel Vonnegut details some of the main recourses he will use to report on Billy Pilgrim's story from an experimental perspective. The first chapter concludes with the narrator inviting his narratee with a "Listen" after having explicitly said that he is the author['s persona], ready to identify himself overtly as a witness in some moments of the forthcoming report: "Somebody behind [Billy Pilgrim] in the boxcar said, 'Oz'. That was I. That was me" (1979, 100). The narratorial interference is, obviously, metafictional; the writer's persona appears as a witness in the story by showing his hand as narrator. However, the narrator's intrusions in the world of the story comically hide a more important notion that takes readers from the field of metafiction to the grounds of trauma: the author was both a witness and a *victim* of the events he reports about Pilgrim's adventures at the war front and in the city of Dresden. *Slaughterhouse-Five* is, in that sense, also a testimony of traumatic experiences (Cacicedo 2005, 358; Peebles 2005, 485). In effect, as Vonnegut also recounts in his novel, he was an infantry scout captured by the Germans in December 1944, following the battle of the Bulge. On February 13, 1945, as a POW secluded in the Slaughterhouse-Five of the German city, he became a surviving witness of the firebombing and almost total destruction of Dresden by a combined strike of the Allied air forces. The result was the massacre of possibly more than 150,000 people, mostly civilians, a fact that the Allies kept as classified information till the 1960s, when books—including Vonnegut's novel—and newspapers started to disclose the magnitude of the events.[2] The author's persona explicitly refers to the fact that the massacre had been classified information for a long time and sarcastically wonders, "Secret? My God-from *whom*?" (1979, 15).

In the narrative of Billy's adventures that unfolds from the second chapter, some experimental devices explicitly refer to the understanding of reality brought about by discoveries in the field of post-Newtonian physics. Possibly, the most striking ideas presented in the book from the premises of the new physics—that indirectly take the book to the grounds of science-fiction—are, first of all, the Tralfamadorians' capacity to fully experience life in the space-time continuum and, secondly, Billy Pilgrim's behavior as a quantum particle. This second strategy is not new in Vonnegut's literary world and can be traced back to his 1959 novel *The Sirens of Titan*, where a man and his dog experience similar anomalies in the space-time continuum. However, in *Slaughterhouse-Five* the strategy also allows for the complementary interpretation provided by Trauma Studies. Thus, Chapter Two marks the beginning of the report on Billy's adventures but it also signals the protagonist's peculiar condition: like the quantum particle, Billy is "unstuck in time." That is to say, no observer—not even Billy himself—can totally fix his position in space and momentum in time. Evoking Heisenberg's formulation of the Uncertainty Principle, the protagonist shows a *schizophrenic* behavior, a notion that readers should not take at face value. His behavior is more the result of posttraumatic symptoms than of being an actual victim of schizophrenia, as Vees-Gulani convincingly argued (2003, 176-77; on the Uncertainty Principle see Davies 1991, 166).

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[2]R. H. S. Crossman describes the massacre in an article published by *Squire* in 1963, which starts as follows: "If the British Commonwealth and the United States last a thousand years, men may say that this was their darkest hour [...] Were all the crimes against humanity committed during World War II the work of Hitler's underlings? That was certainly the impression created by the fact that only Germans were brought to trial at Nuremberg. Alas! It is a false impression. We all now know that in the terrible struggle waged between the Red Army and the German Wehrmacht, the Russians displayed their fair share of insensate inhumanity. What is less widely recognized—because the truth, until only recently, has been deliberately suppressed—is that the Western democracies were responsible for the most senseless single act of mass murder committed in the whole course of World War II [...] The devastation of Dresden in February, 1945, was one of those crimes against humanity whose authors would have been arraigned at Nuremberg if that Court had not been perverted into the instrument of Allied justice. Whether measured in terms of material destruction or by loss of human life, this 'conventional' air raid was far more devastating than either of the two atomic raids against Japan that were to follow it a few months later. Out of 28,410 houses in the inner city of Dresden, 24,866 were destroyed; and the area of total destruction extended over eleven square miles."

Readers should not forget that being a survivor and a witness of the Dresden massacre was not the only traumatic experience the novelist was exposed to. Kathryn Hume reminds us that Kurt Vonnegut's infancy may not have been a happy one (1998, 225-26, 229). In addition, in 1944, while being a student at Cornell, Vonnegut contracted pneumonia. When he recovered, the future fiction writer could not resume his studies because he was conscripted into the Army. Vonnegut has mentioned several times that, as a third generation German-American, in the war he was expected to shoot at enemies who could be his own cousins. He considered his participation in WWII, as well as many other relevant events in his life, to be the result of "time and luck" (Collado-Rodríguez 1996, 479-81), a notion that brings him close to existentialist premises and the issue of fate. The novelist has frequently referred to the duality time/luck to comment on the miseries of the human condition (Klinkowitz 1982). Not surprisingly, as his literary persona affirms already on the first pages of the novel, he tried hard to write a book about the Dresden massacre for 23 years, but nothing substantial came into his mind. In Chapter One, the narrator insistently exposes the difficulties that he experienced to write the story of the massacre (Vonnegut 1979, 9-11). The magnitude of the tragedy characteristically led him to keep silent till he was finally able to complete the novel, a situation that is also mentioned in Billy's case, whose frequent moments of traumatized silence and peculiar behavior evoke the writer's personal posttraumatic condition on several occasions (see Vees-Gulani 2003, 180-81 and Cacicedo 2005, 358-64). Vonnegut seemed to be working hard to work through his own traumas but readers of *Slaughterhouse-Five* may eventually think that the writer could not finally organize his memories of the war experience in a full narrative about Dresden because the events of the city's firebombing occupy only a few pages of the novel. In other words, following premises defended by trauma theorists, we might conclude that the writer's traumatized condition kept him silent for more than two decades and that he could transform the events he witnessed only into an incomplete therapeutic report.

At the time of the novel's release, science had already played a relevant part in the writer's life. By the end of the 1960s, on account of his two first novels, Vonnegut had been labeled as a science-fiction writer and in *Slaughterhouse-Five* he seems to consider such possibility in ironic terms (Klinkowitz 1982, 69-74). Tralfamadore is used here as a satiric device to throw opinions about humanity's insane condition but also as an excuse to explain the fragmented, "telegraphic schizophrenic" presentation of the story—as announced in the subtitle. His representation of Tralfamadorean life also points to the writer's artistic attempts to understand the new reality depicted by contemporary science and to his well-known interest in abstract expressionism (Collado-Rodríguez 1996, 478-79). From the perspective of Trauma Studies, we can extrapolate that the invention of Tralfamadore refers also to the author's traumatized condition and the role literature may play as a therapeutic strategy to soothe the pains of posttraumatic stress. The extraterrestrial world provides the writer, in this interpretation, with an escape route to avoid facing his daily life as a veteran who had witnessed the firebombing in which his own Forces destroyed the beautiful German city, killed thousands of innocent civilians, and almost killed him and the other Allied POWs. Within the narrative, Billy's doctors locate the reasons for his mental condition only in a previous childhood experience when his father throws him in a swimming pool. However, Billy's daughter also allows readers to glimpse at the Freudian concept of deferred action or *afterwardness* in connection with trauma, when she suggests that his father only started to think of Tralfamadore after having survived an airplane crash in 1969—a new traumatic experience that would accelerate the psychic consequences of his war trauma (see Flanagan 2002, 399).

In fact, it is only when Billy is at the hospital recovering from the accident that he becomes a fan of Kilgore Trout's sci-fi novels. Moreover, one of the stories he reads is remarkably similar to the experiences he reports about his having been kidnapped by Tralfamadorians and put in a zoo with a sexy Earthling female (Vonnegut 1979, 90). Sci-fi, the narrator explains, helps Billy to construct a new life for himself, openly pointing to the capacity of literature as therapy to alleviate posttraumatic pain (70). Tralfamadorian philosophy is based mostly on relativity theory, which is exemplified in the extraterrestrials' capacity to perceive past, present, and future at once. Thanks to such capacity, their resulting analysis of human life is ironically pathetic, suggesting the existence of a structural trauma affecting all humankind. Thus, Billy reports on the way Tralfamadorian understand human mortality:

> **The Tralfamadorian can look at all the different moments just that way we can look at a stretch of the Rocky Mountains, for instance. They can see how permanent all the moments are, and they can look at any moment that interests them. It is just an illusion we have here on Earth that one moment follows another one, like beads on a string, and that once a moment is gone it is gone forever.**
>
> **When a Tralfadorian sees a corpse, all he thinks is that the dead person is in a bad condition in that particular moment, but that the same person is just fine in plenty of other moments. Now, when I myself hear that somebody is dead, I simply shrug and say what the Tralfamadorians say about dead people, which is "so it goes." (67)**

The protagonist's passivity when dealing with the issue of human mortality, filtered by the space-time advantaged point enjoyed by the Tralfamadorians, adds to Billy's traumatic experiences in the swimming pool and the airplane crash,

and the historical trauma represented by his role as witness of the Dresden firebombing. Not surprisingly, Vonnegut's protagonist soon became one of the prototypical *vulnerable* heroes in postwar North American fiction (Hendin 1978, 258-59).

Among the other experimental devices that the writer uses in *Slaughterhouse-Five* linking science to traumatic experiences, also stand out the subtitle of the novel and some information disclosed in its metafictional first chapter. Thanks to a long subtitling paragraph, readers know that this "is a novel somewhat in the telegraphic schizophrenic manner of tales of the planet Tralfamadore, where the flying saucers come from." The subtitle is already an indication that we cannot take the author's "seriousness" for granted but also that Billy's belief in the existence of Tralfamadore is a feature that already corresponds to his author's literary world. In effect, the robotic extraterrestrial creatures had already appeared as characters in his previous fiction. Billy is not, therefore, the inventor of Tralfamadore. Consequently, to believe that he is simply a traumatized lunatic who invents an extraterrestrial adventure for escapist purposes would defy the internal logic of Vonnegut's literary universe while also subverting the alleged simplicity of the narrative. On the contrary, both creator and fictional character seem to share the belief in an understanding of the Universe that strongly contrasts with the human pompous want for total freedom. Within Vonnegut's literary universe, it is important to remember that in *The Sirens of Titan* the Trafalmadorians already symbolize the inevitability of cosmic effects on the helpless humankind; eventually even the construction of such a big landmark in human history as the Great Wall of China is nothing but a message sent to their messenger Salo by the extraterrestrial beings.

By the end of the 1980s, Vonnegut published two other novels characterized by surprisingly different existential tones; a certain optimism present in *Bluebeard* (1987) about the world of American abstract expressionism gave way to the tense but also homodiegetic narrative of *Hocus Pocus* (1990), where the pessimism of the author becomes more than evident. The publication of his last novel in 1997 did not bring any resolution to the author's existential plight but offered an interesting technical and cultural contrast with *Slaughterhouse-Five*; almost thirty years later Vonnegut was still the experimental and absurdist critic who persistently modified techniques and beliefs in his science-bound ideology.

On November 15, 1995, I had the opportunity to interview the writer in his Manhattan family residence. Little did I know then that almost exactly one year later, on November 12, 1996, Vonnegut would have concluded the writing of what he told me was going to be—and actually was—his last novel, *Timequake*. He said then that, with this novel, he was attempting to create a book where he could represent life in its complexity and mentioned, as exemplary metaphor of his attempt, the enormous picture, with 5219 people depicted on it, that Karabekian creates in his earlier novel *Bluebeard*, published in 1987. Along the interview, I could confirm the love and pride he took in his older brother Bernard, his acceptance that life is mostly time and luck, Darwinian theory being not always valid, and above all the belief that people are embarrassed with life. All these issues appear in his last novel, where readers cannot see fulfilled the writer's earlier project about the complexity of life. However, *Timequake* represents the author's last attempt at knowledge because it ends up being a book where chaos theory approximates its readers to an epiphanic revelation that Vonnegut finally qualifies as "human awareness" or the condition of our mortality.

If *Timequake* is not the ultimate book able to depict life as a complex whole, it is one more turn of the screw in its author's literary and metafictional path; the book ends up being a novel, *Timequake Two*, about the novel Vonnegut wanted to write and which he called *Timequake One*. The main premise of the first version is, as the author explains in the Prologue of the book, that there was

> **… a timequake, a sudden glitch in the space-time continuum, [that] made everybody and everything do exactly what they'd done during a past decade, for good or ill, a second time […]. There was absolutely nothing you could say during the rerun, if you hadn't said it the first time through the decade. You couldn't even save your own life or that of a loved one, if you had failed to do that the first time through. (1997, xii)**

Thus, Vonnegut plans the fictional timequake for February 13, 2001, when the space-time continuum zaps back to February 17, 1991. Readers may also realize the autobiographical significance of such date: Dresden was firebombed on February 13, 1945. The hero in the very few events he actually describes of this story is again his literary alter ego Kilgore Trout, the old sci-fi writer, now a bum, dies at the end of the book. Meanwhile, Vonnegut "dies" for the history of the American novel in a double explosion of witticism: on the one hand, attentive readers may discover that *Timequake* is a book mostly about the author's rerun of his own life and American culture; it is his particular "timequake," in which he abundantly remembers many events of his past life and even imagines a future clam-bake party in which he is in the company of Kilgore Trout and of other people who remind him of old departed relatives and dear friends. Many emotional pages of the book are also dedicated to persons that were important in the writer's life, such as his sister Allie or his older brother Bernie, who actually died of cancer when Vonnegut had just finished the book, an event that motivated his writing of an Epilogue that finishes with the word "language." No wonder, one may think, that the book ends with such a word, being this after all a textual construct, a book about a book conceived by a master of metafictional strategies.

However, on the other hand, *Timequake* is also an example of the interest the writer took in chaos theory and its ultimate binary enigma: is life ruled by fate or played in freedom? Are our lives marked by design or by chaos?

The motif of the timequake or re-run obviously suggests the rule of fate and universal design, an authorial choice that, in any case, is contradicted by many references to the interaction of time and luck in human experience. One of the most evident examples of the mysterious ways in which life evolves is provided by the unlucky composer Zoltan Pepper; he becomes paralyzed from the waist down when his wife accidentally lands on him in the swimming pool, an event that Pepper will have to experience again during the re-run (Vonnegut 1997, 32). At the precise moment the re-run finishes, he is ringing the bell of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, where his wife works, and he is run over by a driverless fire truck. Once more, the composer is in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Time and luck replaced old Darwinian determinism in the pages of *Timequake* and, sharing in the scientific spirit of the turn the millennium, Vonnegut decidedly moved into chaos theory to support his views on human absurdity and inconsequence. If there is any hidden pattern that may explain random behavior and unexplained complex systems, we humans still have to find it (see Prigogine and Stengers 1985). Thus, storytelling became again Vonnegut's conscious contribution to provide his readers with the sense of a meaning that, however, he sometimes tried to deny. Although the writer frequently contended that humans are embarrassed by life and that we do not care for the planet's health, in his last novel the metaphorization of chaotic elements is accompanied by his old relish in the paradox of literary creation: "every book is a practical joke," he told me in 1995, "nothing in it is really happening, you can make somebody cry, or laugh [and Vonnegut laughed!], or be surprised, but absolutely nothing is going on! As you read, nothing is really happening, yet we writers found out that we can make you think that something is happening" (Collado-Rodríguez 1996, 482). In that sense, nothing *really* happens in *Timequake*; the book is a collection of remembrances, of observations, and of a few fictional events that frequently are none other than the metafictional summaries of non-existent short-stories written by the imaginary Kilgore Trout. But, out of his private re-run, Vonnegut still wished for a meaning in life. Trout ends the novel by affirming, close to his death, that the Universe is not only a conglomerate of the already old postulates defended by Einstein, energy, matter and time, but that it has a new quality: human awareness, "which exists only because there are human beings." "I have thought of a better word than *awareness*," he finally says. "Let us call it *soul*" (1997, 213-14). However, for the ones who might think that Vonnegut finally turned into a sentimental "old fart" (as he called himself more than once), the final Epilogue he writes for the book, after Bernard Vonnegut's death in April 1997, represents one more warning for people fond of romanticizing life by means of scientific discourse. Einstein also said, Vonnegut reminds us, that "Physical concepts are free creations of the human mind, and are not […] uniquely determined by the external world" (1997, 215). The famous scientist's words were going to be rephrased later in the twentieth century by many poststructuralist critics, but they also became an ultimate and paradoxical call for human attention in the writings of metafictional creators who, like Vonnegut, tried to capture intimations of immortality through their literary creations even if realizing that all they could offer was nothing but *language*. As the writer puts it at the end of the Epilogue:

> **A woman who knew Bernie for only the last ten days of his life, in the hospice at St. Peter's Hospital in Albany, described his manners while dying as "courtly" and "elegant." What a brother!**
>
> **What a language. (219)**

The novelist's pessimism and his sustained fight to cope with a reality that he seemed to dislike profoundly come again together in the last book he published before his death in 2007. In *A Man Without a Country* (2005), the old traumatic ghosts of WWII are fed again with new tragic events leading to the Iraq War and the Presidential War on Terror. However, this final time Vonnegut did not camouflage his opinions in the voice of any fictional character, the disguise of the Tralfamadorian sci-fi satire or the use of experimental techniques that might allow for only a partial release of the therapeutic truth. His ideas came directly to the point, possibly surprising some readers because of the writer's "un-American" terms. *A Man Without a Country* reaches its climactic denunciatory message in Chapter 8, where the writer quickly progresses from the particularities of George W. Bush's first election as President of the United States to echoes from WWII and to his own condition as a man who does not want to be an American anymore:

> **In case you haven't noticed, as the result of a shamelessly rigged election in Florida, in which thousands of African Americans were arbitrarily disenfranchised, we now present ourselves to the rest of the world as proud, grinning, jut-jawed, pitiless war-lovers with appallingly powerful weaponry—who stand unopposed.**
>
> **In case you haven't noticed, we are now as feared and hated all over the world as the Nazis once were.**
>
> **And with good reason [...]**
>
> **So I am a man without a country, except for the librarians and a Chicago paper called *In These Times*. (2005, 86-87)**

Tralfamadore, the writer's silence, quantum metaphors, and textual experimentation were left behind in this last book of social and political reflections where Vonnegut expressed his opinions to the limit. The author's voice being so direct and socially committed may suggest that his long working through process to cope with traumatic silence had finally given way to the total release of political denunciation that fully expresses his disgust and anxieties for the condition of the human race and for his own country, but also his ultimate compassion for the many Billy Pilgrims who populate this world.

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