

Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* at Forty: Billy Pilgrim—Even More a Man of Our Times

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Since its publication in 1969, *Slaughterhouse-Five* has achieved critical consensus as Kurt Vonnegut's masterpiece. The MLA Bibliography contains 114 articles and book chapters on *Slaughterhouse-Five*, while *Cat's Cradle* is not a close second with 37 entries. A number of critics make the salutary point that the novel's appearance during the apex of the Vietnam War resulted in the "Vietnamizing" of World War II, the novel's ostensible focus. Yet as history rolls on, *Slaughterhouse-Five* has yet to seem topical and "dated," even growing longer legs after the harrowing watershed events of 11 September 2001. Now as America is heading into its ninth year of a two-front War on Terror, the story of Billy Pilgrim, Vonnegut's traumatized, time-travelling "Joe the Plumber" Everyman icon for the Sixties, has accrued even more resonance and relevance for the second decade of the Twenty-First Century.

The central problem in *Slaughterhouse-Five* lies in comprehending the source of Billy Pilgrim's madness. Vonnegut undercuts our willing suspension of disbelief in Billy's time travel by offering multiple choices for the origin of Billy's imbalance: childhood traumas, brain damage from his plane crash, dreams, post-World War II fallout from his shattering war experiences—called "Battle Fatigue" then, "Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder" now—and plain old delusional fantasy. Yet if, as F. Scott Fitzgerald once observed, only a "first-rate intelligence" has "ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function" (69), an inquiry into the two opposed philosophies that Pilgrim holds in his mind—Tralfamadorianism and Christianity—may lead us to the fundamental cause of Billy's breakdown. Clearly, Billy is no "first-rate intelligence," and he hardly can be said to "function"; he

simply cracks under the strain of his dilemma. For some critics, however, Vonnegut's juxtaposing two divergent explanatory systems, seemingly without affirming one or the other, becomes a major flaw in the novel. Jerry H. Bryant's comment in his *The Open Decision* is representative: "[*Slaughterhouse-Five*'s] basic weakness is a confusion of attitude, a failure to make clear the author's position" (320). I would argue that, on the contrary, Vonnegut's position is clear: he rejects both Tralfamadorianism and divinely-oriented Christianity, while unambiguously affirming a humanly-centered Christianity in which Jesus is a "nobody" (94), a "bum" (95), a man.

In the autobiographical first chapter, Vonnegut introduces the opposed ideas, which the narrative proper will develop, evolving from his twenty-three-year attempt to come to terms with the horrors of Dresden. The Christmas card sent to Vonnegut's war buddy, Bernard V. O'Hare, by a German cab driver from Dresden the pair of veterans met during a return visit, expressing his hope for a "world of peace and freedom ... if the accident will" (2), expresses, in miniature form, the central tension in the novel. Human history is either divinely planned—Christmas signifies God's entrance into human history—and historical events are meaningful, or human history is a series of random events, non-causal, pure "accident," having no ultimate meaning as the Tralfamadorians claim. Both viewpoints deny free will; humanity is powerless to shape events. By this logic, the fire-bombing of Dresden is/was inevitable, whether God wills Dresden's destruction, as he willed the death of Sodom and Gomorrah (19), or whether, according to the Tralfamadorians, the moment is simply structured this way. Either position allows one to wash his or her hands, so to speak, of Dresden. Billy washes his hands and becomes reconciled to his Dresden experience under the tutelage of the Tralfamadorians: "'[Dresden] was all right,' said Billy. '*Everything* is all right, and everybody has to do exactly what he does. I learned that on Tralfamadore'" (171).

The Tralfamadorians provide Billy with the concept of non-linear time, which becomes the foundation for a mode of living: "'I am a Tralfamadorian, seeing all time as you might see a stretch of the Rocky Mountains. All time is all time. It does not change. It does not lend itself to warnings or explanations. It simply *is*. Take it moment by moment, and you will find that we are all, as I said before [on 66] bugs in amber'" (74). Billy learns that "'There is no why'" (66). In short, Tralfamadorianism is an argument for determinism. Yet, this is determinism without design,

where chance rules. The universe will be destroyed accidentally by the Tralfamadorians, and wars on earth are inevitable. However, the tenets of Tralfamadorianism contain the means for evading everyday pain and suffering—“Ignore the awful times, and concentrate on the good ones” (102)—as well as these comforting words about “plain old death” (3):

The most important thing I [Billy] learned on Tralfamadore was that when a person dies he only *appears* to die. He is still very much alive in the past, so it is very silly for people to cry at his funeral. All moments, past, present, and future, always have existed, always will exist ... When a Tralfamadorian sees a corpse, all he thinks is that the dead person is in bad condition in that particular moment, but that same person is just fine in plenty of other moments. (23)

Truly, one may smile through the apocalypse. The upshot of the Tralfamadorian philosophy finds expression in the most banal of clichés: “Everything was beautiful, and nothing hurt” (106).

When Billy, full of revelations, returns to Earth “to comfort so many people with the truth about time” (24), the implications of Tralfamadorianism become apparent. Although Billy’s first attempt to “comfort” someone, a Vietnam War widow’s son, fails—Billy himself has a Green Beret son serving in Vietnam—Billy blossoms into a charismatic national hero at the time of his assassination in 1976. The public appeal of Tralfamadorianism is obvious: it frees humankind from responsibility and moral action. If all is determined, if there is no why, then no one can be held accountable for anything, neither Dresden nor My Lai nor Lockerbie nor the World Trade Center nor Baghdad. In his personal life, Billy’s indifference and apathy toward others are clearly illustrated time and again. Chapter Three offers three consecutive examples of Billy’s behavior: he drives away from a black man who seeks to talk with him; he diffidently listens to a vicious tirade by a Vietnam Hawk at his Lions Club meeting; he ignores some cripples selling magazine subscriptions. Yet the Tralfamadorian idea that we can do nothing about anything fully justifies Billy’s apathy. When Billy preaches this dogma as part of his “calling” (25), he does a great service for the already apathetic by confirming their attitude and providing a philosophical base for their indifference. If one ignores social injustice or the Vietnam War, neither exists. By exercising one’s selective memory, by becoming an ostrich, one may indeed live in a world where everything is beautiful and nothing hurts. Perfect. No wonder Billy has multitudes of followers.

Billy's overwhelming sense of his own helplessness is something contemporary Americans continue to validate. Vast forces assault Americans at every turn—two seemingly endless wars, an economy that seems inexplicable, natural disasters—so much so that the nation is exhibiting the symptoms of clinical depression. The toll on America's all-volunteer armed forces is considerably more acute than in the Vietnam era. Overlong and multiple tours of duty in exasperatingly confusing war zones has resulted in severe upward spikes in suicides, domestic violence, and divorces. The shootings at Texas's Fort Hood prove nobody is safe anywhere. So Billy's advice that we concentrate on the good times and ignore the bad is currently very attractive, and "good times" mean the multiple cultural distractions available to Americans: our vast entertainment industry and our varied electronic devices allowing us to disappear into our own solipsistic nirvanas. Since we can't make a difference and everything seems to be getting worse at warp speed, the sense that civilization is nearly over has become unnervingly popular. The nine years since 11 September 2001 has produced a spate of disaster and apocalypse books and films, both atheistic and evangelically Christian, for example, the film adaptation of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and the *Left Behind* series (16 books and 3 films to date) by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins.

In Billy's fractured mind, Tralfamadorian determinism collides head-on with Christian determinism, so very influential in recent days. Very little difference exists in *Slaughterhouse-Five* between God's will and accident's will. For Vonnegut, belief in an omnipotent Creator, involved in directing human history, has resulted in two great evils: the acceptance of war as God's will; the assumption that we carry out God's will and that God is certainly on our side. Sodom, Gomorrah, Dresden, Hiroshima—urbicide is just God's will. Vonnegut directs his rage in *Slaughterhouse-Five* at a murderous supernatural Christianity that creates Children's Crusades, that allows humankind to rationalize butchery in the name of God, or Allah, that absolves people from guilt. Since for Vonnegut, all wars are, finally, "holy," "jihadic," he urges us to rid ourselves of a supernatural concept of God.

While Vonnegut indicts Tralfamadorianism and supernatural Christianity as savage illusions, he argues in *Slaughterhouse-Five* for a humanistic Christianity, which may also be an illusion, but yet a saving one.

Throughout the novel, Vonnegut associates Billy Pilgrim with John Bunyan's Pilgrim and with Christ. A chaplain's assistant in the war with a "meek faith in a loving Jesus" (26), Billy finds the war a vast Slough of Despond. He reaches Dresden, which "looked like a Sunday school picture of heaven to Billy Pilgrim" (129), only to witness the Heavenly City's destruction. Often Vonnegut's Christian shades into Christ Himself. During the war, Billy hears "Golgotha sounds" (119), foresees his own death and resurrection, "'it is time for me to be dead for a little while—and then live again'" (124), and identifies himself fully with Christ: "Now his snoozing became shallower as he heard a man and a woman speaking German in pitying tones. The speakers were commiserating with somebody lyrically. Before Billy opened his eyes, it seemed to him that the tones might have been those used by the friends of Jesus when they took His ruined body down from His cross" (169). After his kidnapping in 1967 by the Tralfamadorians, Billy the optometrist assumes the role of Messiah: "He was doing nothing less now, he thought, than prescribing corrective lenses for earthling souls. So many of those souls were lost and wretched, Billy believed, because they could not see as well as his little green friends on Tralfamadore" (25). Vonnegut has created a parody Christ whose gospel is Tralfamadorian, who redeems no one, who "cried very little although he often saw things worth crying about, and in *that* respect, at least, he resemble the Christ of the carol [the novel's epigraph]" (170). Indeed, Pilgrim's dilemma is that he is a double Savior with two gospels—a weeping and loving Jesus and a Tralfamadorian determinist. His opposed gospels drive him mad, resulting in his crackpot letters to newspapers and in his silent weeping for human suffering. Possibly Billy could have resolved his dilemma if he had paid closer attention to the human Christ in the novels of Billy's favorite writer—Kilgore Trout.

While Vonnegut often mentions Trout's books and stories for satiric purposes, Trout, "this cracked messiah" (143) who has been "'making love to the world'" (145) for years, also serves as Vonnegut's spokesman for a humanistic and naturalistic Christianity. In Trout's *The Gospel from Outer Space*, a planetary visitor concludes that Earthling Christians are cruel because of "slipshod storytelling in the New Testament" (94), "*which does not teach mercy, compassion, and love, but instead, 'Before you kill somebody, make absolutely sure he isn't well connecte'*" (94). Trout's visitor offers Earth a new Gospel in which Jesus is not so divine, but fully human—a "nobody" (94). When the "nobody" is crucified, "The

voice of God came crashing down. He told the people that he was adopting the bum as his son, giving him the full powers and privileges of The Son of the Creator of the Universe throughout all eternity” (95). What Vonnegut suggests here is that Christ’s divinity stands in the way of charity. If the “bum” is Everyman, then we are all adopted children of God; we are all Christs and should treat each other accordingly.

In another Trout work, Jesus and his father do contract carpentry work for the Romans. They build a cross: “Jesus and his father built it. They were glad to have the work. And the rabble-rouser was executed on it” (175). If Jesus is human, then He is imperfect and must necessarily be involved in direct or indirect evil. This Jesus participates fully in the human condition. Later in the same novel, a time-traveler, stethoscope in hand, returns to the day of Christ’s crucifixion to verify Christ’s death—“There wasn’t a sound inside the emaciated chest cavity. The Son of God was dead as a doornail” (176). This validation of Christ’s mortality is crucial for Vonnegut’s hope for us. While Trout also invents Tralfamadore in his novel, *The Big Board*, Trout is not the “villain” who warped Billy’s weak mind as Josh Simpson has suggested: “[Tralfamadore] exists only in Billy’s mind, having been placed there by Kilgore Trout’s particular brand of literary ‘poison’ ... [T]he ideas contained in Kilgore Trout’s science fiction novels are, ultimately, responsible for [Billy’s] complete divorce from reality” (267). Yes and no. Trout’s human-centered Christianity restores individual agency precluded by Tralfamadorianism.

As mentioned earlier, both Tralfamadorian determinism and the concept of a Supreme Being calling every shot on Earth nullify human intentions, commitment, and responsibility. But Vonnegut’s humanistic Christianity in the face of a naturalistic universe demands moral choice—demands that we revere each other as Christs, since all are sons and daughters of God. Not surprisingly, Vonnegut’s position echoes that of the Methodist preacher’s kid turned hardcore Naturalist writer, Stephen Crane. In “The Open Boat,” the journalist, the correspondent, has an epiphany in which he grasps the indifference of nature:

It is, perhaps, plausible that a man in this situation, impressed with the unconcern of the universe, should see the innumerable flaws of his life and have them taste wickedly in his mouth, and wish for another chance. A distinction between right and wrong seems absurdly clear to him, then, in this new ignorance of the grave-edge, and he understands that if he were given another opportunity he would mend his conduct and his words. ... (309)

The correspondent's insight that we are all in the same boat adrift in an indifferent sea, and that once we realize we only have each other, moral choice is "absurdly clear," is Kurt Vonnegut's as well. Vonnegut cites *The Red Badge of Courage* (90), and the courage, sacrifice, and selflessness in that humane war novel appear in *Slaughterhouse-Five* also. Several acts of kindness, all of which carry Christian overtones, occur: the rabbi chaplain, "shot through the hand" (48) who lets Billy sleep on his shoulder; the American prisoners who were "quiet and trusting and beautiful. They shared" (61) on Christmas day; the blind German innkeeper who gave succor to the American prisoners who survived Dresden by allowing them to "sleep in his stable" (156). These few and fleeting moments of brotherhood represent, for Vonnegut, the best in humankind.

While Vonnegut offers several versions of ideal communities in his works—the Karass, the Volunteer Fire Department, and, despite Howard W. Campbell, Jr.'s assessment of American prisoners, moments of brotherhood in *Slaughterhouse-Five*—he also suggests an alternative for the individual, a slogan that provides a way of living. On the same page where Vonnegut says "Billy was not moved to protest the bombing of North Vietnam, did not shudder about the hideous things he himself had seen bombing do," appears the Serenity Prayer and Vonnegut's comment:

GOD GRANT ME
THE SERENITY TO ACCEPT
THE THINGS I CANNOT CHANGE
COURAGE
TO CHANGE THE THINGS I CAN,
AND WISDOM ALWAYS
TO TELL THE
DIFFERENCE

Among the things Billy Pilgrim could not change were the past, the present, and the future. (52)

The Serenity Prayer, sandwiched between episodes concerning Vietnam, is Vonnegut's savage indictment of Billy Pilgrim. In short, Billy lacks the "wisdom" to see that Dresden is of the past and cannot be changed, but that the bombing of North Vietnam lies in the present and can be changed. However, to protest the bombing requires moral "courage," a quality obviated by his Tralfamadorian education.

Unlike the massive anti-Vietnam war movement, very little protest activity has occurred over the questionable US invasion of Iraq in 2003, following the less questionable invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, as if Billy's passivity has become contagious in America. So much of current war strategy relies on air supremacy, rockets and bombs released from remote distances by both manned and unmanned aircraft. Eduardo Mendieta claims that air war has a universal numbing effect on military personnel and the home population half a world away: "[T]he US military continues to wage war with the same doctrines and principles that led to the devastation of most German cities, and the killing of over a half a million civilians. 'Shock and Awe' is merely an extension of operation ... Overlord (the firebombing of Berlin and Dresden), as well as the ... carpet bombings in Vietnam" par. 26). Mendieta goes on to argue that since America owns the moral high ground without peer, the "United States does not participate in the International Criminal Court ... [and] flaunts the Geneva Conventions in Guantánamo, Abu Ghraib, and other such places that are lawless by law (as the lawyers for the White House had determined)" (par. 27). "They" make the decisions. "We the people" are not really very interested. President Bush told America to go shopping or the terrorists win.

If the people are "guiltless and dispassionate" as Mendieta claims (par. 2), their defenders in uniform are considerably less so. The general social malaise and depression is nowhere more evident than in America's overextended and overstrained military men and women. An astonishing number of our veterans returning from fifteen-month deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan have psychological and emotional problems that have overwhelmed the United States Department of Veterans Affairs ("Suicide Prevention"). *The New York Times* reported that "[a]t least 128 soldiers killed themselves" in 2008 and that the

Army suicide rate surpassed that for civilians for the first time since the Vietnam War, according to Army statistics. The suicide count, which includes soldiers in the Army Reserve and the National Guard, is expected to grow; 15 deaths are still being investigated, and the vast majority of them are expected to be ruled suicides, Army officials said. Including the deaths being investigated, roughly 20.2 of every 100,000 soldiers killed themselves. The civilian rate for 2006, the most recent figure available, was 19.2 when adjusted to match the demographics. (Alvarez)

Furthermore, although accurate statistics are nearly impossible to gather, Lisa C. DeLuca offers the astonishing assertion that “As many as one-third of soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan will have troubling psychiatric symptoms or Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. An unprecedented number of Iraq and Afghanistan combat war veterans are seeking PTSD therapy, but so many others will suffer in silence.” Finally, the US Department of Veterans Affairs tell us

About one-third of the adult homeless population have served their country in the Armed Services. Current population estimates suggest that about 131,000 Veterans (male and female) are homeless on any given night and perhaps twice as many experience homelessness at some point during the course of a year. Many other Veterans are considered near homeless or at risk because of their poverty, lack of support from family and friends, and dismal living conditions in cheap hotels or in overcrowded or substandard housing. (“Overview”)

Despondent, passive, traumatized, and suicidal Billy Pilgrim could serve as the poster child for our combat and returning fighting forces.

The national mood back home is not exactly one of equanimity and good cheer, either. As Americans go about their quiet business and consume their vast entertainment resources, the National Institute of Mental Health informs us that one out of four of us is sick in the head:

An estimated 26.2 percent of Americans ages 18 and older—about one in four adults—suffer from a diagnosable mental disorder in a given year. When applied to the 2004 U.S. Census residential population estimate for ages 18 and older, this figure translates to 57.7 million people. Even though mental disorders are widespread in the population, the main burden of illness is concentrated in a much smaller proportion—about 6 percent, or 1 in 17—who suffer from a serious mental illness. In addition, mental disorders are the leading cause of disability in the U.S. ... Many people suffer from more than one mental disorder at a given time. Nearly half (45 percent) of those with any mental disorder meet criteria for 2 or more disorders, with severity strongly related to comorbidity. (“Numbers”)

These sobering figures say much about America’s current temperament, uncomfortably close to Billy Pilgrim’s condition. With so many Billy replicants, it may not be so surprising that America seems preoccupied—or transfixed—by end-time premonitions.

While disaster and apocalypse movies have been a staple of our popular culture for many years, currently we are being veritably bombarded by them (see Keltner; *apocalypticmovies.com*). As well,

academics are churning out corollary critical studies (See Berger; Dixon; Newman; Russell; Shapiro; Thompson). “American optimism” goes in cycles, of course, so wasteland scenarios have ascended right now as verified in such recent films as *I Am Legend* (2007), *The Road* (2009), and *The Book of Eli* (2010). In *I Am Legend*, a virus infects humankind turning them into vampire-like cannibals, while courageous, uninfected medical researcher Robert Neville (Will Smith), the *Legend* of the title, manufactures an antidote to protect a colony of survivors living in a government-barricaded sanctuary somewhere in Vermont. So this saved remnant will “re-do” humanity. *The Road* features a father and son traipsing south through a completely burned dead America. This unspecified apocalypse looks much like what “nuclear winter” is supposed to be like. Again, our fellow Americans have become marauding packs of cannibals and savages. Father dies, boy is adopted by another surrogate father who has managed to retain his humanity and not graze on other people, and that is our slim hope for rebuilding civilization. Finally, *The Book of Eli* provides a destroyed America with a blind superhero named Eli (Denzell Washington), a ninja samurai or video-game-like killing machine. The film is so visually stunning and produced that one forgets the preposterousness of the story. The *Book* of the title is Eli’s Braille version of the King James Bible which he must preserve somewhere in the “West,” the direction he has been traveling for thirty years since the “Flash” wiped out civilization, presumably a nuclear holocaust. Eli’s unspecified destination turns out to be Alcatraz Island, converted from a prison to be a new Alexandria-like library hybridized with a medieval monastery to preserve and restart civilization at the appropriate time. However, Eli’s precious Bible was taken by force by Carnegie (Gary Oldman) and his cohort of pillaging, cannibalizing Visigoths. Never fear. Eli has memorized the King James Bible and recites it. The re-foundation of Western Civilization is safe.

What are we to make of all this? In the thematics of these films—plagues, famines, roaming tribes, loss of literacy, chaotic lawlessness—the “future” is really the deep past, the Dark Ages, a second coming of the medieval world. Yet the eerie parallels between the Dark Ages and the futuristic fears expressed in so many recent films (see Price and Blurton) may not be so bleak if we recall that the Renaissance followed the Middle Ages, and these films also posit re-built civilizations. America had its last cycle of depression and apocalypse in the Sixties, and our writers most paying attention like Kurt Vonnegut and Saul Bellow wrote optimistic,

affirmative, and countervailing novels like *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969) and *Herzog* (1964). Bellow's Moses Herzog, in one of his impassioned letters, declaims, "*We must get it out of our heads that this is a doomed time, that we are waiting for the end, and the rest of it, mere junk from fashionable magazines ... We love apocalypses too much, and crisis ethics and florid extremism with its thrilling language*" (344–45). In another, he rails against the "*commonplaces of the Wasteland outlook ... I can't accept this foolish dreariness. We are talking about the whole life of mankind. The subject is too great, too deep for such weakness, cowardice*" (82). Like Bellow, Vonnegut also believes that exercising moral courage is our way to salvation, which brings us back to the Serenity Prayer as Vonnegut's version of a categorical imperative.

The seemingly innocuous Serenity Prayer, the mantra of Alcoholics Anonymous, appears once more in a most significant location—on the last page of Chapter Nine (181). The truth of Raymond M. Olderman's observation that "Vonnegut is a master at getting inside a cliché" (191) is validated when we consider that Vonnegut has transformed the AA scripture into a viable moral philosophy. Vonnegut knows that we have to accept serenely those things that people cannot change—the past, linear time, aging, death, natural forces. Yet the Prayer posits that, through moral courage, there are things that can be changed. War, then, is not a natural force like a glacier, as Harrison Starr would have it. While Billy believes that he cannot change the past, present, or future, Vonnegut affirms that in the arena of the enormous present, we can, with courage, create change: "And I asked myself about the present: how wide it was, how deep it was, how much was mine to keep" (16).

Vonnegut, like his science fictionist Kilgore Trout, "writes about Earthlings all the time and they're all Americans" (95). America has adopted the Tralfamadorian philosophy that justifies apathy. We have lost our sense of individual agency and feel powerless and impotent, the "listless playthings of enormous forces" (140). What Vonnegut would have us do is develop the wisdom to distinguish between what we can or cannot change, while developing the courage to change what we can. We have met Billy Pilgrim, and forty years later, he is still us.

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