

“Like bugs trapped in amber”: the Chaos of Composition in *Slaughterhouse-Five*

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There were vile people in both those cities, as is well known. The world was better off without them.

And Lot's wife, of course, was told not to look back where all those people and their homes had been. But she did look back, and I love her for that, because it was so human.

So she was turned to a pillar of salt. So it goes.

—Kurt Vonnegut *Slaughterhouse-Five*

I focus on Vonnegut in this paper for his ability to relay and amplify the futility of representation in conveying a personal trauma to another. In *Slaughterhouse-Five* Vonnegut emphasizes this futility in various ways by employing autobiographical fiction's generic features of fragmentation, silence, barriers of communication, and self-reflexivity. These intentional narrative disruptions emphasize the failure of communication while also demonstrating how both readers and writers struggle to communicate across the text—how all participants negotiate the disorientation and silence rising in the representation of atrocity.

Vonnegut breaks with traditional novelistic structures and models *Slaughterhouse-Five* as an alien novel that reveals the simultaneity of lived experience in order to amplify the futility of representing a personal trauma. He acknowledges this hopelessness when he writes to his publisher, “It is so short and jumbled and jangled, Sam, because there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre. Everybody is supposed to be dead, to never say anything or want anything ever again” (*Slaughterhouse* 19). Both the introduction and the novel require the reader to address questions of secondary witnessing and ethical representation: How does Vonnegut's reframing of the narrative set us up as readers? Are we still the implied readers or is it a

Tralfamadorian? If Vonnegut simply resigns his authorship to the ineffectiveness of conveying the experience, thus blowing it out of proportion through science fiction, what chance then, do readers have in responding to this call to responsibility? I answer these questions by demonstrating the disruptions of narrative technique that Vonnegut employs to conflate time in relaying the simultaneity of his novel. The result shows the artistic difficulty in attempting to represent the chaos of lived experience.

The narrative's stylistic simultaneity parallels both Vonnegut's own positioning as a writer who sees all moments concurrently and Vonnegut's experimentation with the temporal structures of the novel. Because of the inability to represent the experience, Vonnegut portrays the chaos of trauma through the chaos of the text, in order to illustrate the paradox of witnessing. The novel's chaotic narrative thread spirals from the epicenter, the bombing of Dresden, toward multiple angles within a recursive narrative structure demonstrating the author's repeated struggle to write about trauma. Vonnegut's way out of this conundrum is to admit to the novel's limitation upfront: "This one [book] is a failure, and had to be, since it was written by a pillar of salt" (22). What does such a statement do for readers of the text? Why take the risks necessary to play the game? To answer this question is to become an active observer: a participant who attempts to grasp the relations unfolding within *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Vonnegut's use of cause and effect certainly denotes the kinetic terms of the novel's narrative structure. Although he conflates time, he weaves enough common elements into the narrative for readers to grasp the thread of relationships between artifacts, bodies, and space. He demonstrates simultaneity by merging time frames wherein Billy Pilgrim, the novel's protagonist, makes unexpected "jumps" between his lived experiences on the planet Tralfamadore and his internment as a POW. While readers are initially disoriented by the text's time warps, Vonnegut gives enough details for

critical readers to gain their bearings. The act of continually orienting one's self to the text forces readers to become active participants, calling forth a responsibility to Vonnegut's witnessing of a massacre.

Vonnegut, surviving of the largest massacres of modern warfare, takes the responsibility to bear witness. He demonstrates what it means to be human, what it means to write a life narrative in the wake of atrocity. This responsibility causes him, like Lot's wife, to look back onto the destruction, and the chaos rising from lived trauma and he struggles with the uncertainties in recollection. Yet, unlike Lot's wife, he has the opportunity to survive and to portray what he witnessed. He metaphorically turns to look back out of curiosity with a desire to see the spectacle. But more than that, looking back denotes an act of remembrance, and for Vonnegut we are not supposed to look back. From the very beginning of the novel, he states that the book is a failure for doing so. Yet, by turning to science fiction as a genre to portray the unimaginable massacre in Dresden, Vonnegut finds the means of indirectly representing the experience, thereby opening possibilities for witnessing.

An extraordinary feature of *Slaughterhouse-Five* is its intricate, recursive narrative arrangement that intends to model a Tralfamadorian novel. In order for his text to exhibit the simultaneity of Tralfamadorian texts, Vonnegut conflates time by depicting key features of how events unfold then reappear unexpectedly. The first chapter alone carries several reprisals that reveal this recursive-simultaneity in various ways: teapots, taxi cabs, and the act of writing in comparison to the act of reading historical documents, all of which weave throughout the narrative and play upon the chaos of lived experience. Vonnegut abducts his readers into a world of science-fiction-uncertainty that parallels his reader's disorientation to Billy Pilgrim's survival of alien abduction. Throughout the introductory chapter Vonnegut significantly

struggles to find the proper narrative form that can represent his traumatic experience. In his attempts to structure the novel, he states that he has rewritten his story numerous times, crafted outlines, and sketched narrative diagrams. As a writer, he sees himself as “a trafficker in climaxes and thrills and characterization” with “wonderful dialogue and suspense and confrontations” (5), yet even his art fails him. In attempting to map out the chronology of the narrative, he visually represents the plot unfolding on a wallpaper roll that houses the beginning of the story at one end with the conclusion on the other: “[T]hen there was all that middle part,” exploding colors of red lines merging into yellow ones, and then “the yellow line stopped because the character represented by the yellow line was dead” (5). At the destruction of Dresden comes a “vertical band of orange cross-hatching, and all the lines that were still alive passed through it, came out the other side” (5). His frustration with traditional narrative form forces him to realize the impossibility of representing a massacre. The futility compels him to restructure time. Vonnegut cleverly moves the narrative, nearly seamlessly, from the diagram into a reprisal: “The end, where all the lines stopped, was a beetfield on the Elbe, outside of Halle. The rain was coming down” (5). Thus just as easily, he moves back into reflecting on the impossibility of writing his experience. By surrendering to futility of representation, he rethinks his plan and visits an old war buddy to gain another perspective, yet even this visit becomes counterproductive. In closing this chapter Vonnegut admits the failure he has made in attempting to write history. He addresses the rupture from the chaos of lived experience and the botched act of representation. The only way he knows how to write his “Dresden Book” is to fictionalize the account. Playing against common cultural narrative expectations, he proceeds to give readers the first and last lines of the novel. Giving away the novel’s last line even before the narrative has a chance to begin demonstrates the novel’s simultaneous structure.

The simultaneity of Tralfamadorian texts are organized with “brief clumps of symbols separated by stars” (88). Billy makes the assumption that these are telegrams, and to some extent, they are. Yet what is most important about the Tralfamadorian texts is how the author arranges the relationship of events: “[S]o that, when seen all at once, they produce an image of life that is beautiful and surprising and deep. There is no beginning, no middle, no end, no suspense, no moral, no causes, no effects. What we love in our books are the depths of many marvelous moments seen all at one time” (88). Although Vonnegut attempts to frame the narrative around Tralfamadorian simultaneity, in order to arrange the relationship of events he has to examine cause and effect, and any resulting repercussion. Essentially the moral implication Vonnegut demonstrates is that denying the structure of human drama, of not knowing the outcome of events, essentially denies our humanity. It is as if the text’s structural problem of knowing all events at once forces Vonnegut (and his readers) to realize the moral complexities of fatalism.

This moral dilemma is the underlying problem for Billy, for he has backed himself into an existential crisis in considering what it means to be human with the knowledge of Tralfamadorian perspectives. Cause and effect are essentially the burdens of our humanity. Vonnegut shows the results of existing in a predetermined world without accountability when he parallels the Tralfamadorian’s “zoo” with Pilgrim’s POW experience. In this way Vonnegut builds layer upon layer of representations, merging moments between Billy Pilgrim’s alien abduction with his German interment. Billy’s seamless transition between his past on Tralfamadore and the German camps unites both worlds through the hyper-reality of representation. Vonnegut continually finds innovative ways of linking the temporal shifts that occur throughout the novel. His experiments with narrative structure and symbolic word play

cause frustration and disorientation for readers, yet he provides enough commonality for his audience to hold on to through “logical association.” Jerome Klinkowitz in *Slaughterhouse-Five: Reforming the Novel and the World* identifies this experimental technique as easing readers into Vonnegut’s narrative-time-travel: “As a science fiction device, it allows the author to shift scenes with fluid ease, moving from year to year and from place to place with no need for cumbersome exposition to explain such shifts” (73). One textual example portrays Billy walking through several gates of the camp. As he walks through gate after gate he comes to “what he thought might be a building on Tralfamadore. It was shrilly lit and lined with white tiles. It was on Earth, though. It was a delousing station through which all new prisoners had to pass” (*Slaughterhouse* 83). Reader and protagonist alike, struggle to imagine in their literary minds this otherness, this alien cold that envelops the scene. Billy removes his clothes as instructed while he recalls that this “was the first thing they told him to do on Tralfamadore, too” (83). Vonnegut’s conflation of time around two similar spaces, the alien abduction and/with the POW camp, amplifies the traumatic experience while paradoxically fragmenting the narrative structure at crucially vulnerable moments.

Vonnegut’s narrative ruptures exemplify the futility of representation while emphasizing the novel’s disorienting simultaneity. Ironically, the process of showing the collapse of narrative invites readers to experience a co-creation of the text. In an interview with John Casey and Joe Bellamy, Vonnegut refers to the active participation of the reader in deciphering his Tralfamadorian novel: “No other art requires the audience to be a performer. You have to count on the reader’s being a good performer... It’s a learning process” (*New Fiction* 203). As responsive ethical readers, we have to be willing to actively participate in the co-creation of the text. The learning process falls on both writer and reader alike in negotiating the aesthetic

discursive relationship. Vonnegut remains aware of the reader's task in deciphering the complex narrative structure of his text. He must provide enough associations for readers to hold on to while weaving through Billy Pilgrim's experience.

Vonnegut deliberately crafts Billy's life narrative as fluid and malleable. He flows in and out of conscious states, memory lapses, time travel, and key elements within present experiences, like musical quartets that send him into prior moments. Through Vonnegut's assimilation of real life POW experience with fictional alien abduction, these blurred boundaries offer ways of representing a traumatic past in a Tralfamadorian style. Billy's life is trapped in amber where he sees all moments simultaneously. Yet, there are moral implications when all parts are seen within the whole. Within the Tralfamadorian novel, dialogue has ceased and there is no need for further differentiation because body, environment, time value, and space value have become a unified totality. Events may become repeatable. A result of simultaneity is stasis in being. If the dialogue has already occurred then there is no accountability for our position: the transaction between writer, the characters, and the reader. What we end up with, if we are Tralfamadorian readers, is a resignation to response (Harris "Illusion" 137). Vonnegut ultimately uses the simultaneity of the novel to show that if human beings become bugs trapped in amber, trapped in predetermined structured moments, then the meaning of human life is diminished and drama becomes a fabrication. If events are already determined, there remains no free will and accountability or responsibility for the individual.

In a similar manner Mikhail Bakhtin defines our accountability and responsibility as remaining dependent upon the willingness for readers to respond: "[A]ddressivity, the quality of turning to someone, is a constitutive feature of the utterance; without it the utterance does not and cannot exist" (*Speech Genres* 99). If there is no call to answer, then we remain unobligated

to act. By structuring *Slaughterhouse-Five* as a Tralfamadorian novel, Vonnegut ironically shows the relevance of reader response and asks a great deal of his audience. By doing so, he indirectly implicates readers in a co-creation of the work. Vonnegut's multiple narrative disruptions signify the complexities of bearing witness. The catastrophic events for Vonnegut, the author, are so far removed from reality that there are no means to represent the chaos; therefore he invites readers to co-experience the disorientation of deciphering a traumatic event.

All of us come to trauma literature with the choice of participating or not. If we take part in the reading of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, we have already accepted the novel's absurdities and failures at reclaiming the chaos of lived experience. Reader and writer alike, work through this insurmountable task of representation.

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