

The Fraudulent Light in *Mother Night*

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“Which brings us to the arts, whose purpose, in common with astrology, is to use frauds in order to make human beings seem more wonderful than they really are.”

(Kurt Vonnegut, *Wampeters, Foma, and Granfalloon*, 166)

*Mother Night*, Kurt Vonnegut’s third novel, which presents itself as the “confessions” of American playwright and Nazi propagandist Howard W. Campbell, Jr., is perhaps the book in the Vonnegut canon most underappreciated and most deserving of being considered alongside Vonnegut’s best works: *Cat’s Cradle* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*. While several well-known Vonnegut critics do discuss the novel, it certainly hasn’t received the volume of critical attention or the place in the popular imagination spurred by these later works. I’d like to re-examine the novel briefly and suggest a somewhat different reading of it than the one suggested by most critics—a reading that places it even more firmly in line with the stylistic techniques and thematic concerns that dominate Vonnegut’s best works. While previous analyses of the book recognize Howard W. Campbell’s complicity in the Nazi regime, pointing out that his hate-filled, anti-Semitic propaganda does at least as much good for the Nazis as his secret coded messages do for the Allies, I suggest that these earlier readings do not go far enough in

exploring the web of lies and pretensions that Campbell is caught up in. I argue that it is entirely plausible to read Campbell's life as a double-agent as simply wishful thinking on his part, a lie told to justify his own reprehensible behavior. In other words, it is possible, and even likely, that Campbell, a playwright whose business involves creating implausible, romantic scenarios, completely invents the American agent Frank Wirtanen (his "blue fairy godmother"), Wirtanen's recruitment of Campbell as a secret American agent, and the coded messages that Campbell supposedly sends to the Allies.

When critics *do* talk about *Mother Night*, the consensus seems to be that Campbell really did work as a double-agent during the war, and that, in that respect at least, he is a trustworthy narrator. While Jerome Klinkowitz argues that "much of Howard Campbell's life involves fabrication..." (*Vonnegut Effect* 53), he never suggests that Major Frank Wirtanen might be part of this fabrication, instead arguing that the novel is "a classic story of someone being used" (52). For Klinkowitz, Campbell is best seen as a pawn of Major Wirtanen and of the American government. Todd Davis, in discussing Vonnegut's "postmodern humanism,"—in my view, a perfect descriptor of Vonnegut's work—also accepts the existence of Frank Wirtanen in the book at face value, arguing that the irony of Campbell's absurd role as the finest writer for "the ministry of propaganda" rests squarely on the fact that he has been instructed to do so by American military

intelligence (155). Critics Leonard Mustazza and Lawrence Broer both believe that Campbell is redeemed by his ultimate honesty with himself and with readers. Mustazza argues that readers see in Campbell “something genuine and sincere,” a man who is “painfully honest about his inner reality” (*Forever Pursuing Genesis* 64). And Lawrence Broer, who does suggest it is possible to read Campbell as having invented Wirtanen in order to further evade responsibility for his role as Nazi propagandist, nevertheless finally rejects this interpretation. Broer writes that it is Campbell’s “ultimate willingness to confront the consequences of his previous moral blindness that proves his salvation” (56). He argues that Campbell remedies this previous moral blindness in two ways: first through writing his confessions and secondly through the decision to take his own life, an act Broer interprets as “a final affirmative statement,” as the decision of a “moral man” who finally “accepts responsibility for his actions” (56).

I suggest, however, that Campbell is never entirely honest in his confessions, and that he does not achieve moral salvation by recognizing his own flaws at the end. While Campbell is often a sympathetic character, he is still human, and he is, above all, a consummate artist and playwright who continues to romanticize his own story all the way to the end of the novel. As Vonnegut said in his speech to the Bennington College graduating class in 1970, the purpose of the arts, “in common with astrology, is to use frauds in order to make human beings seem more

wonderful than they really are” (*Wampeters* 166). Campbell does just this—he uses his art in order to concoct a fraudulent self—a fantasy like Billy Pilgrim’s Tralfamadore, one that allows him to live with himself and that shapes a heroic picture for posterity.

There is much evidence in the novel that suggests Campbell has invented his life as an American spy. First is the fact that no one ever sees Major Frank Wirtanen except for Campbell himself, who claims to have met the American major three times: once in 1938 when he is recruited, again immediately after the war in Wiesbaden, Germany, and finally, in New York City in 1959 in a vacant store across the street from the house of white supremacist Dr. Lionel J.D. Jones. Yet, the first meeting takes place in a public park, with no witnesses to confirm it, and the other two meetings take place privately. Someone supposedly slips Campbell a note to meet Wirtanen when he is hiding in Dr. Jones’ basement, but this person is never identified and there are no likely suspects. It seems very improbable that one of the supporters of *The White Christian Minuteman* would wish to aid Wirtanen, and George Kraft and Resi Noth are Russian agents specifically working to undermine the American government.

Perhaps the strongest evidence for reading Wirtanen as a real figure is, as Campbell writes, his own “unbroken lily-white neck” (39)—the fact that Campbell was never hung for his crimes after the war. Campbell claims that Wirtanen

offered him safe passage to New York in their second meeting, which is how he escaped hanging. Yet, elsewhere in the novel, Campbell suggests that many war criminals were able to avoid prosecution. He tells readers that, during his thirteen years in New York, he would occasionally find his name in a newspaper or magazine, but “never as an important person,” only “one name in a long list of names of war criminals who had disappeared” (30). So, it is plausible that Campbell, like this long list of other criminals, might have escaped the Allies of his own accord and made it to New York. After all, the U.S. government, while refusing to deny or confirm that Campbell acted as a spy, does deny the existence of Major Frank Wirtanen. And, as George Kraft tells Campbell, even the Russians were “never able to turn up any proof” that he had been an American agent (262), despite the fact that other double agents, such as Heinz Schildknecht, Campbell’s ping-pong doubles partner in the Ministry of Propaganda, is able to prove that he was a member of the anti-Nazi underground during the war and “an Israeli agent after the war and up to the present time” (262).

Further, Campbell refers to Wirtanen in his confessions as his “blue fairy godmother,” signifying that the man is more a fairy-tale invention than a real person, a romantic figure Campbell made up in order to grant him his fondest wish—that, deep down, he really is the good man he wishes to be. In addition, the means by which Campbell claims to transmit his coded messages—a series of

coughs, pauses, clearings of the throat—is so slippery and hard to pin down that it cannot be verified even though recorded versions of all his radio broadcasts are archived in the Haifa Institute for the Documentation of War Criminals.

Campbell's planned suicide at the end of the novel, despite his supposedly receiving a letter from Major Wirtanen confirming his story, suggests the possibility that the letter was invented by Campbell as well. If he hangs himself, he will never be required to produce this supposed exonerating evidence.

It is curious, as well, that Campbell never told his beloved wife, Helga Noth, that he was working as a double agent, even though, as he himself admits, he would have lost nothing by telling her. She would not have loved him less. Telling her would not have put Campbell in any danger. Oddly, he writes that telling Helga would have made her life “seem pedestrian” (41), an unconvincing claim, it seems to me. Wouldn't Campbell's status as a double agent make Helga's life even more exciting and dangerous, anything but pedestrian? The real reason Campbell does not tell Helga about his spying is that it simply didn't happen—he only reinvented himself as a secret American agent after the war had ended. The angelic Helga, after all, seems to be a true-believer, a Nazi and anti-Semite herself: she accepts the things Campbell says about “the races of man and the machines of history” (42); she happily socializes with Nazi big-wigs, believing as Campbell

himself seems to, that politics has nothing to do with them or their “Nation of Two.”

But the most persuasive evidence that Campbell has invented his secret American spy self comes in Vonnegut’s own Editor’s Note to the novel. Adopting the guise that Campbell’s confessions have fallen into his hands and that he has simply served as editor to a book written by Campbell himself, Vonnegut immediately suggests the possibility that Campbell’s confessions contain lies: “To say that he was a writer is to say that the demands of art alone were enough to make him lie, and to lie without seeing any harm in it” (ix), Vonnegut writes as he introduces Campbell. Campbell is an artist, and art *requires* the telling of lies, according to Vonnegut. “To say that he was a playwright is to offer an even harsher warning to the reader,” Vonnegut adds, “for no one is a better liar than a man who has warped lives and passions onto something as grotesquely artificial as a stage.” Having warned readers to be skeptical about the confessions that will follow, Vonnegut risks the opinion that “lies told for the sake of artistic effect—in the theater, for instance, and in Campbell’s confessions, perhaps—can be, in a higher sense, the most beguiling forms of truth” (ix-x). Here, Vonnegut suggests that not only Campbell’s theatrical productions, the romantic plays he writes as a young man, contain lies, but that the confessions themselves have the same purpose—they consist of lies told for artistic effect. “Beguiling forms of truth” is

in itself an interesting phrase. The word “beguile” suggests deception or at least a sort of tantalizing misdirection, so that even if art uses lies to get at a higher truth, this “truth” itself is misleading, deceptive (designed, perhaps, to make human beings look more wonderful than they really are?)

And Campbell, after all, is very aware of the confessions as art, even of his own life as art. In one of his supposed conversations with Major Frank Wirtanen, he criticizes himself for not committing suicide after Helga disappears in the Crimea: “You would think that a man who’s spent as much time in the theater as I have would know when the proper time came for the hero to die—if he was to be a hero. . . . There goes the whole play about Helga and me, ‘Nation of Two,’ . . . because I missed my cue for the great suicide scene” (185). Campbell implies here that “Nation of Two” is not simply a play he is writing, but one that he is living as well. When Wirtanen says that he does not admire suicide, Campbell replies that he himself admires form: “I admire things with a beginning, a middle, an end—and, whenever possible, a moral, too” (185). His confessions contain the formal requirements Campbell believes are necessary for a work to be considered art—particularly the suicide ending that was lacking in his earlier play and the well-known moral that Vonnegut outlines in his 1966 introduction to the novel: “We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be” (v). Emphasizing Campbell’s desperate need for a moral to justify his life as a work of

art, Vonnegut even affixes two additional morals to the book: “When you’re dead you’re dead,” and finally, “Make love when you can. It’s good for you” (viii).

Campbell’s confessions, then, are just as much a piece of art as are the plays he wrote earlier in his career—plays like *The Goblet* that depicted “pure hearts and heroes” (39), characters who loved good and hated evil, who believed in romance. While, on the one hand, acknowledging the complexity of human nature—the mixture of good and bad within everyone (Nazis, for instance, who appreciate great art while carrying out unspeakable cruelties), Campbell is nevertheless desperately pretending to be something better than what he is, to prove that his heart, at least, is still pure. The last poem he ever writes, scrawled in eyebrow pencil on the inside lid of the trunk where he hastily stores his manuscripts before leaving Germany, reads:

Here lies Howard Campbell’s essence,  
Freed from his body’s noisome nuisance.  
His body, empty, prowls the earth,  
Earning what a body’s worth.  
If his body and his essence remain apart,  
Burn his body, but spare this, his heart.

Campbell considers his romantic plays, his art, to be his real self and to represent his heart, his essence, regardless of the fact that his body did service as a fierce anti-Semite and Nazi propagandist. For Vonnegut characters, over and over again, art creates a reality more real than the world they live in. This blurring of the line between art and reality puts Vonnegut squarely in the camp of postmodernist

writers, even as early as 1961, before the flowering of postmodernism later in the decade.

The reading that I suggest here has important implications for the interpretation of *Mother Night* as well as for the book's relationship to other novels in the Vonnegut canon. Rather than reading the book as "a classic story of someone being used," as Klinkowitz argues, or seeing Howard W. Campbell as someone who is, ultimately, "painfully honest about his inner reality," as Mustazza suggests, or interpreting Campbell's salvation as deriving from "his ultimate willingness to confront the consequences of his previous moral blindness," as Broer claims, I argue that we should read *Mother Night* as a meditation on the ways that human beings cope with atrocity and evil: they invent comforting lies to tell themselves. They make art. And narrative itself is the main purveyor of such lies. Readers should view Howard W. Campbell primarily as a literary artist who never leaves his playwriting career behind. In his confessions, he consciously shapes himself for posterity as a heroic, but doomed figure, offering readers a kind of "foma": the comfort of believing in the possibility of redemption from evil, a secret well of courage and goodness, that does not necessarily exist in the real world. The book serves as the "sweet and mournful" cry Campbell longs to hear his whole life but never does: *Olly-olly-oxen-free*, a cry to come out of hiding, to

come home, to be forgiven. We have art, Vonnegut implies, because reality is simply too painful to bear.

Such a reading puts Campbell in the company of later Vonnegut characters who invent worlds more hospitable to them than the real worlds they actually live in, including the prophet Bokonon in *Cat's Cradle*, the psychologically damaged Billy Pilgrim in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and possibly even the cynical Leon Trout in *Galapagos*, if one accepts Oliver Ferguson's reading of the novel as Trout's "lunatic construct," the view that Trout completely invents the story of de-evolution he tells because it provides an imagined solution to all the problems he sees inherent in twentieth century society: "domestic discord, economic free-booting, environmental despoliation, and war." *Mother Night*, then, is less a novel about the war between good and evil raging inside each of us, than it is, like these other novels, a metafictional reflection on the artistic imagination, a book about the power and function of narrative, and the relationship between narrative and reality.

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