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Kurt Vonnegut: Brokenhearted American Dreamer

I

Slaughterhouse-Five first appeared in bookstores in 1969, and it remains the signature achievement of Kurt Vonnegut's distinguished writing career. Long in gestation, it oscillates between realism and science fiction, mordant humor and grief, relieved by moments of unexpected lyrical imagery to convey the author's experience as a young soldier in the Second World War. He recounts for us his trials after capture by the Germans during their last counter-offensive, in the chaos of the Battle of the Bulge just before Christmas 1944.

Through the tragicomic alter ego "Billy Pilgrim," we learn about Vonnegut's six months as an object deprived of free will. We are with him standing in boxcars bound, in mysterious, stop-and-start fashion, for unknown destinations. We encounter the baseness to which people can descend, as well as the nobility to which they sometimes rise, in the most extreme situations. And of course we find out what it is like to go through the apocalypse – the firebombing of the city of Dresden on the night of February 13, 1945, which Vonnegut and about one hundred other Americans interned there miraculously survived. Then followed days and weeks when the prisoners were deployed in the process of corpse disposal – I will skip the grisly details, but *imagine* that task, that surreal landscape, for a moment. When he got home Vonnegut was shocked to find almost nothing about the raid in the back newspapers, and came to the conclusion that his government, abetted by the press, could *lie*. The impulse to somehow tell his "untellable" war story, to expose it to the light, would drive him for decades, and it became the focus for his most ambitious work of art.

This was a book that resisted being written, with a subject defying language and the conventions of narrative. "There is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre," Vonnegut cautions in the book's first pages. He often downplayed

the importance of the event in his life, in part out of concern that his reflections might be seen as special pleading by a German-American. One thing he had in common with his hero Mark Twain, Vonnegut once said (referring to Samuel Clemens' brief stint on the side of the Confederacy), is that they were both associated with the enemy in war. "And so you have to be funnier than most people," he added, careful in describing the privations of the other side.

And it was something he experienced from the outside, as though a visitor from another planet. "Being present at the destruction of Dresden," Vonnegut mused, "has affected my character far less than the death of my mother, the adopting of my sister's children, the sudden realization that those children were no longer dependent on me, the break-up of my marriage, and on and on" (*Palm Sunday* 301). The attitude seems to some degree a defense, an attempt to quarantine the episode and minimize the part of himself he lost in the inferno. In later years Vonnegut declared Dresden off-limits in interviews – only to bring it up himself, again and again, like a compulsion. The struggle to commit his story to print, and the power of the finished product, leave no doubt that *Slaughterhouse-Five* was the fulfillment of a survivor's mission, the expression of a deeply-held need to bear witness.

Slaughterhouse is a tale of defeat rather than victory, in itself a departure in the relentlessly affirmative national story. "It goes against the American storytelling grain to have someone in a situation he can't get out of," Vonnegut observed, "but I think this is very usual in life" (Allen 91). It was his intimate "duty-dance" with the reality of meaningless death, the most taboo of subjects in any culture.

Suffused with irony, Vonnegut's novel is rich with interludes of comic relief. But it is the author's least funny book, an American version of *Trummeliterature*, the spare and haunted "rubble literature" pioneered in the late 1940s by his friend and fellow infantry soldier, Heinrich Böll. Vonnegut compared it to Böll's stories of men who leave and come home, "with the war part missing." "That is like my memory of Dresden," he told a student audience in 1969. "Actually there's nothing there" (Bellamy 203).

In its reduction of things to their constituent elements – individuals turned to inert objects or steam, prisoners oozing like liquid out of boxcars, a city transformed into minerals – it also bears comparison to fellow chemist Primo Levi's accounts of his experiences at Auschwitz. Each man adopts the

scientific distance that was part of his training, as both a means of survival and, later, a mode of communication. Each records his extreme circumstances as though observing an experiment in human behavior. In their economy of expression and eye for detail emerges a kind of poetry different than one might expect of storytellers with more orthodox pedigrees.

The author had no illusions about the commercial prospects of what he had to say and dismissed any ambition that his small testimony might affect the workings of history. Was it an anti-war statement he was trying to deliver? “Why don’t you write an anti-glacier book instead” (*Slaughterhouse*), a skeptic at a cocktail party told him. But the experience had to be recorded, and it turns out a public in the throes of seismic change was ready to embrace it.

Slaughterhouse-Five was an immediate critical and commercial sensation, and it has stood the test of time. It was named by the editorial board of the Modern Library #18 on their index of the most important English-language novels of the twentieth century, and it is now securely in the canon of assigned readings in high schools and colleges across the country. Like all of Vonnegut’s published works, it has remained continually in print and available globally in multiple translations. It reached the big screen in 1972, in a film adaptation the author liked. Alternatively, it has been condemned and even, in a few cases, burned by those claiming offense at its isolated use of rough soldier’s language, no doubt a disingenuous excuse to quash a message they consider dangerously “unpatriotic.” In 2011 the school board of Republic, Missouri, ruled the book “inappropriate” for its high school students.

But given the book’s almost corny faith in bygone civic virtue and in the sense of democratic traditions mourned in their betrayal that lies at the heart of Vonnegut’s vision, his identification with the insurrectionist 1960s generation and the demonization of the book as somehow “anti-American” is curious. Dissident baby-boomers formed the core of his underground, “cult” audience before *Slaughterhouse-Five*, of course, and an accident of timing accounts for its deep footprint in the midst of the Vietnam trauma. Young people loved Vonnegut’s bag of tricks – the demystification of the creative process, the fractured narrative, the time-travel and flights to extragalactic planets like “Tralfamadore.” They adopted to the point of cliché the fatalism of the novel’s repeated phrase, “... so it goes.” Along with fellow veteran Joseph Heller’s 1961 landmark *Catch-22*, *Slaughterhouse* bookends the decade with an absurdist

de-glorification of the “Good War”/Victory Culture narrative. But, just as a commentator for the *Village Voice* recently observed, “Vonnegut has outlasted the counterculture that embraced him” (Sumner, “*Slaughterhouse-Five* at Forty”). I would argue that his most famous book transcends its immediate historical moment. It is really a meditation on the dignity, courage, and shattered dreams of the Great Depression generation. Its power and moral urgency come from sources far removed from the ideological wars of its time.

It is important to consider *Slaughterhouse* within the wider arc of Vonnegut’s career – and, to use another of its concepts, to get it “unstuck in time,” as something more than a 1960s relic. Beneath the structural gimmicks and sci-fi trappings, the sardonic detachment, the childlike prose, lies a kind of humanism and even *patriotism* that, in the superheated, polarized atmosphere in which it first appeared, seems both out of date and at the same time more enduring than some of its early readers might have suspected.

II

Vonnegut tells us in the opening chapter of *Slaughterhouse* that he struggled for a long time to develop a language that would do justice to his “war story,” and for years had no good answers for when his “famous Dresden novel” would finally be completed. He moved cautiously, elliptically toward the task, but we can see premonitions of his ultimate direction even in earlier works. In 1961’s *Mother Night*, Vonnegut wrestled with the moral complexities of World War II, with a fable about Howard W. Campbell, Jr., an American actor who posed as a rabid Nazi propagandist in Berlin, the belly of Hitler’s beast. In doing his job for army intelligence so well, did Campbell go too far with evil in the service of good?

Two years later, in *Cat’s Cradle* (1963), the moral inquiry involves the scientists who create doomsday weapons, men like those who worked for the Manhattan Project, or the eccentrics Vonnegut encountered in his public relations job at General Electric after the war. Narrow horizons blinded them to the havoc wrought by their chalkboard formulas and laboratory gadgets. *Cat’s Cradle* concludes with an “end of the world” chain-reaction, the result of a substance called *ice-nine*. Besides evoking the nightmare scenario of the

Cuban Missile Crisis, it reads today a lot like what Vonnegut must have seen in Dresden. The protagonist and his female companion retreat into a bomb shelter as the catastrophe unfolds. “During our first day and night underground, tornadoes rattled our manhole cover many times an hour,” he remembers. “Each time, the pressure in our hold would drop suddenly, and our ears would pop and ring.” When they emerged at last to look around, the air was dry and hot, an eerie calm prevailed. Imagining himself a child again, the narrator is full of questions he would like someone to answer:

Daddy, why are all the trees broken? Daddy, why are all the birds dead? Daddy, what makes the sky so sick and wormy? Daddy, what makes the sea so still?

With *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* (1965), Vonnegut inches ever closer to his Dresden story. The character of the title, a World War II veteran, with his stint in a sanitarium, his flat affect, his dreamy flights of fantasy and debilitating guilt complex, shows all the signs of what we would now call PTSD. He is a rough draft of Billy Pilgrim in *Slaughterhouse*. Eliot Rosewater’s efforts at Christ-like help to the less-fortunate are an attempt, never fully successful, to expiate survivor guilt, to wipe away unbearable memories from the war.

And so we come to Billy’s tale, which Vonnegut determined would show the soldiers he knew as the babes in arms they really were, not Frank Sinatra or John Wayne swashbucklers. Subtitled *The Children’s Crusade*, the book portrays Billy as a passive, storm-tossed vessel, a gangling clown, representing the callow youngster the author thought himself to be during his time in combat. In interviews Vonnegut recalled being thrown into the disintegrating lines of the American front in December of 1944, an army scout wandering, lost in the snow, with a ragtag collection of other frightened novices. “I imitated various war movies I’d seen,” he once said.

Soon enough Billy, a “chaplain’s assistant,” finds himself in a “Mississippi of humiliated Americans,” herded to collection points for the ride east. He attracts the unwanted attention of bullies along the way – the sadist Roland Weary, the brutal thug Paul Lazzaro, not to mention the guards administering random blows, barking out their unintelligible commands. But Vonnegut also conveys the humanity and brotherhood the prisoners were able to muster even in their collective misery. Crammed into sealed, unheated

cattle cars to be transferred into Germany, many died during the halting ordeal. They were bombed and strafed by Allied planes, their own people, and their sense of time was all but obliterated. "Christmas was in there somewhere," Vonnegut writes. Even with its Dante-like horror (Primo Levi would write in his memoirs of similar things, from his situation on the other side of Europe), the scene is also a stage for *community* in its most idealized form. Here is Vonnegut's description, full of otherworldly wonder, of the boxcar society he experienced:

Human beings in there were excreting into steel helmets which were passed to the people at the ventilators, who dumped them. Billy was a dumper. The human beings also passed canteens, which guards would fill with water. When food came in, the human beings were quiet and trusting and beautiful. They shared.

Once at a prison camp, the Americans seem wretched to the British soldiers who greet them, men who have long ago adjusted to their confinement. Urged to choose a leader, for purposes of discipline and self-respect, the Yanks half-heartedly elect the oldest man in their midst, an unassuming, middle-aged high school teacher from Vonnegut's Indianapolis named Edgar Derby, who emerges as the moral center of the book. "Poor old Edgar Derby," as the author refers to him, pulled strings to enlist at his advanced age, and now, as a POW, takes his leadership responsibilities seriously. He finds meaning and purpose in a fate that brings out the worst in others. Derby is kindly and attentive, a father who looks after his charges in the camp as he worries about his son serving out in the Pacific.

We have new evidence that the author was not the catatonic child he creates in the lead character of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Vonnegut is, in important respects, *Edgar Derby* rather than Billy Pilgrim. In a letter from a Red Cross station in France in late May of 1945, published for the first time in the posthumous collection *Armageddon in Retrospect* (2008), Vonnegut, still severely underweight, reassured his family that he was alive and told of how he had used what little German he knew to try to defend his mates from the gratuitous excesses of their custodians. "After desperately trying to improve our situation for two months, and having been met with bland smiles," Pvt.

Vonnegut wrote, "I told the guards just what I was going to do to them when the Russians came. They beat me up a little. I was fired as group leader."

Billy and his fellow prisoners are soon transferred to Dresden, a baroque "Oz" packed with refugees that had, even to that late point in the war, suffered not so much as a cracked windowpane. "Steam radiators still whistled cheerily," electricity flowed, streetcars rumbled across intersections. Vonnegut later described the city as having possessed the strategic importance of a wedding cake. Life there was Spartan, for civilians and prisoners alike, but not so disagreeable, and the Americans were put to work every day in a plant making vitamin-enriched malt syrup for pregnant women. The stuff was a taste of heaven, and the men slipped each other clandestine samples under the eyes of the old men and teenagers who guarded them.

At night they repaired to their improvised billet, *Schlachthof-funf*, building number 5 of a sprawling slaughterhouse complex. It had formerly been used to store hog carcasses, back when there were still hooved animals available to eat in Germany. One night, Howard W. Campbell, the notorious propagandist from *Mother Night*, shows up in the bunker, spewing with grand theater his viciously racist interpretations of the war and seeking recruits to fight for Hitler on the Eastern Front. Hungry and emaciated as they were, none of the men stepped forward to volunteer, even with the enticement of all the steak, mashed potatoes, and mince pie they could eat. "Poor old Edgar Derby," outraged by Campbell's arrogance, "lumbered to his feet," Vonnegut writes, "for what was probably the finest moment of his life." The author pauses here to set the scene:

There are almost no characters in this story, and almost no dramatic confrontations, because most of the people in it are so sick and so much the listless playthings of enormous forces. One of the main effects of war, after all, is that people are discouraged from being characters. But old Edgar Derby was a character now.

"His stance was that of a punch-drunk fighter. His head was down. His fists were out front, waiting for information and battle plan. Derby raised his head, called Campbell a snake." He "spoke movingly about the American form of government," Vonnegut writes, "with freedom and justice and

opportunities and fair play for all.” His young men, he declared with steely eyes to his reptilian adversary, were united in their willingness to die for those ideals. They would prevail in the end, thanks to “the brotherhood of the American and Russian peoples, as they worked together to crush the disease of Nazism.” Derby believed the declared purposes of the war, and he was ready to risk all to stand up for them. Just then, an air-raid siren above interrupted the soliloquy. Another false alarm – the real attack, a devastating front of man-made weather, would not come until the following night.

Kurt Vonnegut was not mocking Edgar Derby in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. He was using the character to voice the idealism *he* had learned as a boy, the civic religion of mid-westerners like Lincoln and Twain, the New Deal optimism he had drunk deeply and never stopped defending. It is true that Vonnegut was a man of the left, broadly speaking. He loved the socialism of his German-American forebears and the labor militancy of fellow Hoosier Eugene Debs. He understood from close observation the wages of the “survival of the fittest” capitalism that had wrecked so many lives during the stock crash of 1929 and its aftermath – an experience he always called, even more than the war, the defining historical episode of his life. He was freethinking and a pacifist by inclination, inspired by the “Merchants of Death” antimilitarism of the 1930s, and hated knee-jerk nationalism. Decades later Vonnegut condemned, early and publicly, the folly of the Vietnam War and the shredding of the Constitution that accompanied it. He was an instinctive communitarian in politics and approved of many aspects of the youth revolt of the 1960s in terms of civil rights, women’s equality, environmentalism, and challenges to illegitimate authority. But through it all he remained a “patriot,” if I may use that word with all its baggage, of the kind that was quite unfashionable when his war novel appeared. Vonnegut disliked the anti-intellectual proclivities of the later New Left, its “scorched earth” jettisoning of structure and tradition, its violent rhetoric, even as his books were deployed on the insurgent side in the political wars of the day. In a 1973 interview with *Playboy*, he disagreed with the idea that he was a “radical.”

Everything I believe I was taught in junior civics during the Great Depression – at School 43 in Indianapolis, with the full approval of the school board. America was an idealistic, pacifistic nation at that time. I was taught in the sixth grade

to be proud that we had a standing Army of just over a hundred thousand men and that the generals had nothing to say about what was done in Washington. I was taught to be proud of that and to pity Europe for having more than a million men and tanks. I simply never unlearned junior civics. I still believe in it. I got a very good grade.

In short, Edgar Derby is an expression of the author in the way that Michael Walzer once called a “*connected* critic,” a lover of his country even as he anguishes about its shortcomings and failed promise. Vonnegut was a brokenhearted American dreamer, not a bull-in-a-china-shop revolutionist.

III

There is much more to be said about *Slaughterhouse-Five* – including the firebombing of February 13, described in spare, detached fashion by the author. “There were sounds like giant footsteps above. The giants walked and walked.” When the prisoners came up the next day they encountered a swatch of ruin overwhelming in scale.

The sky was black with smoke. The sun was an angry little pinhead. Dresden was like the moon now, nothing but minerals. The stones were hot. Everybody else in the neighborhood was dead. So it goes.

The Americans were led by their stunned guards across a landscape of charred human remains – little logs lying around – amid collapsed buildings with melted glass undulating to the horizon. American Mustang planes swooped low to finish the job, strafing anything that still moved.

Vonnegut called *Slaughterhouse-Five* “a nonjudgmental expression of astonishment” about what he saw after he emerged from “the best bomb shelter in town.” He was reluctant to direct blame at individuals, from commanders down to the pilots and crews who executed what was in effect a bureaucratic exercise, the logical playing out of a machine gone out of control. “One reason they burned down Dresden,” he said in 1977, “is that they’d already burned down everything else. You know: ‘What’re we going to do tonight?’” (Allen 174).

In essays and speeches over the years, he insisted on his empathy for those who considered the operation just retribution for Nazi crimes. What bothered him was the imposition of *collective guilt*, the death penalty applied to babies, old people, the refugees from other places who crowded the city when it was attacked. An accurate accounting is impossible, Vonnegut thought 135,000 dead was the best estimate, more than the number who would perish in either Hiroshima or Nagasaki six months later. The raid came as the enemy was collapsing on all fronts, and it “didn’t shorten the war by half a second, didn’t weaken a German defense or attack anywhere, didn’t free a single person from a death camp.” In the end Vonnegut concluded that Dresden was about symbols rather than military science. “It was religious. It was Wagnerian. It was theatrical. It should be judged as such.”

As disturbing as the attack itself – primarily a British operation, revenge for the carnage of the Blitz – was the fact that the American role was kept from the public back home. “It was a secret, burning down cities – boiling pisspots and flaming prams,” Vonnegut said later (Allen 174). It reassured people, as it still does today, to think of aerial warfare as a surgical procedure with minimum collateral damage. But it always looks different from the ground. When Vonnegut came home, he could find almost nothing about the Dresden attack in the official record or in the newspapers. Did it even happen?

Then there is Edgar Derby’s absurd, meaningless death. He was shot for hanging on to a teapot amid the rubble and human debris of the melted city. “So it goes.” There is also Billy Pilgrim as a middle-aged man, a traumatized vet whose travels in time and space are an escape from the oppressive demands of domesticity and breadwinner masculinity many men of his generation experienced after their return. And there are the benumbed-but-wizened old soldiers who populate Vonnegut’s later novels. In 1987’s *Bluebeard*, we follow the story of the failed abstract expressionist artist Rabo Karabekian, whose final painting is an homage to the refugees he, like Kurt Vonnegut in real life, encountered at the end of the war. And in 1991’s *Hocus Pocus* the narrator is Eugene Debs Hartke, a decorated Vietnam-era warrior who speaks with disarming honesty about the culture of lying he served and abetted, referenced in the book’s title.

But *Slaughterhouse-Five* needs to be seen in a larger context, as an attempt (which Vonnegut declared, at the start, a “failure”) to come to terms with

the ravages of war – the one he survived, and *all* wars. It *is* a commentary on Vietnam – “Every day,” he laments in the final chapter, “my Government gives me a count of corpses created by military science,” a grinding reality that haunts him as he completes his Dresden novel. But it is more universal than that, and more sad than angry in its tone. Vonnegut remained proud, if troubled, by his service in World War II, and he declared it a “good war” after all, despite the many crimes committed by the winning side. Speaking of his ingrained sense of duty, Vonnegut once said he would have enlisted for service in Vietnam, as wrongheaded as he thought that war to be. It would have been the patriotic thing to do.

Like all of his work, *Slaughterhouse* needs to be “unstuck in time” from our conception of it as an artifact from the 1960s. It is an expression of humanist values by a self-described “child of the Great Depression.” Call it the ethics of “poor old Edgar Derby,” the 1960s’ most unlikely hero, a living symbol of moderation, decency, and idealism in a humbly unashamed American idiom.

And yet it is all undercut by the tone of the narrative. Are good intentions and humane values *enough* in an absurd world? Vonnegut is doubtful. The author’s ambivalence is captured perfectly in the phrase from the novel for which he today remains most identified. “So it goes” conveys a bone-deep sense of irony and resignation in the face of defeat – and a will, nonetheless, to carry on.

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