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## Landscapes of Destruction: Reading Kurt Vonnegut's *Breakfast of Champions* with an Eye to Walt Whitman

*In heart, I am an American artist,  
and I have no guilt. . .*

Patti Smith, *Babel* (1978)

*Breakfast of Champions*, first published in 1973, is probably one of Kurt Vonnegut's most destructive, pessimistic and nihilistic works. Even if we chose to label it a comedy, or a farce, its humor would still be of a very black quality.<sup>1</sup> Thus, maybe, the book would be more accurately described as a satire verging on tragedy. Vonnegut was not new to the theme of destruction; where the earlier novel *Cats Cradle* (1963) is a long allegory on power and authority which ends in catastrophe, *Mother Night* (1961) and *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969) unfold as chronicles of private vicissitudes set against the tragic backdrop of a major historical event, World War II. Along with a deep reflection on identity, ambiguity, and the thorny issue of distinguishing innocence from guilt, both share an outright condemnation of war's useless folly and of all the mystifications often concocted to disguise it. In the latter work, remarkably, the horror of the chosen *exemplum* — the allied firebombing of the German city of Dresden, which in three days (2/13-15/1945) killed more than 135,000 harmless civilians — is so immense to prove basically impossible to represent. Billy Pilgrim, the young American POW most of the book focuses on, takes shelter in a deep underground meat locker "hollowed in living rock" (S5 209) and so is only able to witness the bomb runs' aftermath, the morning when Dresden suddenly "was like the moon" (S5 229). This narrative choice, in passing, formally connects the book to classic Greek tragedy, where the most heinous deeds could only be hinted at off-stage.<sup>2</sup>

In *Breakfast of Champions*, on the contrary, crimes and assorted mischiefs turn out to be even too openly represented (thus our allusion to the linguistic excesses of satire.) Scattered among the short passages that make up the twenty-four chapters of the book are 119 line drawings — Vonnegut's own hand — of objects and verbal expressions, a few repeated more than once; now and again, as with the American flag (8), these images appear to be drawn to embody something which has drifted too far from its original and/or idealized meaning, to end up blurred, tainted and somehow betrayed. In times when images as communicative devices often prevail over spoken or written words, the book's expected audience seems to *need* a symbolic, pictorial rendering of the concepts and ideas it has, knowingly or not, forgotten.<sup>3</sup>

Here, Vonnegut's declared blueprint is to write a book similar to a "sidewalk strewn with junk" (5); littered with trash he throws over his shoulder to "make [his] head as empty as it was when [he] was born onto this damaged planet" (5). The result is a never-ending catalogue of cultural monstrosities, either contemporary or, which is worse, proven by now to be timeless. At the end of this kind of subtractive process, dotted with final statements where, for instance, it is "high time" (18) for the world to end, American culture is ostensibly reduced to a *tabula rasa*. Nothing seems to be salvageable; all that is left at the end is a character's distressed longing to "[be made] young [again]" (302, last passage) and the author's teary-eyed profile (303, last drawing).

Through this insistence on a narrative structure where a weak story line — the chronicle, narrated by the author himself, of car salesman Dwayne Hoover's gradual and violent nervous breakdown — is only an excuse for a lengthy, bitter *cahier de doléances*, Vonnegut gives the impression of running an opposite course to the one Walt Whitman laid out in many of his poems in the different editions of *Leaves of Grass*. While developing a new literature for a new country, the "good gray poet" (as he often referred to himself) uses the former to celebrate the latter, and weaves together long lists of things and human types, as if he planned to compile a comprehensive inventory of America's gifts, virtues and assets. Instead of a disillusioned and continuous reduction, Whitman stages a jubilant and enthusiastic buildup, where even destruction

plays a positive role. In a poem like "Song of the Broad-Axe," as an example, the weapon mentioned in the title initially belongs, among the others, to the "antique European warrior" (Whitman 334) and to the — European, again — headsman. A harbinger of death and destruction, as we can read in the few lines recalling the "old city's" sack,<sup>4</sup> when through the centuries it is eventually handed down to the American, the axe changes into the symbol of a peculiar brand of progress that stems from tearing down and rebuilding rather than from improving or mending. Just as it sacked the *old* city, the blade enables its latest wielder to "found a *new* city." (Whitman 331, emphasis added)

Even the Civil War, the most tragic historical event in Whitman's lifetime, with all its ruthless and fratricidal bloodshed nonetheless "save[s] the Union" against "the foulest crime in history" — slavery.<sup>5</sup> Slightly more than 600.000 total casualties amount to a painful but necessary step on the path leading to that "democracy total, results of centuries" (Whitman 341) the poet advocates as America's manifest destiny.<sup>6</sup> At the very beginning of *Democratic Vistas* (1871), published less than a decade after the Confederate surrender, "America" and "democracy" are advertised as "convertible terms." (Whitman 954) Almost on the same page, though, the poet somehow concedes that "America [...] counts, I reckon, for her justification and success (for who, as yet, dare claim success?) almost entirely on the future. [...] For our New World I consider far less important for what it has done, or what it is, than for results to come." (Whitman 953) The want of a national literature is a serious drawback for this success plan, because it slows down the process of building a shared, original spirit; it is with the new class of the "literati" that rests all responsibility for defining, chanting and celebrating the "Soul" of America. Again, this is a mission left to be fully accomplished in some vague future:

Poets to come! orators, singers, musicians to come!

[...]

Arouse! for you must justify me.

I myself but write one or two indicative words for the future,

I but advance a moment only to wheel and hurry back in the darkness

[...]

Expecting the main things from you. ("Poets to come," Whitman 175)

A century after these words, *Breakfast of Champions* focuses on what these "results to come" have been, and on which kind of "literatus" now sings America. This happens from a severely biased standpoint, but one could argue that it was also true of the "good gray poet"— directly evoked in the text when one of the main characters, writer Kilgore Trout, enters Philadelphia crossing a bridge "named in honor of [...] Walt Whitman" and which is significantly "veiled in smoke." (105)<sup>7</sup>

In Vonnegut's novel, to begin with, destruction takes on a planetary scale; its terms, also, are much more real than in *Cats Cradle*, where apocalypse is triggered by the awkward handling of a fictional, government-sponsored substance called *Ice-Nine*.<sup>8</sup> Here, "Humanity [has] behaved so cruelly and wastefully on a planet so sweet" (18) and so it deserves to be annihilated; those who wanted to harness and shape nature ended up wasting it away, whether consciously or not. As casual exposure to athlete's foot led the Bermuda erns to extinction (30-31), reckless recourse to strip mining (123) — duly favored by a handy interpretation of private property rights (129) — resulted in "the demolition of West Virginia." (123) The obtained coal, on a side note, was fed into the same "choo-choo trains and steamboats and factories" (125) Whitman so highly revered (as with mines themselves, for that matter) as symbols of progress. Now, at least if we listen to one of the novel's minor characters, the truck driver, "manufacturing processes" are destroying the planet, and for good measure "what [is] being manufactured [is] lousy, by and large." (86) If West Virginia is little more than a bleak, barren land, and New Jersey is just a land of "poisoned marshes and meadows" (86), elsewhere it seems quite hard to encounter some scenery which is not cemented over. Looking out of the Quality Motor Court's motel window in his hometown of Midland City, Alabama, Dwayne Hoover's unquiet gaze only meets "an iron railing and a concrete terrace [...] and then Route 103, and then the wall and the rooftop of [the jail] beyond that." (158)

Man's exploitative attitude towards nature is, of course, just one of the many landmarks in Vonnegut's American landscape of destruction, together with its bastard son, pollution: to cross "the concrete trough containing Sugar

Creek" means getting "coated at once with a clear plastic substance from the surface of the [water]." (229) These two evils are effectively joined, then, by war in its latest (for 1973) embodiment, Vietnam. Void of all old Whitmanesque heroics, it ushers in "new invention[s]": the body bag (32) for corpses and toxic Agent Orange for chemical defoliation (88); it shatters identities and allegiances: Kilgore Trout's son Leo "desert[s] from his division" and "join[s] the Viet Cong" (114); it gives way to painful and stubborn forms of denial: the POW-MIA bracelets (253) as a last resort to defer the acknowledgment of casualties." Violent crimes, also, mirror war's cruelty. The whole of New York City is rather quickly dismissed as "dangerous" (71), and quite distant from Whitman's hectic, intoxicating positive energy. Fairchild Park, Midland City's "skid row" (189) where people have to stay "and not bother anybody anywhere else — until they [are] murdered for thrills" (188), witnesses fifty-six murders in two years (187). All this is encouraged by easy access to firearms: "anybody who wanted [a gun] could get one at his local hardware store. Policemen all had them. So did the criminals. So did the people caught in between." (49)

A crucial factor in Dwayne's breakdown is definitely his isolation, that makes him unable to vent or simply voice his deep discomfort. If we leave out the customary array of non-places like a Holiday Inn or some fast food joints, the forced intimacy of the jail, and the thickly populated ghettos of Fairchild Park and of "the Nigger part of town" (41), what's left is a scattering of secluded, walled-in houses where everyone is totally "screened from the neighbors." (52) We learn that each message "sent and received in this country, even the telepathic ones, [has] to do with buying or selling some damn thing." (53) In Midland City, in particular, the only possible subjects of conversation are "money or structures or travel or machinery — or other *measurable* things" (146, emphasis added) along with "lines from television shows." (236) Everybody has a "part to play" which entails "living up to [someone else's] expectations." (146) Truth, there, is "some crazy thing my neighbor believes" and which one pretends to agree with "to make friends with him." (214) In such a context, no wonder if art (and culture at large) is just another commodity, another luxury item to be bought, sold or even borrowed — as with

millionaire Eliot Rosewater's El Greco, loaned to the Midland City Festival of the Arts - but never really understood or otherwise internalized. It is as well the case of a "minimal paint[ing]" (201) by a Rabo Karabekian, *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*, introduced in the text as the "first purchase for the permanent collection of the [Midland City] Center for the Arts." Consisting only of a vertical stripe of "dayglo orange reflecting tape" on a huge green (or, better, "*Hawaiian Avocado*") background, the painting, priced at fifty thousand dollars, leaves everybody "outraged" (213) and forces its author to unveil its meaning in public. Regardless of Karabekian's superciliousness, we must acknowledge his good faith; the dayglo stripe allegedly stands for "the immaterial core of every animal - the 'I am' to which all messages are sent," because each and every one of us is "one vertical, unwavering band of light." (226) We could say we're not that far from just another celebration of the individual, the "self," the "body electric" so broadly sung by Whitman — although now it all falls on deaf ears and closed eyes.

Literature, in *Breakfast of Champions'* America, comes handy just as a filler for pornography — when not as toilet paper, as in the Libertyville recycling plants (131). It is in smutty magazines like *Black Garterbelt* (56), in fact, or in books with altered title, cover and (obviously) illustrations, that Kilgore Trout's two hundred and nine between novels and short stories reach the public. Trout is a recurring character in Vonnegut's works — we could say he is his version of Whitman's "lireratus": the frequent references to his writings usually build up a true parallel text, where the same issues debated in the "primary" novel(s) are re-presented using metaphors and a fantasy (usually science-fiction) setting, and more often than not engendering a strong and sometimes bothersome redundancy effect. In this specific novel, for example, the text refers the reader to works like *Plague on Wheels* (55), which condemns the effects of pollution, or "The Dancing Fool" (58), focused on communication failure.<sup>10</sup> Other Trout works echoing already mentioned sections of the novel are *Now it Can Be Told* (55), about the influence of determinism on people's life, "This Means You" (74), on the evils of private property, and *The Barring-gaffner of Bagnialto* (132), where art's value is assessed by chance, using a fortune wheel — which,

for good measure, turns out to be rigged. Again, Vonnegut here seems to be going against Whitman's intent — or stressing its failure. One could argue if the old poet's purpose was "[to] bring order to chaos" (215), with his insisted celebration of a nature-shaping humanity and its ideal pull to democracy. Vonnegut, instead, writes to "bring chaos to order," in opposition to "old-fashioned writers [who made] people believe that life had leading characters, minor characters, significant details, insignificant details, that it had lessons to be learned, tests to be passed, and a beginning, a middle, and an end." (215) Thus, his chaotic catalogue of horrors continues.<sup>11</sup>

It is quite hard, for instance, to find a hint of the vital, almost unrestrained — hetero and homoerotic — sensuality so often chanted throughout *Leaves of Grass*. In Midland City, pleasure is never enjoyed in a healthy way, so to speak. Leaving aside the abuses suffered in jail by weaker inmates, sex is either a companion to violence, through rape (as for young Patty Keene, 143), or otherwise repressed and forced into hiding. Harry LeSabre, an employee of Dwayne's, is a "secret transvestite" who "could be arrested for what he did on weekends. He could be fined up to three thousand dollars and sentenced to as much as five years at hard labor." (48) Dwayne's son Bunny is sent to Prairie Military Academy at age ten (and subjected to "eight years of uninterrupted sports, buggery and Fascism," 185) just for saying that "he wished he were a woman," because "what men did was so often cruel and ugly." (184) Sexuality, of course, can be just another facet of isolation and loneliness; "penis extender[s]" and "rubber vagina[s]" are widely available through mail order (151), and there's always the pornography that accompanies Trout's writings and which, after all, shouldn't be too despised, at least because it "fills such a *need*." (69)

Many passages are devoted to several other sins like greed, over-population (45), mindless encouragement to consumption (91), sheer lack of solidarity ("one of the most expensive things a person could do was get sick," 139), death penalty (159), whether or not inflicted on (black) teen-agers (268), and the potentially dangerous influence media can have on people's perception of reality (the "Pluto Gang" episode, 77-78). The exhausted topic of lost innocence, also, is indirectly — and not without some elegance — tackled, in a passing

reference to the lamb, "a young animal which was legendary for sleeping well on the planet Earth." (83)

The worst fault of our doomed planet, in any case, lies in the fact that "there was no immunity to cuckoo ideas [on it]" (27), and one of these ideas is racism. Just as *Leaves of Grass* was teeming with mentions of slavery's defeat (as in "By Blue Ontario's Shore," for instance, Whitman 473) and of its optimistic dismissal as a relic of the past (as in "Turn O Libertad," Whitman 457), *Breakfast of Champions* swarms with examples of how persistent and culturally embedded racial prejudices still are. Choosing to set the novel in Alabama, Vonnegut probably lessens the impact of this statement, allowing some readers to assume that elsewhere things are obviously different, even if the text clearly warns that "[cities] are all the same." (171)<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, we could argue that a deep South setting adds some likelihood to the disturbing normality of certain attitudes and assumptions — among the others, "philosophical[ly]" accepting as a sign that "times change" the fact that one may end up "staying at a place where black men stayed" (79, emphasis added), or defining slaves "machines made out of meat." (150) A fleeting reference to Kilgore Trout's high school days gives the author an easy, sarcastic cue, since the institute is "named after [Thomas Jefferson,] a slave owner who was also one of the world's greatest theoreticians on the subject of human liberty" (34); in Midland City, instead, Jefferson Street marks "the edge of the Nigger part of town." (41) Just as predictable, but also less caustic, is Vonnegut's mention of Whitman's "Captain," President Lincoln, "a man who had the courage and imagination to make human slavery against the law in the United States America." (85) Jefferson and Lincoln are historical figures, and so is Crispus Attucks, "a black man who was shot by British troops in Boston in 1770" (255), one of the very first to fall in the Revolutionary War. All the same, almost in a Brechtian sense, it is from the voices of the nameless, fameless multitudes that most highly resonates, in the text, the condemnation of racism. It could be a catalogue within a catalogue. Old Mary Young, "daughter of slaves" (63), who silently took care of Dwayne's family laundry, and then Lottie Davis, his current "servant" (17); all the slaves long since dead, the already cited "machines



made out of meat" (also 73, and *passim*);<sup>13</sup> those — grim statistics, numbers before names — crammed into Shepherdstown jail, where "all inmates are black and [all] the guards are white" (159); those who are referred to as "reindeer," just because the local police keeps its armory well stocked with assault rifles, "for an open season [...] which was bound to come" (168); last, those who expose themselves to harm and humiliation in the "African dodger booth" at the local carnival (269).

One of the most effective black non-historical characters in *Breakfast of Champions* is Wayne Hoobler, the "young [...] jailbird." (100) He "had been in orphanages and youth shelters and prisons of one sort or another [...] since he was nine years old. He was now twenty-six." (99) Absolutely clueless about the world at large, and subject to all kinds of abuse and mistreatment until, eventually, the parole board released him, he somehow still hopes "for a better world" (99) which he secretly calls "Fairyland" (100, drawing) and where he would "live happily ever after." (101) He believes that the only, very simple thing he needs to get to Fairyland is a chance to work at Dwayne's Pontiac agency. Of course he won't get it, but what is more important is the way he convinced himself he could count on it. He had been persuaded by the ads Hoover ran in the local paper, the *Bugle-Observer*, and which he used to paste on the walls of his cell. Each ad sported the same motto: "ASK ANYBODY - YOU CAN TRUST DWAYNE" (100).

This consideration allows us to finally introduce another central subject in the novel: fabrication. By itself, the title of the book — "a registered trademark of General Mills, Inc., for use on a cereal product" (1, then repeated *verbatim* on 199) — should hint at the importance of advertising within this work; more subtly, Vonnegut's spontaneous and unrequested disclaimer, where he states that "the use of [such an] expression [...] is not intended [...] to disparage their fine products" (1), could refer the reader to advertisements' intrinsic manipulation of reality and truth for commercial purposes. Leaving aside the fact that some characters (Dwayne Hoover or Harry LeSabre, for instance) are even named after brands or products, textual allusions to advertising are usually associated to a negatively connoted idea of scheming; this applies to

the "Hawaiian Week" (46) at the Pontiac agency, or to Colonel Sanders KFC franchises, "a scheme for selling fried chicken" (160) — but also to the Sacred Miracle Cave, a heavily polluted "tourist trap" advertised throughout the book (117, 154, 177, 191, to list just the drawings) which boasts, among its attractions, "JesseJames," the skeleton of "some railroad robber" that, we learn later, "Dwayne's stepfather had [actually] bought from the estate of a doctor back during the Great Depression." (120)

All these communicative instances share the characteristic of presenting their public with a self-interested, mystified view of reality that also aims to hide, as the case may be, that reality's negative aspects. The trademark of the "Queen of the Prairies," a prison-run dairy farm, for example "[doesn't] mention prison." (195)<sup>14</sup> In a long section at the beginning of the book, Vonnegut extends this reflection to those he sees as seminal contradictions in the birth and history of the United States ("America for short," 7). He starts from 1492, a date which does not mark the moment when the continent was "discovered by human beings," as "teachers told the children," but "simply the year in which sea pirates began to cheat and rob and kill" the "millions of human beings" who already lived there. Afterwards, they "created a government which became a beacon of freedom to human beings everywhere else" — but it was just "another piece of evil nonsense" (10) because, again, "[those] who had the most to do with the creation of the new government owned human slaves." (11) In the novel's nihilistic and destructive context, we're led to believe that from the very beginning America's promise was a kind of a fraud, and, why not, that Whitman's work, too, was just a long redundant piece of advertisement *ante litteram*. After all, according to the General Electric motto, even "progress" can become a "product [to sell]." (298) The whole novel seems aimed at demonstrating that "nobody believes anymore in a new American paradise" as the one promised ever since the Great Depression (2). Nothing is spared: not the national anthem, quoted in full, and dismissed as "pure balderdash" (7), or "gibberish sprinkled with question marks" (8); not the flag to which it refers, that the author initially describes as a true symbol of arrogance never to be "dipped to any person or thing," not even as "a form of friendly and respectful

salute." (8)<sup>5</sup> According to Vonnegut, America's citizens by now are "so ignored and cheated and insulted that they [think] they might be in the wrong country, or even in the wrong planet, that some terrible mistake [has] been made." (9) Looking for clues, they resort to studying banknotes to try and understand "what their country was all about," why everyday life is so different from what it's supposed (and advertised) to be, but they only find obscure symbols like a "truncated pyramid with a radiant eye on top." (9) They would require symbols "of wholeness and harmony and nourishment," which are "richly colored and three-dimensional and juicy" (300-1), but those are nowhere to be found.<sup>16</sup> Most of all, they "hunger for symbols which have not been poisoned by great sins [their] nation has committed, such as slavery and genocide and criminal neglect, or by tinhorn commercial greed and cunning." (301)

We have already pointed out how, according to the text, and leaving America aside for a moment, it seems like it is the whole planet that actually deserves to be destroyed. A few passages directly deal with the issue of conservationism; talking to the truck driver, Kilgore Trout uses a series of allusions to "[God's] volcanoes or tornadoes or tidal waves" and to "the Ice Ages [God] arranges for every half-million years" to wonder why man should worry so much about "[getting] our rivers cleaned up." In the meantime, at the Almighty's whim, "the whole galaxy [could] go up like a celluloid collar." (87) Earth's history, from this standpoint, has been a process of subsequent destruction (or extinction, as with the dinosaurs, 126), but that always happened for the sake of transformation — as with coal, which was "a highly compressed mixture of rotten trees and flowers and bushes and so on." (126) Now, as we have seen with reference to West Virginia's strip mines, manufacturing processes have transformed coal and other fossil fuels into heat and energy that, once used, basically "fled into outer space" (127); thus, through consumption without renewal, as energy sources they will soon be gone for good.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, "there was only one way for the Earth to be, he thought: the way it was." (106)

At this point, it would seem reasonable to conclude that *Breakfast of Champions* is a desperate novel that describes a helpless world — and country, coming back to America. I believe that it is not completely correct. Trout's

downbeat critique of conservationism, after all, ends with a biblical exception: "the story about the Flood" (87), a proof that even on that occasion there had been something worthy of being saved. It is true that sometimes life can be quite similar to the General Motors Pontiac "destructive testing" area, "where parts of automobiles and even entire automobiles were destroyed" or abused in every possible way to check their sturdiness (169). After all, it is during that trip to Michigan that Dwayne Hoover, three months into widowhood, comparing himself to Job "[began] wondering if that was what God put [him] on Earth for - to find out how much a man could take without breaking." (170) The book, also, offers a strange kind of consolatory explanation to all this suffering and wickedness: human beings are *actually* machines, "programmed" to act one way or another. If they behave badly, or senselessly, it is just "because of faulty wiring, or because of microscopic amounts of chemicals which [they] ate or failed to eat on that particular day." (4) Lacking in free will, they are consequently not responsible for their actions. War, slavery, diseases, even the death penalty are not "a shame" (270) anymore, since they don't involve sentient beings. But if the novel offers this sort of twisted escapist, deterministic fantasy, it also denies it when Vonnegut, as the narrator, dismisses it as just "a great temptation." (4) It is much better to rely on a simpler, but truer, knowledge. Tenacious, enduring characters like the young black parolee, who "adapted to what there was to adapt to" (194, drawing), demonstrate that more often than not, as a "common combination on planet Earth," "a life not worth living" goes hand in hand with "an iron will to live" (72) of an almost Whitmanesque magnitude.

Also, near the end of the story, we discover that there is even an old symbol which, after all, could be still deemed viable. Speaking— either literally or metaphorically— of destroyed, levelled-out, thus horizontal landscapes, it is no surprise that it is a vertical (and *un-dippable*, we could say) symbol: the American flag, returning after almost three hundred pages. It is the same "Emblem" that appears so many times in *Leaves of Grass*: "draped in black muslin" or "dense-starred [...] at the head of the regiments" in "Song of Myself" (Whitman 214 and 221); "savagely struggled for" through the whole ninth section of

"Song of the Exposition" (Whitman 349-50); "baptized [...] in many a young man's bloody wounds" in "The Centenarian" (Whitman 434); "sacred [...] mother" in "Delicate Cluster" (Whitman 455); "flung" for "cold and dead" President Lincoln in "O Captain! My Captain!" (Whitman 467); "warlike" and "angry" in the eleventh section of "By Blue Ontario's Shore" (Whitman 476) and, eventually, "fateful" in "Thick-Sprinkled Bunting." (Whitman 593)<sup>18</sup> Again, Vonnegut's citation of the flag is far more low-keyed, if certainly more genuine, and without denying all the previous bitterness.

Behind the wheel of the disaster vehicle moving in to rescue the victims of Dwayne's rampage, in fact, there's young Eddie Key, who turns out to be — although he is black — a descendant of Francis Scott Key, "the white American patriot who wrote the National Anthem." (278) He has an American flag (probably a sticker) "stuck to the windshield." On the "off-chance that Key might now be having a look at what had become of the United States of America so far," Eddie answers one of the "question marks" that "sprinkled" his ancestor's lyrics, the last lines that worried about the flag's destiny, and he says, "very quietly: '[It is] still wavin', man' (279).<sup>19</sup>

## NOTES

\*When not specifically stated otherwise, all parenthetical references belong to the cited edition of *Breakfast of Champions*, with the sole exceptions of two quotations from *Slaughterhouse-Five* (abbreviated as S5) and one from *Hocus Pocus* (abbreviated as HP.) Patty Smith's quotation from *Babel* is on page 193 of the cited edition, and also reprinted in the liner notes to her *Easter* LP, Arista 1978.

1. On comedy, satire and black humor in Vonnegut, see Will Kaufman, "Vonnegut's *Breakfast of Champions*: A Comedian's Primer," *Thalia* 13.1-2 (1993): 22-33; Charles Berryman, "Vonnegut's Comic Persona in *Breakfast of Champions*," in Merrill 1990, pp. 162-70; Robert Scholes, "'Mithridates, he died old': Black Humor and Kurt Vonnegut, jr.," *The Hollins Critic* 3.4 (1966): 1-12 and Lyn Buck, "Vonnegut's World of Comic Futility," *Studies in American Fiction* 3 (1975): 181-98. A number of critics, also, have suggested that all of Vonnegut's novels are actually fables. See, for example, Robert Scholes, *The Fabulators* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 35-55, and Raymond M. Olderman, *Beyond the Waste Land* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), pp. 189-219.

2. In 1972, George Roy Hill directed a film version of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, starring Michael Sacks as Billy Pilgrim. While in the novel Billy and the other prisoners leave the meat locker

and walk around the now leveled-out city in silence, the movie uses J. S. Bach's *Concert N. 5 BWV 1056* as a soundtrack, thus enhancing the already harsh contrast between the lively and crowded place of the night before and the morning's view of death and total destruction. See Joyce Nelson, "Slaughterhouse-Five: Novel and Film," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 1 (1973): 149-53 and Jerry Holt, "Vonnegut on Film" in Reed 2000, pp. 101-6. See also, on the movie's soundtrack, Rocco Carbone, "I trucchi di Vonnegut," *l'Unità* 17 June 2003: 27.

3. References to spoken word and oral tradition at large are introduced in this novel, as in many other Vonnegut works, by frequently inviting the reader to "listen" (7, 42, 193, 206, 231, 273, 293). On Vonnegut's use of drawings, see Peter Reed, "The Graphics of Kurt Vonnegut" in Reed 1996, pp. 205-22 and "More Graphics by Kurt Vonnegut" in Reed 2000, pp. 171-80.

4. Roar, flames, blood, drunkenness, madness,  
 Goods freely rifled from houses and temples, screams of  
 women in the gripes of brigands,  
 Craft and thievery of camp-followers, men running, old  
 persons despairing,  
 The hell of war, the cruelties of creeds [...] (Whitman 334).

5. Part of a line from Whitman's "This Dust Was Once the Man," included in *Memories of President Lincoln* (Whitman 468).

6. This casualties' figure, albeit approximate, is confirmed by various online sources; among the most comprehensive and authoritative is the Unites States Civil War Center maintained by the Louisiana State University (<http://www.cwc.lsu.edu/cwc/index.htm>). Here are Vonnegut's comments about the war: "I think that the end of the Civil War in my country frustrated the white people in the North, who won it, in a way which has never been acknowledged before. [...] The victors in that war were cheated out of the most desirable spoils of that war, which were human slaves" (251-2).

7. Every once in awhile, however, even Whitman's optimism faltered: "The depravity of the business classes of our country is not less than has been supposed, but infinitely greater. The official services of America, national, state, and municipal, in all their branches and departments, except the judiciary, are saturated in corruption, bribery, falsehood, mal-administration; and the judiciary is tainted. The great cities reek with respectable as much as non-respectable robbery and scoundrelism. In fashionable life, flippancy, tepid amours, weak infidelism, small aims, or no aims at all, only to kill time. In business, (this all-devouring modern word, business,) the one sole object is, by any means, pecuniary gain. [...] Confess that everywhere, in shop, street, church, theatre, barroom, official chair, are pervading flippancy and vulgarity, low cunning, infidelity— everywhere the youth, puny, impudent, foppish, prematurely ripe — everywhere an abnormal libidinousness, unhealthy forms, male, female, painted, padded, dyed, chignon'd, muddy complexions, bad blood, the capacity for good motherhood deceasing or deceas'd, shallow notions of beauty, with a range of manners, or rather lack of manners [...] probably the meanest to be seen in the world" (*Democratic Vistas*, Whitman 961-3).

8. On the theme of destruction (and survival) in Vonnegut's work, see Peter Freese, "Surviving the End: Apocalypse, Evolution, and Entropy in Bernard Malamud, Kurt Vonnegut, and

Thomas Pynchon, "Critique 36.3 (1995): 163-76 and Hearron, Tom, "The Theme of Guilt in Vonnegut's Cataclysmic Novels," in Nancy Anisfield, ed., *The Nightmare Considered: Critical Essays on Nuclear War Literature* (Bowling Green: Popular, 1991), pp. 186-92.

9. In a more recent novel, *Hocus Pocus* (1990), "Vietnam" comes back in a haunting, albeit less effective way: as a single word written by the main character, Eugene Debs Hartke, on a small piece of paper (HP 61). Its evocative power is supposed to be so great to prevent the need of adding anything else. "POW/MIA" bracelets are made out of aluminum, brightly colored, and each one is inscribed with data relating to a U.S. serviceman who went missing in action during the Vietnam war. The bracelet is supposed to be worn as a remembrance and support sign, until that particular soldier, sailor or pilot is released from detention or his death is ascertained.

10. See, on Kilgore Trout and other recurring characters, William Godshalk, "The Recurring Characters of Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.," *Notes on Contemporary Literature* 3.1 (1973): 2-3 and Peter Reed, "Kurt Vonnegut's Bitter Fool: Kilgore Trout," in Leeds 2000, pp. 67-80. On Vonnegut and science fiction, see Carlo Pagetti, "Kurt Vonnegut, tra fantascienza e utopia," *Studi Americani* 12 (1966): 301-22; Benyei Tamas, "Leakings: Reappropriating Science Fiction -The Case of Kurt Vonnegut," *JFA* 11.4.44 (2001): 395-408 and Willis E. McNelly, "Kurt Vonnegut as Science-Fiction Writer," in J. Klinkowitz, ed., and D. Lawler, ed., *Vonnegut in America: An Introduction to the Life and Work of Kurt Vonnegut* (New York: Dell, 1977), pp. 87-96.

11. A stylistic device common to many of Vonnegut's works is the presence throughout the text of recurring expressions, somehow akin to an actual tag-line: "So it goes," in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, or "Cough, cough" in *Hocus Pocus*. Here, the words of choice are "and so on," presented also as the drawing of an over-sized "ETC." (234, 288 and 302) and also quite fitting a refrain, for a list or a catalogue. On the subject of chaos, see Mary S. Schriber, "Bringing Chaos to Order: The Novel Tradition and Kurt Vonnegut, jr.," *Genre* 10.2 (1977): 283-97 and Donald E. Morse, "Bringing Chaos to Order: Vonnegut Criticism at Century's End," *JFA* 10.4.40 (1999): 395-408.

12. The town's name, *Mid-land City*, might suggest its identification with the "average" (*mid-dle*) community, too.

13. One of the most poignant collateral occurrences of this concept of a human being reduced to a mere tool is doubtlessly the "Hundred-Nigger Machine," a nickname for "a tremendous earth-moving [apparatus]," reminiscent of "a time when black men had done most of the heavy digging" (150).

14. In the novel's preface, Vonnegut writes about his direct experience of "advertisement scheme[s]" (46). The whole book is dedicated to Mrs. Phoebe Hurty, who "wrote ads for the William H. Block Company" (1-2), an Indianapolis department store incidentally designed by Vonnegut's father, and now a residential complex. She hired young author to "write copy," and taught him to "be impolite [...] about American history and famous heroes, about the distribution of wealth, about school, about everything" (2).

15. Flags are the subject of several drawings throughout the book: America (8), Bermuda (31), Nazi Germany (137), and Germany "after they got well again" (138). Curiously enough, es-

pecially if we consider Vonnegut's German descent, this last is incorrectly drawn, with vertical instead of horizontal bands. On a side note, it is true that the vertical design, along with several others, was briefly considered for adoption in 1948 (see <http://flagspot.net/flags/de/1949.html>). On the same page, another mistake places the Volkswagen "Beetle" 's first production after WWII, while it had already started being manufactured in the 1930s.

16. Vonnegut's personal suggestion is an apple, "a popular fruit" (127) that seems to meet all these requirements (127, 206, 301).

17. Another crucial issue the book rather pessimistically deals with is determinism — or, rather, Social Darwinism; again, the allusion is disguised as a joke, a play on words between Trout and the truck driver. According to the former, "[getting laid] would [only] depend on how *determined* you were." The driver sighs, and concludes: "Yeah, God [...], that's probably the story of my life: not enough determination" (110).

18. It is, indeed, quite an aggressive kind of imagery; well fitting, on the other hand, for a "republic" that "must soon [...] outstrip all examples hitherto afforded, and dominate the world" (*Democratic Vistas*, Whitman 954).

19. Coming right after so many pages of harsh, critical exposure of America's misdeeds, this may look like a rather weak sign of redemption, or a very cheap consolation prize. I believe, instead, that this can be read as just another example of how even the most negative constructions and critiques of America seem unable to disown and repudiate it completely. On this crucial issue see, for example, Sara Antonelli, *Dai Sixties a Bush Jr.: La cultura USA contemporanea* (Roma: Carocci, 2001). The book effectively points out the somewhat ambiguous nature of most of the dissent groups active between the Fifties and the Seventies, all inspired in some degree by a clean nostalgia for the "American dream" (and, in the case of writers like Ken Kesey, for the Frontier values.) Counterculture itself, in works like Philip Slater's *The Pursuit of Loneliness* (1970), has been presented as "a kind of reform movement, trying to revive a decayed tradition once important to our civilization" (73). If this is probably not true for every Vonnegut novel, the painful awareness of such a "decay" can be a factor contributing to *Breakfast of Champions*' (most likely one of his most "countercultural" works) sustained, unrelenting anger. From this point of view, we could say that Vonnegut attacks the American myth as a disillusioned believer, and with the ardor of a betrayed lover. See also, on this topic, James R. Tunnell, "Kesey and Vonnegut: Preachers of Redemption," in George Searles, ed., *A Casebook on Ken Kesey's One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1992), pp. 127-33, and Robert Merrill, "Vonnegut's *Breakfast of Champions*: The Conversion of Heliogabalus," *Critique* 18.3 (1977): 99-109.

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