UNIVERSIDAD COMPLUTENSE DE MADRID
FACULTAD DE FILOLOGÍA

TESIS DOCTORAL

The Gospel from Outer Space: Apocalypse, America, and Science Fiction in the novels of Kurt Vonnegut

El evangelio del espacio exterior: Apocalipsis, ciencia ficción y Estados Unidos en las novelas de Kurt Vonnegut

MEMORIA PARA OPTAR AL GRADO DE DOCTOR

PRESENTADA POR

David López Guzmán

Directora

Carmen María Méndez García

Madrid

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Writing this dissertation has truly been an apocalyptic process for me. Throughout, I have often wondered why I had decided to put myself through this ordeal and wished I had chosen differently. Still, I am glad to have finally made it to the other side, and feel that I emerge quite changed when compared to the person who set out on this path five years ago. Whether the person I am now is a better man is, of course, not up to me to judge. Be it as it may, I am certain that I could not have arrived to where I am now without the help of many people who have walked alongside me in this journey.

First of all, I must certainly thank my parents, who have always provided me with unconditional support, trust, and understanding. I am eternally grateful for them.

Next, I cannot express enough gratitude to Dr. Carmen Méndez for her invaluable labor in the writing of this dissertation. With her characteristically deadpan ways, impressive knowledge, tireless work ethic, insightful suggestions, and subtle compliments, she was paramount in allowing me to believe in my own potential to carry this project through. I especially remember one particular conversation in her office, long before COVID forced us to see each other only through a computer screen, in which she told me that I should refrain from blaming all of my life's troubles on my dissertation. Although I stubbornly persisted in doing just that, now I know that she was right.

I would also like to thank Dr. Arno Gimber, former coordinator of the PhD program, who has always been helpful and accessible, replying to emails with astonishing speed whenever I have felt the urge to consult him over one of my many doubts regarding bureaucratic matters. Continuing with faculty members, I have to mention Dr. James Flath, in whose contemporary American literature classes I first heard the name Vonnegut over ten years ago, as well as the many teachers who, during my university studies, made me love literature more than I already did, and showed me that any literary work treasures the potential to engage in fruitful conversations that transcend the limits of time and space.

I myself am a teacher, and cannot refrain from thanking the dozens of students who, throughout the years, have frowned with a mixture of wonder, revulsion, and incredulity whenever I have mentioned that I was writing an almost 500-page long assignment about an American writer who died before they were born. Their innocent amusement never failed to make me smile and remind me not to take myself too seriously.

My friends' constant urges to stop complaining and finish writing my dissertation once and for all had a similar effect. One of them, who shall remain unnamed, once even told me that, if I really pulled my act together, I might as well write the whole thing during a weekend. Who can deny the blessing it is to have such friends?

Extra special thanks go to Cris, who, by becoming the first civilian reader of this dissertation moved me to want to go on writing just to have an excuse to talk to her before we had even met in person. Once we did meet, she became an incessant source of inspiration, helping me to uncover the creative force that finally allowed me to complete this task that had once seemed impossible. Without her soothing advice in times of anxiety, her sweet predisposition to listen, laugh, teach, and learn, and her characteristically millennial prowess behind a computer, this dissertation simply would not exist. I thank the universe for her.

Last, but definitely not least, I want to thank Kurt Vonnegut; a man I never got to meet, but whom I feel I know and knows me more than most people I could spend a whole lifetime with. Throughout the years, Kurt has made me laugh, love, cry, imagine, question, and believe, and I thank him for every conversation we have had, every bad taste joke that has made us laugh out loud, and all the fair amount of trouble we have gotten ourselves into together. My life would not be the same without him.

Once all the thanking is done, let us get on to more serious matters, but not before dedicating this dissertation to the three women I have loved most dearly in my life: the one who made me fall in love with books at a young age, the one who always believed in me and shared with me some of the most wondrous years of my life, and the one who makes me want to live, transcend chaos, and create a better reality on a daily basis.

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ABSTRACT | ENGLISH

This dissertation is inspired by the realization that the writings of Kurt Vonnegut constitute, above all, an apocalyptic message. This message is apocalyptic in the purest essence of the term; that is, it intends to reveal to its audience a new philosophy that may allow them to deal with the hardships of life and gain hope in the possibility of a better future.

When Vonnegut's work has been analyzed under the rubric of apocalypse, this analysis has often been ascribed to what Elizabeth K. Rosen terms a "modern" vision of apocalypse as a narrative of despair. Thus, the many dystopian contexts, end-of-the-world scenarios, and cataclysmic conflagrations that punctuate his novels have generally been read as a sign of pessimism coming from a nihilistic author who believes humanity to be irrevocably doomed to self-destruction. However, I propose that a deeper examination that deconstructs Vonneguts' themes and motifs in the light of his personal philosophy as outlined in his multiple non-fiction writings, interviews, and public speeches, reveals that rather than a modern apocalypticist of despair, the author is indeed what Rosen would term a traditional apocalypticist: one that imagines the worst because he believes in the possibility of something better. Beyond the misleading stereotypes of current popular culture, apocalypse is indeed a doctrine of hope, and Vonnegut's constant allusions to physical, social, and mental breakdown are an admonition of what may come unless humanity realizes its own potential to create a fairer, more humane society. The means to unlock the door to this inherent creative potential is precisely the essence of Vonnegut's apocalyptic message.

Although academics such as Jerome Klinkowitz and John R. May have hitherto alluded to this aspect of Vonnegut's literature with truly enlightening ideas, this dissertation intends to be the first full-length study of Kurt Vonnegut's full oeuvre as an interrelated apocalyptic corpus that constitutes a direct commentary on the events of its time, the second half of the twentieth century. In order to do so, I borrow Stephen D. O'Leary's terminology, which applies the principles of Aristotle's *Poetics* to the apocalyptic text (principally, although not solely, the biblical Book of Revelation) in order to distinguish a tragic and a comic reading of apocalypse. My contention is that, as the history of the United States in the post-World War II scenario unfolds, Vonnegut

identifies a growingly tragic view, one that interprets the apocalyptic text as a literal foretelling of events to come and foments a radical opposition between absolute abstractions of good and evil, as best exemplified in the manichean rhetoric of the Cold War. However, to this tragic view, the author opposes a comic interpretation of apocalypse, one that reads the text as myth and allegory, and rejects simplistic binaries in order to recognize the complex, often contradictory nature of reality and the elusive character of human nature. Only through the recognition of our own fallibility and the ultimate meaninglessness of our existence, I hold that Vonnegut argues, may we finally realize our infinite creative potential and attain the promise of New Jerusalem not as the ideal of a heavenly afterlife but as a metaphor for a better life, and avert the kind of fatal catastrophes so recurrent in his novels that threaten the survival of life on Earth.

A further, closely intertwined aim of this dissertation is to vindicate the figure of Kurt Vonnegut as a science fiction writer and defend that science fiction constitutes a most important and relevant genre when surveying the literary history of the twentieth century. The relationship between Vonnegut and science fiction remains a source of controversy to this day, with advocates and academics of the genre denying the author of *Slaughterhouse-Five* a place among their pantheon, and Vonnegut scholars laboring to demonstrate that the novelist was never really a science fiction writer, even though his ascription to the genre is glaringly undeniable. This debate probably has its roots in Vonnegut's own intentional distancing from a genre that at the time was considered childish and lowbrow in order to aspire to literary prestige, but it seems ludicrous that a series of declarations made in the early years of his career weigh more than the unquestionably science fictional tropes of many of his novels up to the end of his career, his insistence on integrating complex scientific concepts into his works, or the fact that his most enduring and beloved character, Kilgore Trout, *is* indeed a science fiction writer. Nevertheless, the fact remains that no single study of the career of Kurt Vonnegut as a science fiction novelist exists to this day.

This study purports to amend this situation, as I propose that science fiction, as the epitome of postmodernist writing, is actually the main literary vehicle that Vonnegut utilizes to transmit his comic apocalyptic philosophy. I argue that, in science fiction, Vonnegut finds the ultimate apocalyptic literature; the most appropriate genre to reflect the fragmented, violent, and contradictory nature of American reality during the Cold War era, and one that, through its transgressions of time and space, allows him to speak

in metaphor and paradox of very real and pressing issues happening in the here and now, while through its popular nature, endows him the ability to connect with the middle-class American audience to whom his apocalyptic message is destined. In its vision of both outer and inner space as a new frontier for the human race, science fiction shares many of its precepts with the foundational American creed that constitutes the basis of Vonnegut's ideals, both of them providing the promise for humanity to start again devoid of the trappings of the past. As such, it also becomes the ideal means for the author to develop his apocalyptic philosophy as a more humane update of the American Dream suited for the coming twenty-first century. Thus, I argue that apocalypse, America, and science fiction constitute the three main pillars of Kurt Vonnegut's philosophy, and the purpose of this dissertation is to untangle the threads of that philosophy, which I label The Gospel from Outer Space, and elucidate how it may be useful in our present, singularly apocalyptic times.

The means applied in order to assess the intention, mechanisms, and manifestations of Vonnegut's apocalyptic philosophy is to perform a systematic analysis of his literary production in the context of his life and times. Although it covers all of his novels as well as short stories, plays, and non-fiction texts, this analysis focuses particularly on seven novels, which are the ones I analyze in depth, and which have been chosen as those that display the most clear science fictional themes, motifs, and plots, placing a special emphasis on the intent to cover the author's full oeuvre, from his first to his last novel, thus aiming to rectify the prevailing critical tendency to focus on the first twenty-five years of his career. The seven novels are *Player Piano* (1952), *The Sirens of Titan* (1959), *Cat's Cradle* (1963), *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), *Breakfast of Champions* (1973), *Galápagos* (1985), and *Timequake* (1997).

Throughout the dissertation, the study of these novels is articulated around an eclectic critical corpus, giving space to disparate and wide-ranging voices which help illuminate the myriad intricacies that Vonnegut imbued his words with. Among these sources, there are current and past scholars devoted to studying the work of Vonnegut such as Jerome Klinkowitz, Leonard Mustazza, and Peter Freese; renowned theorists in the field of science fiction (Marc Bould, Darko Suvin) and postmodernism (Linda Hutcheon, Brian McHale); contemporaries of Vonnegut such as Norman Mailer, Thomas Pynchon, and Philip K. Dick; academics devoted to the study of apocalyptic tropes of modern American literature such as Frank Kermode, John R. May, and Elizabeth K.

Rosen; theologians and anthropologists invested in the origin of the apocalyptic myth and devoted to the exegesis of the original biblical texts such as Norman Cohn, Stephen D. O'Leary, Adela Yarbro Collins, and Mircea Eliade; experts in American history (Howard Zinn, Sean Wilentz), social chroniclers (Herbert Marcuse, Robert Putnam), and analysts of popular culture (Peter Braunstein, Jesse Jarnow); as well as some of the most recognized voices of postmodern philosophy, ranging from Fredric Jameson to Jacques Derrida, Umberto Eco, and Roland Barthes. All these authors and many others contribute to the multi-faceted nature of the study of Kurt Vonnegut as a novelist, thinker, American icon, and human being.

The dissertation opens with an initial chapter that presents the apocalyptic context of the post-World War II context, after the horrific revelations of Auschwitz and Hiroshima and at the dawn of the eschatological stalemate of the Cold War, and then introduces the figure of Kurt Vonnegut and delineates the intricate connections between apocalypse, America, and science fiction that constitute the crux of his philosophy and the core around which his literature revolves. Next, the main argumentation is developed throughout three chapters arranged according to John R. May's so-called threefold scheme of traditional apocalypse, which argues that apocalyptic narratives indelibly follow a movement from judgment to catastrophe and, ultimately, renewal, as well as David Ketterer's typology for the prototypical plot of science fiction, which involves dystopian narratives progressing towards destruction scenarios and, lastly, visions of other worlds beyond Earth.

Combining May's and Ketterer's classifications, the chapters are labelled Crisis, which involves an analysis of Vonnegut's reflection on the path of his times by relating his work to their historical, cultural, and social context; Chaos, which delves in Vonnegut's particular reaction to the events described in the previous chapter, examining his pondering over the meaninglessness of human life and how he resolves to sublimate his own traumatic experience as a subjet of postmodernity into an experimental fiction that embraces chaos as the most essential force of the universe; and Creation, which surveys Vonnegut's decision to build a better world through an act of the imagination using science fiction, and how the resulting literature constitutes an apocalyptic exhortation to his readership to engage in their own feats of creation in order to oppose the tragic apocalyptic pull of the times.

By way of this gradual, exhaustive study of Vonnegut's literature, the dissertation concludes that his work constitutes a literary call to action that, just like the original apocalyptic prophets, deploys language in order to soothe its audience in a painful and uncertain moment of crisis, assuring them that only by accepting chaos rather than rejecting it, and by endeavoring to affirm their own meanings amidst the confusion of existence, may they finally unearth the creative potential to transform the world into a postmodern reconfiguration of the myth of New Jerusalem. Vonnegut's means to transmit this message of hope is an experimental, postmodernist brand of science fiction which renews the core tenets of American foundational philosophy in order to create a new, humanistic creed that may replace the obsolete American Dream, and finally grant the right to Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness to all the human race. Therefore, the dissertation ventures that the most valuable aspect of Vonnegut's literature is its effect on the reader, its ability to give solace to people, make them feel part of an extended family, inculcate in them a set of humane values and ethics, and, ultimately, awaken in them the desire to work for a better world. This, I argue, is what makes Vonnegut still relevant in the second decade of the twenty-first century, and why his literature holds the potential of a positive force of change amidst grueling times.

RESUMEN | ESPAÑOL

Esta tesis se inspira en mi idea de que los escritos de Kurt Vonnegut constituyen, por encima de todo, un mensaje apocalíptico. Este mensaje es apocalíptico en la más pura esencia del término; esto es, pretende revelar a su audiencia una nueva filosofía que les pueda ayudar a afrontar las vicisitudes de la vida y hallar la esperanza en la posibilidad de un futuro mejor.

Cuando la literatura de Vonnegut se ha analizado bajo la rúbrica del apocalipsis en el pasado, a menudo ha sido adscrita a lo que Elizabeth K. Rosen denomina una visión "moderna" del apocalipsis como una narrativa de desesperación. De este modo, los numerosos escenarios distópicos, visiones del fin del mundo y conflagraciones cataclísmicas que pueblan sus novelas han sido generalmente interpretados como una señal de pesimismo por parte de un autor nihilista, que considera a la humanidad irrevocablemente condenada a la autodestrucción. Sin embargo, mi tesis propone que un examen más profundo que deconstruye los temas y motivos de Vonnegut a la luz de su filosofía personal tal cual queda plasmada en sus múltiples escritos de no ficción, discursos y entrevistas revela que, en lugar de un apocalipticismo moderno de desesperación, el credo del autor es realmente lo que Rosen denomina un apocalipticismo "tradicional": una vertiente que imagina lo peor porque confía en la posibilidad de algo mejor. Más allá de los estereotipos engañosos imperantes en la cultura popular actual, el apocalipsis es en realidad una doctrina de esperanza, y las constantes alusiones al colapso físico, social y mental que emergen de la pluma de Vonnegut suponen una admonición acerca de lo que podría ocurrir a no ser que la humanidad repare en su propio potencial para crear una sociedad más justa y compasiva. La manera de abrir la puerta a este potencial creativo latente es precisamente la esencia del mensaje apocalíptico de Vonnegut.

Pese a que académicos como Jerome Klinkowitz y John R. May han aludido a este aspecto de la literatura de Vonnegut en el pasado aportando esclarecedoras ideas al respecto, esta tesis aspira a ser el primer estudio completo de toda la obra de Vonnegut como un corpus apocalíptico interrelacionado que constituye un comentario de los acontecimientos de su tiempo, la segunda mitad del siglo XX. Para ello, tomo prestado la terminología de Stephen D. O'Leary, que aplica los postulados de la Poética de

Aristóteles al texto apocalíptico (principal, aunque no exclusivamente, al libro bíblico del Apocalipsis) para distinguir entre una lectura trágica y una cómica del apocalipsis. Mi postulado es que, según se desarrolla la historia de Estados Unidos en el contexto posterior a la Segunda Guerra Mundial, Vonnegut identifica un progresivo giro hacia una imperante visión trágica, siendo ésta aquella que interpreta el texto apocalíptico como una profetización literal de los acontecimientos por venir que fomenta una oposición radical entre abstracciones absolutas del bien y el mal, epitomizada en la retórica maniquea de la Guerra Fría. No obstante, frente a esta visión trágica el autor opone una interpretación cómica del apocalipsis, entendida como una lectura del texto como mito y alegoría, de tal modo que se rechacen los binarismos simplistas en favor de una aceptación de la naturaleza compleja, a menudo contradictoria, de la realidad y el carácter esquivo de la esencia humana. Sólo a través de la aceptación de nuestra propia falibilidad y de la ausencia de significado de nuestra existencia, argumento que Vonnegut opina, podrá la humanidad movilizar su infinito potencial creativo y alcanzar la promesa bíblica de una nueva Jerusalén, no como el ideal de una existencia celestial tras la muerte, sino como una metáfora de una vida mejor en la que se eviten el tipo de catástrofes tan recurrentes en sus novelas y que constituyen una amenaza plausible para la supervivencia de la Tierra.

Un segundo objetivo de esta tesis que se haya claramente interrelacionado con el primero es reivindicar a Kurt Vonnegut como escritor de ciencia ficción y defender que la ciencia ficción constituye un género importante y relevante en la historia literaria del siglo XX. La relación entre Vonnegut y la ciencia ficción es motivo de controversia hasta nuestros días, con seguidores y eruditos del género negando al autor de *Slaughterhouse-Five* un puesto en su panteón, mientras los académicos de Vonnegut insisten en demostrar que éste nunca fue realmente un escritor de ciencia ficción, pese a que su adscripción al género es sencillamente incuestionable. Los orígenes de este debate probablemente se remontan al claro empeño del propio Vonnegut por distanciarse de un género que, en su tiempo, se consideraba insustancial e incluso infantil para así poder aspirar al prestigio literario, pero resulta disparatado que una serie de declaraciones realizadas en los primeros años de su carrera tengan más peso que los innegables tropos propios de la ciencia ficción que pueblan muchas de sus novelas hasta el final de su producción, su insistencia en tratar complejos conceptos científicos en su escritura, o el hecho de que su personaje más recurrente y reconocible, Kilgore Trout, sea un escritor de ciencia ficción.

A pesar de ello, es un hecho que, a día de hoy, sigue sin existir un estudio que abarque la carrera de Kurt Vonnegut como autor de ciencia ficción.

Esta tesis pretende corregir esta situación, dado que propongo que la ciencia ficción, como epítome de la escritura postmodernista, constituye el mecanismo literario que Vonnegut pone en marcha para transmitir su filosofía cómica-apocalíptica. Defiendo que, en la ciencia ficción, Vonnegut encuentra la apoteosis de la literatura apocalíptica; el género más apropiado para reflejar la naturaleza fragmentaria, violenta y contradictoria de la realidad norteamericana durante la Guerra Fría. La ciencia ficción es un género que, a través de sus transgresiones espacio-temporales, permite al autor tratar asuntos muy apremiantes del contexto presente por medio de la metáfora y la paradoja, mientras que su carácter popular y accesible le brinda la posibilidad de conectar con el público estadounidense de clase media y sin grandes pretensiones intelectuales al que va destinado su mensaje apocalíptico. Mediante su visión del espacio tanto exterior como interior como una nueva frontera para la raza humana, la ciencia ficción comparte muchos de sus preceptos básicos con el credo fundacional estadounidense que constituye la fuente de los ideales de Vonnegut, dado que ambos conceden la promesa de un nuevo comienzo para la raza humana liberada de la carga de su pasado. Por tanto, la ciencia ficción se convierte en el vehículo ideal para que el autor desarrolle su filosofía apocalíptica como una actualización más compasiva y humana del Sueño Americano que pueda ser apropiada para el siglo XXI. Por tanto, argumento que apocalipsis, ciencia ficción y Estados Unidos constituyen los tres pilares principales de la filosofía de Vonnegut, y el propósito de esta tesis doctoral es desenmarañar los hilos de esta filosofía, que denomino El evangelio del espacio exterior, y dilucidar cómo puede ser útil en nuestro contexto actual, que también es singularmente apocalíptico.

La estrategia para abordar las intenciones, los mecanismos y las manifestaciones de la filosofía apocalíptica de Vonnegut es la realización de un análisis sistemático de su producción literaria en el contexto de su vida y su época. Aunque abarca todas sus novelas además de relatos, obras de teatro y textos de no-ficción, este análisis se centra especialmente en siete novelas, que son las que estudio en profundidad, y que he elegido por considerarlas aquellas que exhiben los temas, motivos y argumentos más claramente clasificables como de ciencia ficción, además de con una clara intención de abarcar la obra completa del autor, desde su primera novela hasta la última, pretendiendo así corregir la imperante tendencia crítica a centrarse en los primeros veinticinco años de su

producción. Las siete novelas son *Player Piano* (1952), *The Sirens of Titan* (1959), *Cat's Cradle* (1963), *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), *Breakfast of Champions* (1973), *Galápagos* (1985) y *Timequake* (1997).

A lo largo de la tesis, el estudio de estas novelas se articula en torno a un extenso y ecléctico corpus crítico, dando espacio a voces dispares provenientes de distintos ámbitos que ayudan a iluminar las numerosas complejidades con las que Vonnegut dotó sus palabras. Entre estas fuentes figuran académicos del presente y el pasado dedicados al estudio de la obra de Vonnegut como Jerome Klinkowitz, Leonard Mustazza o Peter Freese, teóricos de renombre en el ámbito de la ciencia ficción (Marc Bould, Darko Suvin) y el postmodernismo (Linda Hutcheon, Brian McHale), contemporáneos de Vonnegut como Norman Mailer, Thomas Pynchon y Philip K. Dick, críticos centrados en el estudio de la corriente apocalíptica en la literatura estadounidense como Frank Kermode, John R. May y Elizabeth K. Rosen, teólogos y antropólogos interesados por los orígenes del mito apocalíptico y dedicados a la exégesis de los textos bíblicos como Norman Cohn, Stephen D. O'Leary, Adela Yarbro Collins y Mircea Eliade, expertos en historia norteamericana (Howard Zinn, Sean Wilentz), cronistas sociales (Herbert Marcuse, Robert Putnam) y analistas de la cultura popular (Peter Braunstein, Jesse Jarnow), además de algunas de las voces más reconocidas dentro del pensamiento postmoderno, caso de Fredric Jameson, Jacques Derrida, Umberto Eco y Roland Barthes. Todos estos autores y muchos otros contribuyen al carácter polifacético de este estudio de Kurt Vonnegut como novelista, pensador, icono americano y ser humano.

La tesis se abre con un primer capítulo que introduce el contexto apocalíptico inmediatamente posterior a la Segunda Guerra Mundial, tras las terribles revelaciones de Auschwitz e Hiroshima, y a las puertas de la perpetua amenaza apocalíptica de la Guerra Fría. Es en este contexto en el que se introduce la figura de Kurt Vonnegut y el modo en que las intricadas conexiones entre apocalipsis, ciencia ficción y Estados Unidos constituyen la esencia de su filosofía apocalíptica y el núcleo en torno al cual gira su literatura. A continuación, el cuerpo de la argumentación se desarrolla a través de tres capítulos articulados en torno al esquema del apocalipsis tradicional elaborado por John R. May, que arguye que toda narrativa apocalíptica ineludiblemente sigue un movimiento del juicio a la catástrofe y, finalmente, la renovación, y a la tipología propuesta por David Ketterer para el argumento prototípico de ciencia ficción, que conlleva narrativas

distópicas evolucionando hacia escenarios de destrucción y, por último, construyendo visiones de mundos más allá de la Tierra.

Combinando las clasificaciones de May y Ketterer, los tres capítulos se titulan Crisis, Caos y Creación. Crisis propone un análisis del comentario que Vonnegut elabora acerca del progreso de su tiempo, relacionando sus obras a su contexto histórico, cultural y social. Caos, que analiza la reacción personal de Vonnegut a los acontecimientos descritos en el capítulo anterior, examina sus reflexiones acerca de la insignificancia de la existencia humana en el orden cósmico y su determinación de sublimar su propia experiencia traumática como sujeto postmoderno a través de una literatura experimental que abraza el caos como fuerza esencial del universo. Por su parte, Creación considera la decisión de Vonnegut de crear un mundo mejor mediante un acto imaginativo a través de la ciencia ficción y cómo la literatura resultante constituye una exhortación apocalíptica a sus lectores para que acometan sus propios actos de creación con el fin de oponerse al impulso trágico-apocalíptico de los tiempos.

Mediante este estudio gradual y exhaustivo de la obra de Vonnegut, la tesis concluye que su literatura supone una llamada a la acción que, del mismo modo que los profetas apocalípticos originales, utiliza el lenguaje para consolar a su público en un momento doloroso e incierto de crisis, asegurando que solamente mediante la aceptación del caos en lugar de su repudia, y a través del empeño por afirmar los significados creados por ellos mismos en medio de la confusión imperante, lograrán descubrir su propio potencial creativo para transformar el mundo en una reconfiguración postmoderna del mito del nuevo Jerusalén. El mecanismo a través del cual Vonnegut transmite este mensaje esperanzador es una formulación experimental, postmodernista de la ciencia ficción que renueva los principios básicos de la filosofía fundacional estadounidense para crear un nuevo credo humanista que pueda reemplazar al obsoleto Sueño Americano y finalmente conceda el derecho a la vida, la libertad y la búsqueda de la felicidad a toda la raza humana. Por lo tanto, la tesis postula que el aspecto más valioso de la literatura de Vonnegut es su efecto en el lector; su habilidad de proporcionar consuelo a la gente, hacerla sentir parte de una gran familia, inculcarle una serie de valores éticos y humanitarios y, en última instancia, avivar el deseo de trabajar para construir un mundo mejor. Esto, defiendo, es lo que hace que Vonnegut siga siendo un autor relevante en la segunda década del siglo XXI y lo que imbuye su literatura del potencial de una fuerza positiva de cambio en tiempos difíciles.

I wanted all things
To seem to make sense
So we could all be happy, yes
Instead of tense.
And I made up lies
So that they all fit nice,
And I made this sad world
A par-a-dise.

—The books of Bokonon

INTRODUCTION

We are living in apocalyptic times.

As the third decade of the twenty-first century unfolds against the backdrop of a global pandemic that has taken over six million lives worldwide, and beneath the threatening shadow of mounting tensions among the world's largest economies, the claim seems simply irrefutable. At the start of 2020, COVID-19 exposed humanity to its own vulnerability and powerlessness, as major cities worldwide were completely shut down; their inhabitants forced into indefinite lockdown to prevent the spread of an invisible threat. Almost two years later, as the ongoing waves of coronavirus continued to claim victims and affect the course of daily life across the globe, on February 24th, 2022, Vladimir Putin's Russia invaded Ukraine, the final straw in a conflict that had been building up for eight years and which has brought back the specter war to Europe, created a worldwide economic recession, and reawakened ominous hostilities that had remained dormant since the end of the Cold War. As pandemic and war are joined by the seemingly unstoppable threat of global warming and pollution, with record levels of greenhouse gas concentrations propelling the planet into what the World Weather Organization labels "uncharted territory, with far-reaching repercussions for current and future generations" ("State of Climate"), and by an ever-widening economic gap between rich and poor, as millionaires like Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk fly to space in their own private rockets while, back on Earth, 25,000 people die of hunger-related causes every day (Holmes, "Losing"), the future of the human race appears uncertain to say the least. Indeed, it seems as if we were living inside the plot of a Kurt Vonnegut novel.

Vonnegut, who passed away in 2007, has been described as the contemporary American[1] writer who "has done more to bring the end of the world to the attention of his

[1] Even though it is a common source of controversy, throughout this dissertation I will favor the use of the adjective "American" to refer to anything that originates in or is related to the US, including its people, its literature, and its history. May Kenneth G. Wilson's explanation of the term's usage in *The Columbia Guide to Standard American English* serve as a justification: "We of the United States of America, citizens of only one of many nations in the Americas, North, Central, and South, have preempted the informal name of our country, America, and our title, Americans. It may be arrogant and inaccurate that we do so, but the

readership" (Rosen 45). In the fourteen novels and many short stories and essays he published between 1950 and 2005, he examined every apocalyptic trope imaginable, from nuclear holocaust to alien invasion, climate crisis, biological pandemic, accidental detonation, natural extinction, and beyond. Throughout his lifetime, the author found his fair share of inspiration for such varied eschatological scenarios, as he fought as an infantryman in the European front during World War II, and famously survived the firebombing of Dresden only to return home and live under the shadow of atomic destruction for almost half a century during the Cold War. However, as a student of anthropology, Vonnegut understood that the apocalyptic urge was not unique to his era, as human cultures have hypothesized about the end of the world since the dawn of time, and have all found reasons to allocate themselves at the beginning of the end of a long process of decline; as Ihab Hassan writes, "[i]t is the privilege of every age to consider its predicament unique, and it is its hope that the predicament may prove the most gravid history has known" (*Radical* 3).

On the basis of this assumption, Vonnegut's continuous interest on investigating hypothetical end-of-the-world scenarios can be understood as more than a simple reaction of despair at the eschatological climate of his time. The experience of living through World War II and the Cold War certainly shaped the author's vision, but in the process it led him to a deeper philosophical investigation on the nature of endings—their significance, their implications, their possibility, even. Not satisfied with simply speculating about the end of the world, Vonnegut set out to explore "the full scope of the apocalyptic imagination" (Ketterer 296) and thus, rather than being a mere jeremiad-issuing doomsayer, he can be said to belong to a "purer strain of apocalyptic writers" (May, *Toward* 192). The roots of this strain in the United States were first traced by George Snell, who referred to authors such as Edgar Allan Poe, Ambrose Bierce, and Herman Melville as "apocalyptic" in his 1947 study *The Shapers of American Fiction*. Later, R. W. B. Lewis was the first to identify the humorous breed of American apocalypse to which Vonnegut may be said to belong in his essay "Days of Wrath and Laughter," collected in *Trials of the Word: Essays in American Literature and the Humanistic Tradition* (1965). In the text, Lewis explains how novelists like Melville and

fact is that no other citizens of the Americas seem to want to be confused with the Americans of the USA. Nor have others coined any other universally recognized names for us. . . . Our flag is almost always 'the American flag.' Only the precision of The United States of America and of a citizen thereof can be official and usefully substituted . . . . It is not likely that these usages will change soon, so overwhelming is their use both by others and by us" (27–28).

Mark Twain adapted traditional Christian symbols of apocalypse into secular metaphors to mockingly describe the moral decline of their society, thus creating a purely American, "savagely comical" (Lewis 203) style of apocalyptic literature.

Subsequent authors such as John R. May in *Toward a New Earth* (1972), David Ketterer in *New Worlds for Old* (1974), Elizabeth K. Rosen in *Apocalyptic Transformation* (2008), and Peter Y. Paik in *From Utopia to Apocalypse* (2010) have studied Kurt Vonnegut as a key figure in this subgenre of American apocalyptic literature, opening interesting lines of research on the many aspects of the author's work which can be deemed apocalyptic and giving increasing notice to the postmodernist leanings of his writing, but only in the form of articles or single chapters within larger works. Indeed, several other scholars who have described Vonnegut's novels as "apocalyptic" have mistakenly used the adjective as a mere synonym of "eschatological" or "destructive," thus ignoring the many other implications of the term and overlooking the full sweep of the author's apocalyptic message.[2] Considering the sizeable number of studies centered on Vonnegut's figure that emerged in the wake of the enormous success of his sixth novel, 1969's *Slaughterhouse-Five,* which, according to Robert Merrill**,** amounted to "a true Vonnegut industry" (7), it seems surprising that not a single volume has been devoted to addressing in detail the significance of the apocalypse as a driving force that articulates Vonnegut's message and unifies his full oeuvre.[3] This dissertation aims to amend that void in Vonnegut studies by surveying not only the apocalyptic themes and motifs of his work, but, even more importantly, the apocalyptic intent behind his literature, which through its musings on the possible end of human existence, investigates the very nature and purpose of that existence. In the process, I hope to shed a light on how Vonnegut's

[2] Dealing as it does with the accidental end of life on Earth, it probably comes as no surprise that *Cat's Cradle* (1963) is the Vonnegut novel to which the adjective "apocalyptic" has most commonly been attributed. Thus, Jesse Weiner labels the novel "an apocalyptic tale of fire and ice" (118) that investigates the potential consequences of "apocalyptic technology" (130), whereas Francisco Javier Vallina Samperio argues that it is "one the most apocalyptic of Vonnegut's works" ("Wasteland" 106). Both of these views reveal a modern understanding of apocalypse as a fatalistic vision of disaster that brings forth the end of humanity, and do not consider the more complex implications of the term which lead me to deem the whole of Vonnegut's oeuvre an apocalyptic corpus.

[3] The closest is probably Todd F. Davis' *Kurt Vonnegut's Crusade; or, How a Postmodern Harlequin Preached a New Kind of Humanism,* which investigates the author's belief in humanity's worth as an article of faith and the potential of the human imagination to construct a better reality. Of the self-described "atheist" (*PS* 191) Vonnegut, Davis claims that "religion, in its broadest sense, remains at the center of his discourse, and his musing over our existence ultimately presents some form of solace. Solace, Vonnegut claims, is what people search for in religion; it is the channel for appeasing our frustration" (Davis, *Crusade* 40).

ideas could help us understand and confront the apocalyptic times we are living today, and illuminate the hope of a better future.

The vehicle that Vonnegut utilizes to convey his apocalyptic message is science fiction, and therein lies the second argument of my dissertation. Conspicuous as it may seem for a writer who has speculated about time travel, contact with alien races, sentient robots, and visits to other planets, Vonnegut is often not considered a science fiction author. The origin of this impression can be traced back to a 1965 essay for *The New York Times Book Review* in which the author sought to distance himself from the genre, probably sensing how, after 15 years of being pigeonholed as a pulp writer, his then-growing popularity could finally lead to mainstream and academic acceptance, but only at the cost of severing his ties to such a popular, low-brow style of literature which, back in the sixties, was considered to be completely at odds with any form of "serious" writing. From then on, scholars who endeavored to defend Vonnegut in the early days of his literary canonization, almost requisitely seemed to have to underscore how the initial categorization of his work as science fiction had been no less than a misinformed prejudice (Goldsmith 6), whereas connoisseurs and historians of the genre alike tend to rancorously deny him access to their fraternity to this day. Nevertheless, the fact remains that Kurt Vonnegut is the only American science fiction writer to have successfully achieved a full crossover into the mainstream of the literary establishment. Peers such as Philip K. Dick or Ursula K. Le Guin have certainly transcended the rigid ghetto walls formerly erected around science fiction, but none of them made it to the pages of *Life* magazine as a literary sensation or had one of their books namechecked in Modern Library's "100 Best Novels" list as Vonnegut did.[4]

Vonnegut's links to science fiction could have understandably been lost to history if, following his *New York Times* essay, he had completely disavowed the genre. However, the fact remains that the author never stopped writing science fiction. On the contrary, *Slaughterhouse-Five,* the novel that finally signified his literary breakthrough, is about a former US private who travels through time and is kidnapped by

[4] The famous list, issued by the American book publishing imprint in 1998, purported to collect the one hundred best English-language novels published during the twentieth century, and included *Slaughterhouse-Five* in the eighteenth position. In the list, Vonnegut rubbed shoulders with illustrious precursors such as James Joyce, Joseph Conrad, and Vladimir Nabokov, as well as contemporaries like Norman Mailer, Ralph Ellison, and E. L. Doctorow. The next closest thing to science fiction to be found on the list is speculative fiction by Aldous Huxley—*Brave New World*—, George Orwell—*Animal Farm*—, and Anthony Burgess—*A Clockwork Orange* (Modern Library, "100 Best Novels").

extraterrestrials and displayed in an alien zoo. One would be hard pressed to come up with a more prototypically science fictional plot. Vonnegut may have initially arrived at science fiction through his desire to make a living as a writer in the booming magazine fiction industry of the early fifties, but he clearly developed a fondness for the genre that lasted throughout his whole career. After all, his most recurring character up until his final novel, 1997's *Timequake,* is outcast science fiction writer Kilgore Trout, whom Vonnegut himself described as his "alter ego" (*TQ* xii), and it simply cannot be a coincidence how the author phrases some of the most relevant aspects of his philosophy through science fictional devices such as the Tralfamadorians of *The Sirens of Titan* (1959) and *Slaughterhouse-Five* or the Bokononist concept of *foma* in *Cat's Cradle* (1963). Therefore, this dissertation aims to amend the unfathomable absence of a full-length critical study of Vonnegut as a science fictionist, by centering on the author's use of the genre as his most enduring apocalyptic device.

In science fiction, Vonnegut found the perfect means to reflect the shocking discontinuities and chaotic nature of his times and his own life. Having witnessed his parents' fall from riches to rags during the Great Depression, the reduction of the city of Dresden to cinders by an Allied air raid, the General Electric Company's intention to manufacture the future from a laboratory labelled "The House of Magic," the mounting tension between the United States and the Soviet Union, which seemed to bring the end of the world ever closer during the Cold War, his country's descent into a collective paranoia of violence, war, and overall unreality in the sixties, and his own sudden rise to becoming the greatest sensation in American literature after almost two decades struggling to support his family with his writing, it is no wonder that Vonnegut turned to science fiction in order to portray his world in writing. Conventional literary forms did not seem enough to capture such convulse experience, and so the author resolved to dismiss the ever-thinning barrier between the real and the fantastic altogether in order to "characterize reality as science fiction, and science fiction as reality" (Ketterer 206).

The genre also afforded Vonnegut a sort of license; a distancing device that enabled him to comment on social and political issues of his time without having to address them directly. Disguising these matters beneath a patina of unreality, in turn, allowed him to investigate topics which may have been too traumatic to confront through a realistic narrative. Besides, the author's actual scientific knowledge, having studied chemistry at the University of Cornell, afforded his works a certain plausibility when

dealing with scientific speculation that other science fiction simply could not afford. By Vonnegut's own account, "most science fiction writers . . . knew almost nothing about science" (*BOC* 127), but he did know what he was talking about when he dealt with the physical nature of time, the concept of entropy, or the underlying chaos at the core of the universe, which gave his novels an additional depth. Furthermore, Vonnegut's stylistic experiments in the field of science fiction opened up the genre to the innovations of late sixties postmodernist literature and managed to widely broaden its scope. An interesting symbiosis took place between author and genre, as Vonnegut took advantage of science fiction's popularity and accessibility to disseminate his ideas to a wider public, whereas the critical success and deep academic scrutiny of his work have, in hindsight, assisted the slow but steady reconsideration of science fiction as a respectable literary genre and a viable field of study for academics. Even if he operated in the shadows, not feigning his allegiance to the genre, in retrospect it seems clear that Vonnegut's popular and critical success in the late sixties and seventies was a landmark event to bridge the previously irreconcilable worlds of science fiction and academia and allow popular culture into the canon.

Nevertheless, Vonnegut's ultimate purpose when deploying his palette of science fictional tropes was undeniably apocalyptic. In the words of Jerome Klinkowitz, the author understood that "[t]o make it meaningful, the world must be reinvented" (*Disruptions* 53), and believed that all human beings treasure, in their consciousness and imagination, the power to reshape reality in order to create a more meaningful, harmonious, and humane world. Science fiction was the ultimate platform for this apocalyptic philosophy, the purest expression of Vonnegut's faith in the human capacity to exert change and assert meaning. Isaac Asimov once told Bill Moyers that "science fiction is important because it fights the natural notion that there's something permanent about things the way they are right now" (qtd. in Popova "Asimov"), and therein precisely lies the key to Vonnegut's long-standing reliance on the genre to make his deepest philosophical claims. Science fiction creates models of other, plausible worlds, which, by contrast with our own present reality, hold up a mirror to our world's and humanity's flaws, while asserting that there are other feasible ways to be, and means through which to improve. That life, in short, is not static, and a different world is possible. That is why David Ketterer claims that "The apocalyptic imagination . . . finds its purest outlet in science fiction" (15).

The title of this dissertation, "The Gospel from Outer Space," borrowed from the name of a Kilgore Trout short story in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, thus connects the two main purposes of my investigation. On the one hand, it purports that Vonnegut's work is driven by an apocalyptic intent which, just like the biblical gospels, stands as an admonition on how to morally and humanely conduct oneself amid trying times in order to enlighten the path to some form of salvation. On the other hand, it boldly aims to present Vonnegut as a science fiction writer, who willingly operated within the conventions of the genre because he believed in its apocalyptic potential, in the endless creative prospects it affords humanity by conceiving of outer space as a metaphor for inner space, and our own consciousness as the ultimate, unexplored frontier. The Gospel from Outer Space is a philosophy that empowers humanity to reach the apocalyptic promise of New Jerusalem through its own will. Georg Lukács once claimed that the novel is "the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God" (88), and through science fiction, Kurt Vonnegut implies that humanity created God, and so it can deploy that same creative power to embrace the salvation prophesized in the New Testament, even after science, history, and the chaotic nature of everyday experience seem to have denied the very existence of God. Doing away with the symbolic trappings of biblical imagery as simply metaphors, Vonnegut strips Christian rhetoric down to its bare-bones message of salvation through altruism, humbleness, and love. This way, no longer are the eschatological events foretold in the Book of Revelation necessary in order to reach the blissful realm of New Jerusalem, as Vonnegut holds that this potential is dormant within every single human mind, and can be attained not after death but in life.

The background in which my dissertation unfolds is the United States during the second half of the twentieth century, and the country itself becomes a key figure in the narrative as a metaphor that embodies the full symbolic scope of both the apocalyptic imagination and science fiction. The United States is built on apocalyptic imagery; a nation born out of the imagination, conceived in the minds of its founders as a new beginning for humanity in an Eden-like promised land, a beacon of liberty and democracy cemented on the American Dream's ideal of endless possibilities. This foundational American ideology is the primordial source for Vonnegut's philosophy, who nevertheless also explores its tragic corollary in the form of violence, racism, and social iniquity; the paradox that constantly shifts the balance between the country as utopia or dystopia. The Cold War era saw the US take on an unprecedented apocalyptic role as no less than the

self-proclaimed savior of the world; a paladin of freedom in the manichean crusade against pure evil as symbolized by the Soviet Union, a morality play which exposed the whole humanity to the very real threat of nuclear annihilation for decades. This was the era of the technological sublime, when reality seemed to surpass the wildest dreams of science fiction on a daily basis, as well as a time of shockingly disturbing events, from John Fitzgerald Kennedy's assassination to the Vietnam War, Watergate, and, ultimately, 9/11, all of which, broadcast to the whole world through the omnipresent television set, pushed the boundaries between what was real and what was fictional with traumatic consequences. As newsreels continuously reported what would previously have been considered sheer fantasy, the fabric of reality seemed to shatter, and Vonnegut sought to create a new form of fiction that could successfully reflect this new unreality in which concepts such as fact, meaning, and history seemed questionable and maybe even obsolete.

The main protagonist of this dissertation, however, is Kurt Vonnegut himself, as his fascinating life exemplifies the very transformative process that he attempts to convey with his literature. Exposed to the violently distressing nature of postmodern reality, Vonnegut constantly sought to transform trauma into inspiration, channeling the disquieting darkness of his times into a philosophy of solace and hope that he shared with the whole human race. The voice of Vonnegut is not that of an intellectual academic or a literary celebrity detached from everyday experience, but of a common, middle-class American; a proverbial "average Joe" witnessing the events of his time and forced to live a life of hardship, violence, injustice, inconclusion and meaninglessness, much different from the one he was promised as a young boy, and asking himself why. The answer he progressively outlined throughout half a century of writing is a plausible one, and one that he chose to share through a novelistic approach that is equally experimental and accessible. This answer, his apocalyptic philosophy, is what I try to examine in the following pages; a deceivingly simple message that makes Kurt Vonnegut an important, innovative and relevant author to this day, but one whose work cannot be properly understood without contemplating it in the context of its era and the author's own life.

I am well aware that the biographical approach has not been popular in literary analysis since authors like Philippe Sollers in *Logiques* (1968), and Paul Ricoeur in *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (1976), argued that the author is not the cause but the product of what he writes, and thus, as Ricoeur claims, nor

authorial intention nor "the historical situation common to the author and his original readers" are relevant to the interpretation of a text, whose meaning (or, rather, meanings) must be "conceived in a dynamic way as the direction of thought opened up by the text" (92). Nevertheless, as Jerome Klinkowitz ironically defends, "the product has a biography, too" (*Kurt Vonnegut* 11), and Vonnegut always flaunted the fact that his background and biography had deeply shaped his ideas, his character, and his aesthetic, openly proclaiming that he "wrote out of [his] life" (qtd. in Sumner 8). This does by no means imply that I reject Ricoeur's theory of interpretation, but I do subscribe to Ihab Hassan's words when he writes that the context of fiction "is always the present" (*Radical* 95). This implies that said context is ever-changing, as a novel like, for instance, Vonnegut's *The Sirens of Titan,* does not have the same implications read in the second decade of the twenty-first century as when it was first published in 1959, but it certainly does not neglect the fact that an analysis of the original context in which the novel was written and published in 1959 can enrich an interpretation adapted to our current context. In the words of Darko Suvin, "History and society are not an external yardstick to be applied to the literary work: on the contrary they constitute its very structure and texture" (*Positions* 4), and ignoring such key components would result in an incomplete literary analysis, especially concerning an oeuvre like Vonnegut's, which continuously engages in a dialogue with the events of his day.

Steven Connor defends an understanding of literature which reads the novel "not just as passively marked with the imprint of history, but also as one of the ways in which history is made and remade" (1), and this is the vision I subscribe to. Throughout this dissertation, I try to present Vonnegut both as a passive agent of history, living through convulse times and commenting on them as any other regular citizen, and as an active agent, who, through his literature, contributed to the transformation of his culture and society, altered the course of history, and contributed to the enrichment of the collective unconscious that we call reality. History is not only shaped by governments, states, and major political events, but by every single man or woman who belongs to it, especially if, as in the case of a novelist like Vonnegut, their art or craft can allow their ideas to flow among their contemporaries and beyond, affecting the way other human beings respond to and interact with each other and their surroundings. Through an act of literary creation born out of a very specific social, cultural, and political context, Vonnegut managed to create a new world for the millions of people who read his novels, influencing a myriad

aspects of reality which simply cannot be traced. The desire to incite his readers to indulge in similar acts of the imagination in order to create a more hospitable and fair reality is the crux of Vonnegut's apocalyptic message, and one that remains as relevant as ever. But before analyzing how and why the author managed to craft such a message, I must first turn to the discussion of some key conceptual, methodological, and structural aspects of this dissertation.

First and foremost, of course, is the delimitation of the term apocalypse itself, which, as I will develop at length in the first chapter of the dissertation, is a largely popular concept which, nevertheless, is commonly misunderstood. As much as it has been pigeonholed in our current speech as a mere synonym for destruction, cataclysm, or disaster, its meaning actually goes far beyond that reductionist cliché. Apocalypse is actually a synonym for unveiling or revelation, as any given apocalyptic narrative refers to the disclosure of a meaning which had previously been unbeknown. In this respect, I favor Rosen's terminology, which opposes traditional apocalyptic narratives to what she calls neo-apocalyptic stories, whose emphasis is on destruction, subsuming all the other connotations of the term to create a cynical or sullen message of pessimism and despair (xv), and which is undeniably the most popular acceptation of the term in the present day.

Vonnegut's stance has often misguidedly been labelled as neo-apocalyptic, when, in actuality, his philosophy fulfills all the requisites of traditional apocalypse. Traditional apocalyptic narratives are a literary response to a context of crisis which, through the revelation of a divinely ordained plan for humanity, seek to fortify believers' acceptance of their present hardships by illuminating a hopeful future that will ultimately make these hardships meaningful. Perhaps the most popular of all apocalyptic texts, the Book of Revelation, the final book of the New Testament, epitomizes this hope in the image of the timeless realm of New Jerusalem, where the chosen souls will eternally dwell with their God after the cataclysmic struggle between good and evil which will bring history as we know it to a closure. Thus, beyond its vivid imagery of doom and destruction, the ultimate purpose of the Book of Revelation and any given traditional apocalypse is to offer hope and solace amid arduous times by instilling "the conviction that historical crisis will have the cleansing effect of radical renewal" (Zamora 10). In this sense, Frank Kermode, in his influential study *The Sense of an Ending* (1967), claims that the apocalyptic impulse is an innate human tendency which responds to our desire for meaning and order, thus accounting for the prevalence of apocalyptic myths and visions

of impending doom among every known culture throughout history (96). These allegories are a means to soothe our desire to know why: why we live, what the purpose of human existence is, and why life is not the way we wish it would be. Presenting the whole of human history in perspective, apocalypse purports to finally answer our metaphysical quibbles and enlighten our acceptance of life in its unalterable essence.

Throughout the course of history, the apocalyptic impulse has remained even if, as the centuries progressed, some of the original connotations of the narrative were progressively left behind. Hence, Rosen refers to how postmodernist narratives update the traditional apocalyptic paradigm, which does not require a divine source for its revelation anymore, and transforms the motif of New Jerusalem from a new world to "a new vision," a way "to see the old world *anew*" (xxiii), thus translating the "messianic kingdom from a new-age heaven to a second-chance earth" (Martin and Ostwalt 62). This is the kind of secular apocalypse preached by a self-proclaimed atheist like Kurt Vonnegut. Throughout his novels, Vonnegut constantly grapples with the essential nature of our existence, and ultimately concludes that all human beings have the creative potential to undergo an inner process of apocalyptic transformation. In this secular transfiguration of the original narrative into a spiritual allegory, the author himself becomes the source of the revelation, which essentially empowers every individual to create their own New Jerusalem and attain salvation, fulfillment, and meaning in life without having to go through the ordeal of Armageddon.

In this regard, perhaps the most relevant concept in the development of my dissertation is Stephen D. O'Leary's distinction between tragic and comic apocalypse, as described in his study *Arguing the Apocalypse, A Theory of Millennial Rhetoric* (1998). O'Leary surveys the history and tenets of apocalyptic thought and concludes that the Book of Revelation may be interpreted through the two literary "frames of acceptance" outlined by Aristotle in his *Poetics*: tragedy and comedy (68). This dualistic understanding of apocalypse accounts for the diametrically opposed yet complementary visions of the myth which have been prevalent throughout history. On the one hand, the tragic reading of Revelation conceives of the text as a literal prediction of events to come in an unalterable near future: evil must be purged and the only means to do so is through the destruction of the whole world, against which humanity is completely powerless other than in its ability to choose sides, and after which God's people will dwell with Him for all eternity. On the other hand, the comic interpretation understands the text as an

allegory: evil is an intrinsic part of humanity, and it must be exposed and, ultimately, overcome by humanity, which is awarded the potential to bring forth change and salvation by its own means in an open-ended temporal horizon (68). The main argument behind my dissertation is that Kurt Vonnegut promotes a comic understanding of apocalypse which opposes the increasingly tragic apocalyptic course of his times, as epitomized by the manichean rhetoric of the Cold War, a simple binary which juxtaposed vague abstractions of absolute good and evil against the backdrop of a very real threat of nuclear annihilation.

Thus, the use of the adjective "apocalyptic" throughout this dissertation appeals to much more than just calamitous devastation (which, nevertheless, is part of the term's meaning, too), and when I refer to tragic and comic apocalypse, I am not appealing to the source of tears or laughter, but to O'Leary's nomenclature. Above all, the adjective "apocalyptic" connotes a sense of solemn significance and magnitude, the cause of dramatic change and new understanding. However, it also appeals to a certain sense of dualism and even contradiction. Lois Parkinson Zamora describes apocalypse as "both a model of the conflictual nature of human history and a model of historical desire" (12), and as a narrative that claims to recount the ultimate end of history while appealing to an existence beyond said end, it is riddled with paradox from its very inception. The tragic and comic interpretations of the myth are two sides of the same coin which cannot be understood without each other, which signifies that "when the tension disappears, when the vision is merely optimistic *or* pessimistic, we do not have apocalyptic literature but fantasy" (Zamora 13). Throughout the dissertation, I strive to highlight this dualism and how the inconclusive paradox at the heart of apocalypse can also be identified as the essence of science fiction, of the United States, and of Kurt Vonnegut himself, whose work, in the words of Todd F. Davis, "symbolizes an interplay like that of the yin and yang in Taoist philosophy" (*Crusade* 56). It is this contradictory yet complementary pull which causes the tension at the heart of his literature and which I try to reflect in my text.

In order to do this, I reference and comment on Vonnegut's whole body of work. Several critics have addressed the interconnectedness of his full oeuvre as a single, supplementary entity: Robert Morace hints that all the author's individual works are weaved into "a larger extended family of fictions" (156), whereas David Ketterer highlights the recurring characters and locations in his novels claiming that "there is no doubt that Vonnegut regards his work as a totality in the Faulknerian manner" (297), a simile also deployed by Jerome Klinkowitz when he compares Vonnegut's fictional

universe to Faulkner's, referring to it as a "Mod Yoknapatawpha County" ("Crimes" 157). Still, in order to prevent this dissertation from extending beyond reasonable length, I limit my in-depth analysis to seven of Vonnegut's novels, those which can more clearly be filed under the rubric of science fiction. This choice presents no easy task, because all but a few of Vonnegut's novels contain at least some elements clearly science fictional elements, and, as I will explain, the boundaries of the genre itself are not easy to determine. However, as David Hartwell explains, "the wonderful, inchoate family of science fiction all know what science fiction is by intuition" (166), and thus, my selection is ultimately based on the novels which *feel* more like science fiction than on any fixed criteria, and certainly is not intended to imply that some of the works that I have not chosen, such as *Slapstick* (1976) or *Hocus Pocus* (1990) cannot be labelled as science fiction.

Ultimately, what I did consciously try to do when selecting the seven novels was to give equal weight to the different phases of Vonnegut's trajectory, in order to cover the entire half-century scope of his writing career as well as to rectify the disproportionate critical bias towards his early novels and, especially *Slaughterhouse-Five.* Javier Martín Párraga claims that close to eighty percent of the studies devoted to Vonnegut's figure focus on discussing his breakthrough 1969 novel ("Medio Siglo" 9), whose success opened a space for in-depth analysis of his previous five works but, at the same time, laid on all of his subsequent books the burden of having to measure up to a universally acknowledged classic, which leads David Simmons to declare that "Kurt Vonnegut's later writing demands to be reconsidered in a less retrospective and more openly contemporaneous and contextual manner" (*New Critical* xiii). My selection aims to avoid this prejudice by covering the widest possible range of Vonnegut's production, extending from his first novel to his last. The seven works studied in depth are *Player Piano* (1952), *The Sirens of Titan* (1959), *Cat's Cradle* (1963), *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), *Breakfast of Champions* (1973), *Galápagos* (1985), and *Timequake* (1997). As for the choice of seven novels, the number was mostly arbitrary, although I cannot refrain from mentioning the symbolism of the number seven in the apocalyptic myth which, from the seven deadly sins to the seven seals and the seven angels that are instructed to "pour out the vials of the wrath of God upon the earth" in Revelation (Rev 16:1), is recurrently used in biblical literature to denote "completeness, perfection, consummation" (O'Leary 65). Hopefully, such will be the case in this dissertation, too.

As relates to the structure of the dissertation, it is inspired by what John R. May calls "the three constitutive elements of traditional apocalypse": judgment, catastrophe, and renewal (*Toward* 33). With this division, May illustrates how any apocalyptic narrative originates from a context of crisis that receives judgment and is punished with a devastating catastrophe that ultimately results in renewal. In order to right its course of degeneration, the world must first descend into the abyss of chaos before reemerging purged on the other side. Apocalypses must always be "destructive before they can be creative" (Ketterer 29), but, as May indicates, "[t]here is no chaos without a new creation" (*Toward* 6), and the cycle of purifying destruction must always end with a new beginning. In his crucial investigation on the relationship between the apocalyptic imagination, science fiction, and American literature, *New Worlds for Old* (1974), David Ketterer advances a complementary classification to May's, in which he divides the stereotypical plot of science fiction into four phases which "immediately underline its close relationship to the Book of Revelation" (124). These four phases are first dystopian fictions, which describe a "steadily worsening state of affairs," then destruction, which accounts "for fictions in which the world is either threatened with destruction or variously done away with," followed by post-catastrophe scenes, which describe the consequences of this cataclysm, and, ultimately, a final phase in which "the center of interest shifts to the cosmic voyage and world beyond Earth" (123). A combination of May's threefold scheme and Ketterer's prototypical plot accounts for the division of my dissertation into three main thematic blocks, labelled "Crisis," "Chaos," and "Creation," which are preceded by an initial chapter entitled "Apocalypse, America, and Science Fiction."

This first chapter starts with an examination of the frame of mind engendered at the end of World War II by the apocalyptic implications of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the unveiling of the atrocities committed during the Nazi Holocaust. This new era was marked by a paradoxical reality in the United States, in which the unprecedented levels of affluence were matched by the legacy of anxiety of what soon came to be known as the Cold War, as citizens were forced to persistently live under the threat of nuclear annihilation. The chapter explores how writers reacted to this new postmodern reality, and introduces the figure of Kurt Vonnegut as the quintessential American novelist of his era by way of his unique trajectory, which enacts the lights and shadows of the American Dream, through a philosophy which has its roots in the foundational ideology and ethics of the nation, and pursues a clearly apocalyptic intent.

From there, I move on to an in-depth exploration of the origins and implications of apocalyptic thought and narratives, presenting the view of the United States as an apocalyptic nation by way of its origins, myths, ideology, and history, and investigating the proliferation of a purely apocalyptic strain in American literature. Finally, I present science fiction as the epitome of this apocalyptic literature, researching its origins, defending why it is perhaps the purest literary outlet to portray the cognitive dislocations of Cold War era, and introducing Vonnegut as a science fiction writer, detailing his relationship to the genre and his deployment of it as a vehicle for his apocalyptic message.

"Crisis," the first of the three blocks that make up the main body of the dissertation, surveys the trajectory of Kurt Vonnegut as an ongoing commentary on the social, political, and cultural context of the United States from the early fifties to the late nineties. This section is analogous to May's first constitutive element of traditional apocalypse, "judgment" and to Ketterer's first phase of the stereotypical science fiction plot, "dystopian narratives," as it presents Vonnegut as a severe judge of his times, in which he identifies a dystopian process of degeneration towards a tragic apocalyptic understanding of the world and America's role in it. The chapter takes a ficto-critical approach, which, according to Bran Nicol amounts to the use of fiction "to analyze cultural and social patterns as an alternative to 'pure' theory" (184), in order to examine the context of constant crisis of the Cold War era through the words of Vonnegut, exposing the symbiotic relationship between the writer and what he once labelled as the "villains" in his books: "culture, society, and history" (*FWD* 31). Throughout the chapter, I aim to present Vonnegut both as a regular American, who is shocked, moved, and inspired by the constant upheavals of the times like any other citizen, but also as a privileged commentator who, with his typewriter, is able to influence and shape reality through narrative, demonstrating Timothy Parrish's claim that "the postmodern novel engages with and even establishes the models for how political and social meaning has been shaped since the Cold War" (6). Through the use of historical sources, I paint a picture of the second half of the twentieth century in the United States with Vonnegut as its main protagonist, linking the historical and cultural milestones of the time to the themes and motifs explored in his science fiction novels. The chapter is arranged by decades, which, although ultimately arbitrary divisions, have a strong symbolic weight, each adhering to their own particular idiosyncrasies. To this effect, Raymond Olderman defends that "it is no longer cutting it too fine to talk about the vision of a single decade,"

as "[w]riters more than ever have become conscious of history and of the symbolic value of turning points" (x).[5]

The following chapter, "Chaos," deals with what May labels the "catastrophe" element of apocalypse and matches Ketterer's second and third phases of the science fiction plot: "destruction" and "post-catastrophe scenes." In it, I examine the consequences that Vonnegut's novels imagine for the degenerative course of his society commented on "Crisis." It is here that I analyze the symbolism and significance of the author's famed end-of-the-world scenarios and study the implications they raise on the possible existence of a fundamental flaw at the core of human nature which relentlessly pushes us towards self-destruction. The discussion of one of the labels most commonly bestowed upon Vonnegut, "black humor," leads to a deeper examination of the nature of meaning itself in the context of the prevailing unreality of the late-twentieth century and scientific advances on the physical essence of the universe and chaos theory, as well as their metaphysical corollaries. Next, I argue that the traumatic psychological consequences of these investigations into the pure fabric of reality are akin to the numbing destruction of the world as it had previously been narrated in the apocalyptic myth, and I research how postmodernist[6] literature struggles to reflect this "new world" through a radically new concept of what a novel should be. Finally, I survey how Vonnegut discovers the use of what would become one of postmodernism's key devices, metafiction, as a means to purge his own personal chaos, embodied in the twin traumas of the destruction of Dresden and his unexpected rise to stardom with *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Metafiction allows the author to sublimate his own traumas through an act of literary creation, and I analyze how the catharsis afforded by this personal process of apocalyptic

[5] An annex is included at the end of the dissertation consisting of six charts, one per decade from the fifties to the oughts, which collect significant sociopolitical episodes, major literary landmarks, events in Vonnegut's biography, and the publication of all of his works, on a year by year basis. This may be helpful as a reference for the whole dissertation, but it could be of particular use to complement the reading of this first "Crisis" chapter.

[6] There appears to be an unsettled debate over the use of the terms "postmodern" and "postmodernist;" a confusion which is exacerbated by the fact that even some of the most pre-eminent critics in the field, such as Brian McHale, Linda Hutcheon, and Ihab Hassan do not seem to follow a unified pattern with their usage of the terms, and sometimes even deploy the two indistinctly to express the same meaning. For the sake of clarity, throughout this dissertation I will use "postmodern" when referring to the particular historical and philosophical context of the second half of the twentieth century (as related to postmodernity), and "postmodernist" to allude to specific representations of said context and philosophy in culture and the arts (as related to literary postmodernism).

renewal bestows upon him the revelation that acknowledging the chaos at the core of existence is the only means to reach a new creation.

This leads into "Creation," the closing chapter of the dissertation, which relates to May's "renewal" and the final move identified by Ketterer in the science fiction plot from Earth to "other worlds." After surveying how his journey through the chaotic nature of existence granted Vonnegut the understanding that only by embracing this chaos, the ultimate meaninglessness and artificiality of the fiction we call reality, may humanity ascertain its potential to create a better world, this chapter investigates the means through which Vonnegut aims to transmit his comic apocalyptic philosophy by analyzing several of the key elements in his science fiction novels. First, the concept of *foma* from *Cat's Cradle* stands as a postmodernist reminder of the fictionality of all human narratives, not as a cynical repudiation of the existence of meaning, but as a celebration of the human capacity to create its own meanings, as long as they ascribe to Vonnegut's one inexorable commandment (itself based on an unjustifiable act of faith): that human life is sacred. Next, I analyze the recurrent appearance of the inhabitants of the fictional planet Tralfamadore throughout Vonnegut's literature in order to remind humanity of the dual nature of their existence. The cosmic relativism afforded by these alien creature's supratemporal perspective reveal to humans their utter insignificance in the cosmic order, while this very triviality entitles every single man and woman to create their own sense in life and live by our own meanings, free from any grand collective metanarratives. An examination of the prototypical path of Vonnegut's antiheroic protagonists then illustrates his belief that the comic apocalyptic transformation must be born out of the individual but can only truly reach the new vision of a postmodern transfiguration of New Jerusalem by being translated to the collective experience. The epitome of this process is found in the character of Kilgore Trout, and I investigate how, as the ultimate Vonnegut antihero, Trout uses science fiction and humor to create a new apocalyptic American mythology. The chapter closes with an examination of how this philosophy is disseminated by Trout's creator through a new kind of novel, equal parts innovative and accessible, that manages to make his readers feel part of an extended family and encourages them to engage in their own acts of creation in their everyday lives, as it is the transformation of the everyday which can ultimately grant us a new, apocalyptic vision.

Finally, the dissertation closes with a series of conclusions that trace the course of history from the turn of the century to our days, in order to justify why Vonnegut's

message is more important and relevant than ever as an exhortation on how to live amid times of crisis and try to effect social change. Exemplified by his own act of literary creation but extensible to all walks of life, Vonnegut's comic apocalypse may seem a simple philosophy, but all the greatest ideas are ultimately simple, because they appeal to concepts and feelings to which we all humanity can relate. Once it has been demonstrated that Kurt Vonnegut is a science fiction writer, and that science fiction is a valid genre not only for serious literary analysis, but for deep metaphysical exploration, too, I turn to the future research lines that may be derived from my dissertation, focusing especially on possible means to give the ideas extracted from Vonnegut's apocalyptic philosophy a practical application in the context of secondary education, in order to enrich the values of empathy, respect, humor and creativity of future generations and try to make this world the better, more humane place that Kurt Vonnegut envisioned but could not witness in his lifetime.

Note on the style of this dissertation

This dissertation follows the latest style guidelines for research papers within the liberal arts and humanities published by the Modern Language Association of America (MLA) in the ninth edition of its MLA Handbook (2021). In this new edition, the standards of documenting sources prevail over their particular formats. For this reason, there are only minor changes that apply mostly to the way the bibliographical sources are cited: punctuation becomes simpler and more intuitive, volume and issue numbers are clearly identified, and the city of publication and media type are no longer relevant to the citation.

NOTE ON ABBREVIATIONS

Throughout the dissertation, and for the sake of brevity, I use a series of abbreviations when citing each of Vonnegut's works. They are as follows:

AIR: Armageddon in Retrospect

AMWAC: A Man without a Country

BB: Bluebeard

BOC: Breakfast of Champions

BSB: Bagombo Snuff Box

BTT: Between Time and Timbuktu

CC: Cat's Cradle

DD: Deadeye Dick

FWD: Fates Worse than Death

GBY: God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater

GP: Galápagos

HBWJ: Happy Birthday, Wanda June

HP: Hocus Pocus

JB: Jailbird

MN: Mother Night:

PP: Player Piano

PS: Palm Sunday

SH5: Slaughterhouse-Five:

SOT: The Sirens of Titan

SS: Slapstick

TQ: Timequake

WFG: Wampeters, Foma & Granfalloons

WTTMH: Welcome to the Monkey House

1. APOCALYPSE, AMERICA, AND SCIENCE FICTION

1.1 The war of Armageddon: World War II and its philosophical consequences

Over the course of six catastrophic years from 1939 to 1945, World War II altered the course of history and the fabric of human existence forever. Regarded by historian Max Hastings as "the largest event in human history" (xvi), the war can be described as an apocalyptic event not only due to its dramatic figures of over sixty million deaths (xv) and its moral dimension, which fulfilled "many of the promised characteristics of Armageddon, a final war between good and evil" (Vonnegut *BB* 21), but also because it ushered in a completely new era in history. This new reality, however, would not be the timeless New Jerusalem prophesized in the Book of Revelation, but a new dialectic which "undermined the assumptions of humanism that man was the measure of all things" (Levine and Papasotiriou 34), opening the eyes of the world to a new reality marked by the consequences of the war's two most disturbing ramifications: the genocide of the Nazi Holocaust and the development of atomic weapons, which gave humans the potential to destroy their own world.

Robert Oppenheimer, head of the Los Alamos Laboratory where the atomic bomb was developed under the Manhattan Project, is said to have repeated a phrase from the sacred Hindu text, the *Bhagavad-Gita* (2nd century BCE), after the success of the Trinity nuclear test on July 16, 1945: "Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds" (Temperton, "Now"). Years later, the physicist explained how in that moment he "knew the world would not be the same" (Temperton, "Now"). Effectively, when the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima less than a month later, on August 6th, the sun rose on a whole new world which, in a contradictory paradox indicative of times to come, was equally closer to peace and prone to total annihilation.

From the earliest accounts of its effect, the Hiroshima blast was reported in clearly apocalyptic terms. While President Harry Truman announced the attack to his fellow Americans claiming that "[t]he force from which the sun draws its power has been loosed against those who brought war to the far east" (qtd. in Weart 38), Albert Einstein opposed any kind of triumphalism declaring that "the unleashed power of the atom has changed

everything except our thinking," and warning of how the bomb left the human race "drifting toward catastrophe beyond conception" (qtd. in Carter 259). Then a 22-year-old private fresh at home after fighting in the European front, author Kurt Vonnegut would echo Einstein's dire prediction of a world in the verge of suicide when, 35 years later, he asked "How sick was the soul revealed by the flash at Hiroshima? . . . It was so sick that it did not want to live anymore" (*PS* 63).

When a second atomic bomb dropped over Nagasaki on August 9th led to Japan's surrender, no triumphalist celebration could mask the unrest for humanity's new Godlike potential for destruction. World War II might be over, but the advent of nuclear weapons seemed a haunting prediction of the destructive potential of further wars to come. A week later, Norman Cousins declared in the *Saturday Review* that "[m]odern man is obsolete," and that the dropping of the atomic bombs "marked the violent death of one stage in history and the beginning of another" (5), thus confirming the apocalyptic change of paradigm heralded by the final attacks on Japan. This new historical stage was equally marked by the discovery by Soviet troops advancing towards Berlin of a network of extermination camps throughout Eastern Europe, which proved as chilling as the mushroom clouds above Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and just as darkly indicative of humanity's new state of being. The atrocities revealed at the camps, including but not limited to the systematic genocide of around six million Jews, as well as millions of Poles, gypsies, and other ethnic and social minorities in the name of Hitler's so-called "Final Solution," were described as the "master rupture" of twentieth-century history and "the historical origin of post-modernity" (Crosthwaite 16).

Fredric Jameson, explains that, in basic terms, "the real difference between postmodernism and modernism is that postmodernism is a situation of tendentially complete modernization in which those older remnants [of pre-modernity] have been removed" ("Clinging to the Wreckage" 28–29). Perhaps the darkest aspect of the new postmodern reality illuminated by the Nazi Holocaust, hence, was that, in the exact same sense as the development of atomic weapons, the systematic killing at the death camps in Auschwitz or Treblinka did not signal a sudden departure from the Enlightenment's faith on reason and progress but, quite the opposite, such destructive tendencies actually "followed a logic deeply inscribed within the project of modernity itself" (Crosthwaite 15). The technologies which had allowed for millions of killings in a process of utter dehumanization that turned human beings into mere numbers could not be disregarded as

a barbaric residue of pre-modern irrationality, but were indeed, in Zygmunt Bauman's words, "a mundane extension of the factory system" (8), which made the Holocaust a "legitimate resident in the house of modernity" (17).

Fascism and its genocidal consequences were the consummation of a perversion that lay at the basis of the Enlightenment's rationale; that is, that "the reason which was to be the means to satisfying human ends becomes its own end, and thereby turns against the true aims of the Enlightenment: freedom and happiness" (Luckhurst 89). Once humanity is dominated by technological rationality, mass murder is prone to become a routine bureaucratic process. One of the most influential studies of this rationalization of dehumanization was Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963), a report on the trial of Adolph Eichmann, one of the chief organizers of the Holocaust, in which Arendt coined the term "the banality of evil" to account for the fact that, to effects, the *Obersturmbannführer* who had authorized the merciless killing of millions was not a devilish monster but a simple man:

> The trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal. From the viewpoint of our legal institutions and of our moral standards of judgment, this normality was much more terrifying than all the atrocities put together. (Arendt 276)

Eichmann's behavior, therefore, made humanity disturbingly aware of the "dark side" of its nature, of the dehumanizing impulse that resides beneath our patina of reason and civilization. The discovery of atomic weapons had given humanity the destructive potential of an apocalyptic God without raising it above the moral level of an Adolf Eichmann, making the possibility of future atrocities akin to those revealed at the extermination camps more than plausible, and maybe even the inescapable consequence of so-called progress. As such, in the words of Ihab Hassan, World War II offered "a dread prophecy of the future," in which "senseless and efficient violence, the vast repression of everything human, alienation from self, society, and nature . . . threaten to define the condition of man in an age of totalitarianism or technocracy" (*Contemporary* 64).

World War II, then, not only left behind millions of dead bodies and dozens of cities obliterated, but its traumatic legacy, in the form of a series of "events that even the

survivors cannot really survive" (Adorno and Jones 122) also opened a new chapter of history in which reality seemed more unpredictably shocking than any writer of fiction could have imagined, and completely devoid of sense. After the dark revelations of Auschwitz and the blinding flash of Hiroshima, the uncanny had suddenly become commonplace, and it was "now life and not art that requires the willing suspension of disbelief" (Levine and Papasotiriou 83). What was humanity in this new, postmodern state of affairs, but a threat to itself? Would there be limits to the destructively evil impulses of what Norman O. Brown deemed "The disease called man" (3)? Was there even a future for mankind or would the years following the end of the war prove to be, as Kurt Vonnegut described it, "the Finale Rack of so-called Human Progress" (*HP* 204)?

1.2 The American Century: American change in the post-war context

In February 1941, almost a year before the attack on Pearl Harbor triggered the United States' intervention in World War II, magazine tycoon Henry Luce had declared the start of what he called "The American Century" (159). Like many before and after him, Luce believed that "America was not just a country, it was an idea and an ideal" (Halberstam 51), but the manifestation of said ideal with regard to foreign policy had, ever since the country's independence in 1776, been subject to a constant dualistic tension between the opposing principles of isolation and intervention. The isolationist rhetoric claimed that the United States "should strive to separate itself from the sordid power politics of the Old World in order to remain pristine and uncontaminated" (Levine and Papasotiriou 13), whereas the dialectic of intervention that defended a manifest claim to engage in international affairs "in order actively to save the world according to liberal principles" (13). In his *Time* magazine editorial, Luce used a New Testament metaphor to phrase his proposed role for the United States in the global politics of the new era: "we must undertake now to be the Good Samaritan of the entire world" (170).

When Japan's surrender put an end to the war in September 1945, the United States seemed finally qualified to accomplish Luce's ideal. Having entered the conflict still feeling the effects of the Great Depression, the country emerged as the war's preeminent economic benefactor, the producer of half the industrial product of the world, with a per capita income that doubled that of the next richest nations (Levine and

Papasotiriou 13). In a moral sense, not only did the United States see itself as "the war's one outright victor" (Bradbury, *Modern* 158) but it was also the sole custodian of the atomic power that had brought an end to the conflict. With the attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Americans had, in Malcolm Bradbury's words "initiated the nuclear age" (*Modern American,* 158) but, as A. J. Muste had warned in 1941, military triumph often has problematic ethical consequences for the victor, who "thinks he has just proved that war and violence pay" (qtd. in Zinn 416). It was with the mutually suspicious gaze of morally certain victors that the United States and its former ally the Soviet Union, the nation which, with over twenty-seven million deaths, had suffered the most dramatic losses of the war, now faced each other at the gates of a new world order.

The apocalyptic reordering that World War II effected on the economy, society, and general idiosyncrasy not only of the United States but of the whole world was so profound that it is perhaps the deadpan simplicity of a character in Thomas Pynchon's 1963 novel *V* that best articulates its violent dislocation: "the world flipped" and then, "come 1945 . . . [it] flopped" (291). When the world "flopped" at the end of 1945, Americans felt the need to assume a global role in the uncertainly tense era that would follow, and the war's immediate aftermath would indeed prove to be a period of mounting tension between two nations which had lost the only nexus that had previously tied them together: a common enemy. The growing mistrust over the Soviet claim to a sphere of influence in Eastern Europe was encompassed in former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill's speech at Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri on March 5th, 1946, where he famously declared that "[f]rom Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the continent" ("The Sinews") The era's increasing tautness reached its first climax a year later with President Truman's appeal to the US Congress for $400 million to aid Greece in its choice between "free institutions, representative government, free elections" and "terror and oppression" (qtd. in K. O'Brien 248). With its manichean rhetoric of a world split between two diametrically antagonistic forces, Truman's speech added an apocalyptic dimension to Henry Luce's postulation, clearly pitting good, as symbolised by the United States, against evil, embodied by the Soviet Union, in what amounted, in Kenneth P. O'Brien's words, to "an American moral declaration of the Cold War" (248).

The apocalyptic connotations of the new bipolar situation were made even more darkly evident when the Soviet Union conducted its first nuclear test on August 29th,

1949, confirming how the world had effectively been split into two hostile factions, both of which now had the potential to destroy the whole of humanity at the touch of a button. Isolationism, President Dwight D. Eisenhower would declare in 1952, was "dead as a political issue" (qtd. in Carter 28), and history had entered the new age of the superpowers; two postmodern empires tied in a contest of unprecedented military build-up that trapped them in a vicious symbiosis where one's annihilation could only come at the cost of the other's. The doctrine was termed Mutual Assured Destruction (paradoxically shortened to MAD)[7] by Donald Brennan (Deudney 80), and it would engage the whole world in a strategic deadlock for decades to come. Soon, as the Cold War brought the possibility of total destruction closer to reality than it ever had been, fear would become "the foundation for much of the dominant narrative" of the second half of the twentieth century (Altheide 12). There was no escaping the ever-present threat of the atomic bomb, which, in Paul Boyer's words, had "become one of those categories of Being, like Space and Time, that, according to Kant, are built into the very structure of our minds" (xviii). Suddenly, the bomb had given a renewed plausibility to biblical prophecies of the end of mankind so that, according to historian Ray C. Petry, not only did religious enthusiasts "find sudden and unprecedented support for their most frenzied contentions," (13), but also people of secular convictions were forced to consider "whether these wildest predictions may not shortly be translated from the realm of shadowy aberration into the blaze of stark actuality" (13–14).

In the United States, World War II's dual legacy of unprecedented economic affluence and ever-present atomic threat created a paradoxical situation in which, according to Reinhold Niebuhr, "the paradise of our domestic security is suspended in a hell of global insecurity" (*Irony* 7), leaving citizens suffocated beneath the weight of a "double-edged sword of relief and anxiety" (Levine and Papasotiriou 32) and numbed by the excruciating uncertainty of living enmeshed in a culture intent on celebrating affluence while failing to conceal the "chaos that lies beneath the apparent conformist stability" of their society (Tew 23). These were, indeed, apocalyptic times, and not only because the rhetoric of the Cold War brought eschatological concerns to a disturbingly current actuality. At a deeper level, the combination of the traumatically inescapable

[7] The irony of the term was certainly not lost to editor Harvey Kutzman and publisher William Gaines, who in 1952 launched *MAD,* a humor magazine with great influence in American popular culture that remains in print to this day. Many of the young readers who found much to love in Vonnegut's novels during the sixties would most certainly have been attuned to *MAD's* analogous brand of sociopolitical satire, too.

awareness of the dark side of its nature revealed by the horrors of war and the impotence of facing the stultifying meaninglessness of an existence that hanged on an ever-thinning thread, deposited humanity at the dawn of a whole new metaphysical era, motivating a deep examination of what being human actually meant.

1.3 The one bright book of life: The role of the novel in the new postwar reality

The reality of the Cold War effected an all-angles challenge on Western society's capability of making a moral stand and grasping even a minimum sense of purpose and understanding in life. On the one hand, there was the new "scientific discoveries that were not commensurate with his sense of relation to the whole" (Nadeau 13), as the inescapable advances of technological modernization often led to a feeling of entropy amidst "more and more information, and less and less meaning" (Baudrillard, *Simulacra* 79). On the other hand, there was the daily news, which gave the impression that "History now seems to rest on quicksand" (Hassan, *Contemporary* 169). The constant bombardment of dire statistics, revelations of ungraspable futility and empty commercial slogans that constituted American culture in the post-war years created the inescapable impression that "[t]he power of public life has become so vast and threatening that private life cannot maintain a pretence of its importance" (Bellow, "Notes" 69). Unable to find comfort in "an age after ideology, shaken by the awareness of the holocaust, atomic anxiety, the fact of human evil" (Bradbury, *Modern* 161), the private citizen couldn't escape the feeling that, in this new Cold War reality, "[t]he Self is asked to prepare itself for sacrifice" (69).

Horrified by a culture which claimed to celebrate the potential of the individual but in reality seemed intent on turning citizens into subservient, disposable machines, a new generation of American writers soon took on the task of reflecting "the pathos of human beings enmeshed in the relentless triviality of contemporary American culture" (Scholes, *Fabulation* 205). In 1949, Theodor Adorno stated that "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" (*Prisms* 34), but these young American authors now turned to the novel, that ever-shifting form that D. H. Lawrence had once termed "the one bright book of life" ("Why the Novel"), to expose their views on man, reality and America itself; following Michael Butor's dictum that the novel is "the phenomenological realm par excellence, the best possible place to study how reality appears to us, or might appear"

(49). If Georg Lukács once referred to the novel as "the epic of a world abandoned by God" (88), then what better medium than the novel could a writer employ to explore the possibility of finding meaning in a world that seemed headed for an apocalypse in secular terms; a fatal catastrophe, not motivated by divine will, but through humanity's own tragically absurd pretentions?

During the decades following World War II, American novelists would produce a trademark brand of literature that not only examined humanity's worth, but also opened itself up to ontological interrogations about what the role of the novel itself should be in the new postmodern reality, and whether the concept of reality itself was viable at all. Operating on an apocalyptic context that seemed intent on echoing the Cold War's threat of annihilation with continuous declarations of the "death of the novel," these writers understood that they worked "both within a convention, the convention of the novel, and against it" (Bradbury, *The Novel* 12). The result was a highly innovative and experimental literature that, nevertheless, remained highly preoccupied with contemporary American reality and concerns, defying apparently unalterable literary conventions and hierarchies to the point that some deemed it "antinovel" (Myers 52). To these accusations, Frank Kermode responds arguing that, as far as "a new writer's task might always be seen to be the correction of obsolete versions of reality imposed by earlier novels . . . any good novel is an antinovel" (112).

Writing in a number of different styles and trends, ranging from black humor to science fiction and New Journalism, novelists as disparate as Thomas Pynchon, Kurt Vonnegut, and John Barth would be merged under the label of postmodernism, connected in their shared belief that "it is not so much what art is *about* that matters (i.e. not its subject or ideas) but what it *does* and how this makes us respond to it" (Nicol 40). Echoing Roland Barthes' famed thesis on the "death of the author," postmodernist American novels understood that "the text is perceived through the kaleidoscope of our consciousness, a changing and many-colored thing" (Hassan, *Contemporary* 169) and, as such, sought to exploit the potentiality of literature not just as a one-sided monologue but as a conversation where author and reader are equally active participants in the creation of meaning. In a time when the world seemed to make less and less sense, American writers took on a dual apocalyptic task, not simply reflecting and questioning their time in a jeremiad-like "warning against the presumption of man" (May, *Toward* 32), but also

striving to create a better reality, a sort of New Jerusalem of the mind, through their literature.

Bradbury writes that "the novelist's obligation is to make himself a stylistic and experimental citizen of a world that does not fully exist for him until he has done this" (*The Novel* 12), an impulse clearly evidenced in postmodernist novelists' constant questioning of the social, political, and cultural values of the United States in an attempt to "correct" the path their country had taken in the Cold War era through their literature. Robert Scholes traces this urge back to the paradoxical fact that, before America became a reality, it

> Was itself a fabulous fiction that grew in the minds of men like Columbus, Hudson, and John Smith before they found it and founded it – and in the minds of other men like Paine, Jefferson, and Franklin, who invented its political and social structures out of their ideals and hopes, and then sought as actors on the stage of history to make a real nation out of their fabulous dreams.
>
> In America myth has always been stronger than reality, romanticism stronger than realism. (*Fabulation* 208–209)

Perhaps that is why American novelists feel a strong impulse to contribute to that myth, as the perception that theirs is "a culture endlessly wedded to becoming" (Bigsby 3) leads them to believe that writing about their country, reflecting the America that they think should be, can actively transform the America that is. Joyce Carol Oates writes that "America is a tale still being told—in many voices—and nowhere near its conclusion" (371), and if, as Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "the writer is an explorer" whose "[e]very step is an advance into new land" (561), then it is the task of literature to write that tale and amend not only previous obsolete forms of narrating reality, but reality itself, too.

A country whose "very identity had always been the subject of debate" (Bigsby 8), the United States' stance in the Cold War as the polar antithesis of everything that the communist empire symbolized seemed to complete a transformative process that, according to William Leach, had begun in the decades following the Civil War. It was then, Leach argues, that "American capitalism began to produce a distinct culture" (3) which, far from being connected to the traditional religious and communitarian values of the Puritans or to the democratic impulse of the Founding Fathers, was based on "acquisition and consumption as a means of achieving happiness; the cult of the new; the

democratization of desire; and money value as predominate measure of all value in society" (3). As the fifties dawned, the United States came to encompass the farthest extremes of the capitalist system; a country where "consumption, not welfare . . . was the means of social cohesion" and the "celebration of affluence became the hallmark of 'the American Way of Life'" (Zunz 90).

To justify the fact that not all American citizens partook in this celebration of affluence,[8] a growingly popular rhetoric emerged based around a capitalistic reading of the famed American Dream. First articulated by James Truslow Adams, who in *The Epic of America* (1931) wrote of "that American dream of a better, richer, and happier life for all of our citizens of every rank" (viii), the Dream was one of those American myths that seemed stronger than reality; a doctrine whose appeal resided, according to Jim Cullen, in the "[a]mbiguity [which] is the very source of its mythic power" (7)—the fact that it could be conjured by opposing camps to make antagonistic claims while still pledging unconditional allegiance to its ever-appealing mystique. As the twentieth century advanced, the American Dream seemed to move ever further away from the ideal engraved in the Declaration of Independence (1776) that "all men are created equal" and hold the unalienable right to "Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness" (Declaration) towards a social Darwinist justification of the unequal distribution of wealth and class distinction.

Postmodernist novelists like Kurt Vonnegut, who in his 1965 novel *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* pens an obituary to how "the American Dream turned belly up, turned green, bobbled to the scummy surface of cupidity unlimited, filled with gas, went *bang* in the noonday sun" (9), vehemently opposed the path that they thought was pushing the country away from the ideals of the Founding Fathers and Abraham Lincoln, and towards a heartless celebration of markets and greed. These authors were not alone in their views but actually echoed the feelings of a whole sector of the population, and as the Cold War era advanced, a new schism, just as irreconcilable as the one between the Western and Eastern blocs, would emerge between two diametrically opposed visions of what America should stand for. It is perhaps this interrogation of the country's nature and identity, which would last well beyond the end of the Cold War, that best encompasses the nature of the

[8] As a matter of fact, as late as 1947, one-third of the households in the world's most prosperous nation did not even have access to running water (Levine and Papasotiriou 13).

"American Century," and the postmodernist novel is one of the arenas in which it is more meticulously enacted.

Ever since Frederick Jackson Turner mourned its closing in 1893 as the disappearance of America's "restless, nervous energy" (37) and its "gate of escape from the bondage of the past" (38), Americans have yearned to re-open the long-lost frontier in countless projects and endeavors. Whereas the dominant narrative of the fifties and sixties projected the frontier in ventures based on technological innovation, monetary expansion, space exploration and Cold War militarism, novelists like Vonnegut responded to the militarist and consumerist thrust in a time of seemingly inescapable entropy by proposing an escape through a metaphorical frontier that would connect the United States back to foundational values of community, social advancement, and spirituality. Subsequent generations of their readers would project new frontiers in mind-expanding drugs, sexual hedonism, and the unchartered infinity of cyberspace. It was a "struggle for the 'liberation' of the 'true' American 'self' from the 'false' attitudes and values of the American hegemony" (Simmons, *Anti-Hero* 59), whose legacy would prove to be one of challenging previously unquestioned assumptions. By interrogating the very essence of the American experience, these artists contributed to the collective creation of that apocalyptic nation "born out of its own imaginings," where the "natural tense is the present perfect" (Bigsby 1).

Henry James once wrote that "it takes a great deal of history to produce a little literature" (*Hawthorne* 23). The troubled decades following World War II, in which fiction would time and again seem intent on overcoming reality, would prove to be so teeming with scandals, tragedies and sudden shifts that novelists would struggle to come to terms with a constant battery of events that seemed to move faster than the clocks—"It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one's own meagre imagination," Philip Roth famously wrote of everyday life in the US in 1961 (Roth 34). The imagination, however, would precisely prove to be the tool that novelists would use to chart "the great psychic migration of American youth since World War II" (Ritter 42) in a fiction "marked by images of *breakdown* and *breakthrough*" (Levine and Papasotiriou 31) that stands as the best chronicle of what it was like to be alive in the apocalyptic context of the second half of the twentieth century. After all, E. L. Doctorow claims that "[t]he reason we need writers is because we need witnesses to this terrifying century," (Fresán 172). Nevertheless, the writer is a creator of history as much as a

witness of it, whose final task resides in "fashioning the intellectual and emotional landscape" of his time (Nadeau 64) to provide readers "with maps for living in a rapidly expanding and evolving country" (Elliott 430). Perhaps no American novelist of the Cold War era chased the elusive American Dream along a map of the past, present and future of the United States as intensely as Kurt Vonnegut. From the General Electric works at Schenectady and the cultural wasteland of Midland City, Ohio, to the jungles of Vietnam and the rubble heaps of Dresden, Vonnegut took readers on a trip through time and space across places real and imagined, setting off from the deck of the Mayflower and arriving at the planet Tralfamadore and the inner confines of his own mind. In the process, he chronicled the lights and shadows of the United States, reshaping the raw materials of history and culture into a new type of novel, equally complex and accessible, which fulfilled the apocalyptic impulse of molding chaos into creation.

1.4 The thinking man's pop writer: Kurt Vonnegut

Out of all the postmodernist authors who emerged at the beginning of the Cold War, it may be safe to call Kurt Vonnegut one of the most representative and quintessential American writers of the second half of the twentieth century. Not only did he write throughout the whole period, with his first short story, "Report on the Barnhouse Effect" appearing in *Colliers'* magazine in 1950, and his last novel, *Timequake*, being published in 1997 (although he continued writing up until his death in 2007, with a volume of non-fiction writings, *A Man Without a Country*, topping the best-seller lists in 2005), but he also ran the whole gamut of American literature, partaking in all the main styles and trends of the period. From his years as a magazine fiction writer in the fifties and early sixties, when he "wrote just about every type of popular story" (Klinkowitz, "Canary" 20) to his non-fiction detours into reporting, literary criticism and autobiography, Vonnegut's works read as a nutshell history of the evolution of the American novel in the post-World War II era, ranging from science fiction to dark satire, postmodernist experiment, detective fiction, historiographic metafiction, dirty realism and New Journalism among other literary movements, all the while retaining a distinct, unmistakable style that captivated millions of readers worldwide.

Throughout his career, Vonnegut's themes were the great concerns of his epoch. He once declared that "[t[he function of an artist is to respond to his own time" (Allen, *Conversations* 64), and he did so by mirroring the "absurdities of American reality in the post-war situation" (Abádi-Nagy 45). Vonnegut writes "satiric parables in a time of ethical unease" (45) which not only voice his notion that "[w]hat humans call progress has come at the expense of its soul" (Glover 194) but also propose what he considers viable alternatives to the dehumanizing path of his century. A stylistic innovator who was one of the key precursors and practitioners of American postmodernism, Vonnegut nevertheless sought to keep grounded to a plain, understandable prose and composed his themes out of "thoroughly middle-class materials" (Klinkowitz, *Disruptions* 197). It was precisely through that tension between innovation and accessibility that, according to Jerome Klinkowitz, the author "helped to reinvent the novel and also reshape the country's imagination as it passed from one stage of history to another" (*Kurt Vonnegut* 21).

Whereas the often alienating complexity of the majority of his fellow innovators like John Barth, Robert Coover and Thomas Pynchon seemed to obscure their works beyond the tolerance of popular audiences, Vonnegut, while constantly exhibiting a strong experimental edge, never allowed his novels to drift into complexity for complexity's sake. This allows readers to identify with him as an author who "goes among them, looks out on the world as the best of them do, and in fact *is* one of them" (Mellard 197). His personal brand of accessible experimentalism made him "the paradigm of the popular writer" (196) and opened innovative fiction to a whole new audience that went beyond the cognoscenti of the avant-garde, making him in equal parts "[t]he most mainstream of postmodern authors" and "the most beloved writer of post-World War II literature" (Rosen 45). This unprecedented appeal tied to his didactic intent led John Irving to hail his former teacher as "the most original American writer since Mark Twain and the most humanitarian writer in the English language since Charles Dickens" (Fresán 218).

However, while contributing to boost his popularity to unprecedented rates, Vonnegut's unique combination was contemplated with suspicious skepticism by literary critics. For the first fifteen years of his career, his novels went essentially unnoticed. The writer himself remembered how, in the mid-sixties, *Esquire* magazine published "a list of the American literary world back then and it guaranteed that every living author of the

slightest merit was on there somewhere," and he "wasn't on there" (*WFG* 282). Even when the unprecedented success of *Slaughterhouse-Five* in 1969 finally forced critics to acknowledge Vonnegut's place as a major force in American letters, his affair as the new darling of the literary academia proved to be fleeting; both of its follow-ups, 1973's *Breakfast of Champions,* and 1976's *Slapstick* were met with an avalanche of harsh reviews that argued that his novels amounted to "trash culture elevated to art" (Gardner 87) and accused the author himself of being "the voice of the many who are one with their limitations" (Hendin 31).

Vonnegut maintained that it was his non-literary background as a major in chemistry and anthropology as well as his experience as a slick magazine writer in the fifties which accounted for this critical mistrust:

> The hidden complaint, was that I was barbarous, that I wrote without having made a systematic study of great literature, that I was no gentleman, since I had done hack writing so cheerfully, for vulgar magazines—that I had not paid my academic dues. (*PS* 93–94)

Nevertheless, the author always expressed pride in his roots, arguing that "it can be tremendously refreshing if a creator of literature has something on his mind other than the history of literature so far" (94). Still, although Klinkowitz holds that it was precisely Vonnegut's experience writing for popular magazines that contributed to the establishment of his personal style, attuning him "to the cultural tensions of the popular literature and imagination of his time," and moulding him into "a writer astutely capable of working within the popular conventions of his day, transcending them and maturing as an artist" (*Disruptions* 54–55), the truth is that, as much as cementing the bold accessibility of his work, this non-academic background granted that Vonnegut was never fully allowed a secure place as a canonical figure in American literature.[9]

In 1981, Vonnegut wrote that "It has been my experience with literary critics and academics in this country that clarity looks a lot like laziness and ignorance and childishness and cheapness to them" (*PS* 291). Paradoxical as it may seem, even though

[9] The rationale behind this critical repudiation is hard to understand considering how, as Vonnegut himself once remarked, Ernest Hemingway wrote for *Esquire,* F. Scott Fitzgerald for *The Saturday Evening Post,* William Faulkner for *Collier's,* and John Steinbeck for *The Woman's Home Companion* (*BSB* 3).

he was worshipped by legions of readers and admired by many of his peers, after the brief lapse of academic infatuation with *Slaughterhouse-Five* in the late sixties, his humanist stance "positioned him at odds with an increasingly postmodernist and poststructuralist critical fraternity throughout the nineteen seventies and much of the nineteen eighties" (Simmons, *New Critical* xi). The release of a new Vonnegut novel was unequivocally met with reviews which claimed that his best work was long behind him (ironically, in books to which critics had not dared devote a single line decades earlier), and while none of them failed to gross impressive sales, academics insisted on their tendency to "comfortably dismiss Vonnegut as a naïf with a knack for low comedy, but not 'serious,' not an artist, not canonical" (369). To them he was "sentimental" (Myers 55), "sententious" (Mellard 197), intent on "propagating outdated middle-class values" and "indulging in maudlin sentimentality" (Freese, "Man" 230), and Gore Vidal went as far as labelling him "the worst writer in the United States" (qtd. in *PS* 114).

As late as 1996, Peter Reed and Marc Leeds wondered at how Vonnegut seemed to occupy "a somewhat ambiguous place in American letters" (xvi). While he remained in great demand as a novelist, essayist, and speaker whose works were widely read, taught in high schools and colleges throughout the country, and subject to continuing academic examination, he somehow still seemed "denied unqualified acceptance as a dominant figure at the center of the literary scene" (xvi). Even to this day, fifteen years after his death, it is still difficult to ascertain whether Vonnegut has been consolidated as an integral part of the American literary canon. *Slaughterhouse-Five* continues to be praised as one of the most important novels of his time, and Modern Library placed it on the eighteenth position of its list of the "100 best English-language novels of the 20th Century," but it is precisely this bias towards his most famous novel that sometimes proves to be a burden impeding the acceptance of his whole oeuvre. It comes as no surprise to discover, as Martín Párraga explains, that 80% of the critical studies devoted to Vonnegut's figure are limited to the discussion of *Slaughterhouse-Five* ("Medio Siglo" 9).

Maybe Vonnegut's gravest crime in the eyes of the literary academia resides in how his work, in its characteristic embrace of contradiction and its deliberate flaunting of all the rules, refuses to adjust to any particular label. It is this ethereal quality, which allows his novels to continually traverse boundaries between highbrow and lowbrow, fiction and reality, comedy and tragedy, that has often unsettled critics who have tried "to

come to terms with his unheard-of combination of the serious concerns and narrative strategies of high art with the themes, procedures, and emotional appeals of high art" (Freese, "Critical Reception" 3). However, it is that same unpredictable uniqueness which, for decades, has captivated the imagination of readers who find in Vonnegut's books the close, unpretentious, honest voice of a close friend. He may have been "both too funny and too intelligible for many, who confused muddled earnestness with profundity" (Scholes, *Fabulation* 205), but by complexly encompassing "all the right paradoxes" of a "fatalistic moralist, cynical pacifist, holy atheist, anti-intellectual philosopher, apocalyptic futurist, and grim humorist," Vonnegut rose to the status of "the thinking man's pop writer" (Bellamy, "President" 85).

Robert Scholes explains that fiction has the ability to fulfil two functions which he labelled sublimation and feedback:

> As sublimation, fiction is a way of turning our concerns into satisfying shape, a way of relieving anxiety, or making life bearable . . . [whereas] as feedback, fiction is a means toward correcting . . . our perception of things and our actions in the world as a result of our experience with simulated actions. (*Fabulation* 214)

The greatest works of literature, Scholes argues, are those that manage to combine both sublimation and feedback. Vonnegut never allowed himself to forget that the responsibility of any writer is, finally, "the duty to tell a 'good story'" (McHale 63), but at the same time he was fully aware of the transformative potential of fiction. Reading and writing were to him "the most nourishing forms of meditation anyone has found so far" (*PS* 150), and he knew that, by reflecting the contradictions of his time in his literary experiments, he could not only change the form of the novel itself but also alter the course of the world by modifying his reader's minds and their outlook on life communicating "a Humanist philosophy that stresses kindness and love" (10). Perfecting the symbiosis of sublimation and feedback, Kurt Vonnegut produced a body of work that is equally rooted in the events of his time and abstractly timeless, a quality which makes him "*the* representative American writer of the latter half of the twentieth century" (Morse, *Imagining* 11).

1.5 An American artist: The purely American character of Vonnegut's fiction

"American" is perhaps the adjective that best represents Kurt Vonnegut's multifaceted character as a man and as an artist. Born in 1922 in Indianapolis, Indiana, the grandson of German immigrants, Vonnegut's life and works operate as a mirror image of a country "built on contradictions" (Bigsby 9). Only the United States could have produced a writer whose two most famous quotes are the cryptically deterministic "So it goes" (*SH5* 27), used up to 106 times in his novel *Slaughterhouse-Five* as a detached reminder of humanity's powerlessness in the face of death and suffering; and "God damn it, you've got to be kind" (*GBY* 129), an exhortation of that same powerless humanity's moral responsibility to live responding to a philosophy of kindness and altruism, phrased as a comic oxymoron in itself. Just like his perpetual tension between experiment and accessibility, the "multiple modes" of Vonnegut's fiction, which result in a "farrago of literary syntaxes" (Schulz 15), or the conflicting views of him as one of the leading novelists of his time and a worthless "hack" (*PS* 292), these two seemingly conflicting aphorisms urging for human responsibility in a coldly deterministic universe are a reflection of the hodgepodge of paradox and complex duality that was the American culture in which Vonnegut lived, from which he fed, and to which he contributed. A man who "consciously or unconsciously, . . . created multiple and even contradictory identities" (Shields 351), Vonnegut did not elude contradiction but rather embraced it as a key aspect of human nature and American identity, using it as the building block of a philosophy that Peter Freese describes as a "metaphysical tightrope act": the counterbalancing of a "cynical unveiling of the meaninglessness of human existence with a plea for love and decency as the necessary antidotes" ("Man" 229).

More than any of his fictional protagonists, the evils he addresses, or even himself, America may be said to be the main character in Vonnegut's fiction. His books, as Morace explains, are "steeped in the major issues of his own times" (152), from Cold War tensions to space exploration, Vietnam, Watergate, or 9/11. Following the example of Norman Mailer, who in *Advertisements for Myself* (1959) writes, "Who can claim that the good sociologist with his technical jargon is *ipso facto* a better observer than the good novelist?" (196), Vonnegut builds his novels as sociological investigations on the major events of his times in an attempt to understand "the bewildering facts of contemporary experience" (Olderman 192). In the process, the author seems to voice the concerns of

many of his fellow Americans. As David Myers argues, "In much the same way as Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* captured the mood of the lost generation, and Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* the bitterness of the thirties depression, Vonnegut has expressed the authentic spirit of the nuclear age generation" (52).

However, although his novels are often indelibly connected to the immediate context in which they were written, Vonnegut's career-long critique of the US "addresses faults that lay far deeper, in the American subconscious himself" (Morace 152), and the specific events which he discusses are often just a starting point to indulge in a deeper examination of how the country's history and character have motivated them. That is why his works often travel backwards in time to revisit America's past in search of the moment when something went wrong, aiming to identify the fatal flaw that deflected the country's utopian promise, but also to celebrate what he considers the real values of America, through a return to which the future could be redeemed of the dystopian scenarios that he also tends to explore. As such, Vonnegut's novels not only constitute "an impassioned and somewhat brokenhearted meditation on the American Dream" (Sumner ix); they also stand as a philosophical treatise on "what it means to be an American," traversing the country's "great promises and its equally great failures" (Morse, *Imagining* 2) to exert that the promise of Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness for every citizen is still potentially available. However, Vonnegut believes that said promise can only be accomplished through a deep, critical examination of the darkest corners of the country's history that will result in a renewed understanding of the American Dream, finally debunking the dehumanizing aspects that have turned it into an "American nightmare" (Freese "Man" 226).

Jacques Barzun writes that "[t]he shortest way to popularity is to keep up a verbal war against social order" (7). Throughout his career, Kurt Vonnegut constantly challenged the political, moral, and literary establishment of the United States, but his was not a nihilistic rebellion without a cause; rather, his harsh condemnation of the political course of his country was motivated by a sincere belief in the great apocalyptic promise of America as a redeeming narrative-nation. After his death, his son Mark reminisced of how Vonnegut "loved America and believed that the land and people of Lincoln and Twain would find a way to be right," and of how he truly thought that "America could be a beacon and a paradise" (*AIR* 6). Unrelenting as it may sometimes become, Vonnegut's parody of his country was always born out of a respect for its core

set of values; values which, he considered, were being betrayed by the same politicians that claimed to defend them. It comes as no surprise that many authors have relied on comparisons with some of the most mythical figures in US culture to describe Vonnegut, calling him a "postmodern Mark Twain" (Sumner 258) or even "the Lincoln of our Literature" (Morace 156), because he himself is already part of that pantheon of great American myths.

In the same way as Lincoln and Twain, Kurt Vonnegut led what can only be referred to as a quintessentially American life. "I wrote out of my life," the author once said (qtd. in Sumner 8), and he was made painfully conscious of the overwhelming forces that American history exerts upon the individual citizen from a very early age, when the Great Depression destroyed his family's fortune to the point that his mother, embarrassed by their social downfall, succumbed to a mental disorder that finally pushed her to commit suicide in 1944. Through the experience of the Depression and its consequences, the young author "understood in his bones the wages of the Ponzi-schemed, predatory capitalism" (Sumner 5), and in his European tour of duty during the final stages of World War II, when he famously was one of the few survivors of the Dresden air raid, he witnessed the irrational barbarity of war and the absurd randomness of death in a world dictated by dehumanizing technological "progress."

Back home, in the late forties, he beheld how growing hostilities between the new superpowers betrayed World War II's promise of being "The closing chapter to ten thousand years of madness and greed" (*JB* 198), instituting instead a new rhetoric of acute eschatological threat and domestic paranoia. Vonnegut's anthropology studies at the University of Chicago deeply influenced the relativistic beliefs that he would later express in his literature, which radically oppose the general narrative of Cold War apocalyptic duality. Instead, anthropology instilled on him the notion that myths, religions and cultures are custom-designed artifacts manufactured "to provide cohesion and purpose to communal life in its various forms" (Sumner 2), and therefore no culture is superior to any other, no moral concept can be held as irrevocably true, and cultures and ideas can and must be modified taking man's well-being as the final measure of all things. Such well-being, Vonnegut learned from his instructor Robert Redfield's concept of the "folk society," was best achieved in communities which echoed not only primitive societies and early Puritan settlements, but also the humanitarian ethos of the Indianapolis of his own youth.

As the fifties dawned, Vonnegut struggled to make a living and support his growing family, often having to combine his career as a writer with a number of other jobs ranging from sports journalist to public relations man at General Electric, English teacher, and even owner of a Saab dealership, all of which would contribute to inform his character and writing style. It is no wonder that, years later, the author himself would refer to his career with smug detachment by labelling it "a perfectly straightforward business story" (Klinkowitz, "Why" 332). Like any other middle-class American of his time, he was working hard to earn a living, and the environment in which he wrote was neither elitist academia nor bohemian New York City, but West Barnstable, where, instead of mixing with other writers and intellectuals, Vonnegut honed his trade among a community of tradesmen and businessmen (Klinkowitz, *Kurt Vonnegut* 32) who were his neighbors as well as his potential public. The polar opposite of the literary sensations who found a startling success overnight, Vonnegut definitely fits the American ideal of the "self-made man" which Henry Clay had outlined in 1832 (Cullen 69)—to the extent that such myth may be said to really exist—which leads Joe David Bellamy to proclaim that "In a sense . . . most writers are self-taught, but one gathers that Vonnegut . . . is more self-taught than most" ("President" 79). John Cheever once said that "the author's individuality was never stronger than in the United States" (Fresán 103) and no author was more an individual than Vonnegut, who, living in an isolated environment and devoid of any kind of critical recognition for almost two decades, was truly "a literary maverick, who runs with no pack" (Scholes, "Chasing" 53).

Vonnegut's individual spirit and his devotion to the literary craft with the detached commitment of a professional tradesman would prove to be the ultimate source of his uniqueness and the key to his unexpected success. Devoid of literary pretentions, his writings read like "overheard conversations," accessible to all readers "because the language being spoken is the reader's own, the common vernacular of the great American middle class" (Klinkowitz, *America* 36). The novelist himself would declare that he trusted his writing the most "when I sound like a person from Indianapolis, which is what I am" (*PS* 70), and it was this natural unpretentiousness, the "tone that proclaims that he is just another ordinary, middle-aged, middle-class Joe and that he feels just as helpless as most people do about the hopeless mess the world is in" (Myers 53) that attuned his writing to the sensibilities of the nascent countercultural youth of the early and mid-sixties. This new generation found in Vonnegut a writer who did not address them from

the seemingly superior position of an elder who knew more than them; a figure who was not afraid to "deal with sophomoric questions that full adults regard as settled" (*WFG* 277). Vonnegut was never scared to accept that there were many problems to which he did not know the right answer, but he could definitely identify the many inhumanly wrong ones that politicians and parents alike seemed intent on justifying.

Young Americans discontent with the path their country was taking with the escalating war in Vietnam attuned to Vonnegut's appeal as a "hip philosopher" (Berryman 164) to the point that novels like *The Sirens of Titan* (1959) and *Cat's Cradle* (1963) became "the center of an intense cult among American youth" (Hassan, *Contemporary* 86). Ironically unbeknownst to the writer himself at first, this was a completely unintended phenomenon. As his friend and fellow writer Dan Wakefield remembers, "Vonnegut didn't go looking for the kids, they adopted him," (*Letters*, 152), but by the time *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the author's account of his Dresden experience retold against the backdrop of Vietnam, was published in Spring 1969, the inertia accumulated during years of intensifying underground following built through word of mouth exploded into an unprecedented success. Not only was *Slaughterhouse-Five* one of the most original American novels ever written, but the personal details it revealed about Vonnegut "captured the imaginations of the public and the publishing world, of the youth culture and the critics, as few others have since the days of Ernest Hemingway" (Bellamy, "President" 89). The author who, just five years before, was struggling to see his name in print and had to accept any job in order to feed his family was now being hailed as a "Campus Orwell" on the pages of *Newsweek* magazine (Shields 247) and writing his name in the history of American literature through a rearguard assault the temples of high art that made him "our first major writer to have begun and sustained his career in the paperback industry" (Klinkowitz, "Canary" 17).

Vonnegut's unheard of path from anonymity to fame and "unusual success with two audiences that are taken to be mutually exclusive, namely 'simple' readers who want to be entertained and academics who want to be impressed" (Freese, "Critical Reception" 3) was a clear enactment of the rags-to-riches version of the American Dream if there ever was one. Although the writer would often joke that success could have come earlier, when he had a whole family to support, instead of when he was 47 and most of his children were already in college, and despite the fact that, as I have mentioned before, the critical infatuation with his figure would prove to be fleeting at best, Vonnegut would

remain an extraordinarily popular personality for the rest of his life. The secret to both the experimental innovation and the widespread allure of *Slaughterhouse-Five* was how the author introduced himself into his own writing; how he had used his novel to purge his own demons in public, not fearing to give voice to the trauma of his Dresden experience. The result was not only achieving "survival through the healing powers of the imagination" (Broer, "Duty Dance" 171) but that, in the process, he had gained an audience who responded to Vonnegut's intensely personal prose by feeling exceptionally close to him. Just like the writing of *Slaughterhouse-Five* had proved an apocalyptic process of cleansing and renewal for Vonnegut, so would in turn his legions of readers find solace in his novels, turning his fiction into a "hospitable city of words" (Morace 154). More than simply reading and enjoying them, "Millions of lives were indeed touched by Vonnegut's works" (Klinkowitz, *America* ix).

Kurt Vonnegut was aware that the pulpit of his books gave him access to the lives and minds of readers all over the world, and as such he chose to use them to transmit a didactic message of humanism based on the foundational American values of human decency, and community. Conscious that, as Susan Sontag once declared, one of the functions of art in mass culture is to "modify consciousness" (*Against* 304), Vonnegut argued several times that his aim was to act as a "canary-in-the-coal-mine" (*WFG* 94) and put his artistic sensibilities at the service of a common social good, aiming to make his readers' lives more bearable through the sublimation of entertaining novels that revealed the feedback potential to create a fairer world. Todd F. Davis explains that Vonnegut "really cared" and his altruistic stance "was no charade" ("Flabbergasted" 5), and the manner in which Vonnegut channelled his humanitarian concern in an attempt to "shake some sense into Middle America" with his books can only be characterized as apocalyptic in the purest sense of the term. To start with, he dresses several of his novels in eschatological themes which explore the countless possible manifestations of the end of the world at all levels, from the personal to the universal, an impulse that was reflected in his transgressive narrative structures, which constantly push the limits of the novel as narrative medium and interrogate the nature of finality itself. Still, even more importantly, the main urge behind Vonnegut's whole oeuvre is an attempt to bring humanity closer to an apocalyptic revelation that may open the door to a better world of mind. Powerless as a passive subject of history but empowered as a boundless creator of worlds, Kurt Vonnegut insistently seeks to illuminate an apocalyptic transformation in his readers

through what he called "the most nourishing form of meditation anyone has found so far": the power of the written word (*PS* 150).

1.6 A misunderstood cliché: The true nature of the apocalypse

Kermode writes, "Apocalypse is a fashionable word" (114), and yet the term's popularity is commensurate with the way it is "carelessly and inconsistently employed" (Ketterer xi), because however widespread, even clichéd, its use as such is, the fact is that "Apocalypse is *not* merely a synonym for disaster or cataclysm or chaos" (Zamora 10). The word has its origins in the Greek form *apokalypsis*, which combines the verb *kalyptein* (to cover or conceal) with the prefix *apo* (meaning off, or away from) ("Apocalypse, n."). Essentially, then, it is a synonym of disclosure, unveiling and/or revelation, and as such, "the one feature common to all the apocalypses is that they purport to unveil to human beings secrets hitherto only known in heaven" (Cohn 163) and to reveal "a vision of ultimate destiny" (O'Leary 5), God's final plan for the future of mankind and the world. Therefore, the term's most popular recent usage covers only one aspect of its true implications, because even though "the Judeo-Christian revelation of the end of history includes—indeed, catalogues—disasters, it also envisions a millennial order which represents the potential antithesis to the undeniable abuses of human history" (Zamora 10). Far from being synonymous with the end of the world, then, apocalypse is a doctrine of hope which points to a new beginning with the conviction that "historical crisis will have the cleansing effect of radical renewal" (10).

In *Visions of the End* (1979), Bernard McGinn articulates three main aspects common to apocalyptic texts from various religious backgrounds: the first is "a sense of the unity and structure of history conceived as a divinely predetermined totality" (10); history, then, is interpreted as a linear structure with a beginning, an ending and, consequently, a purpose. Essentially, then, apocalypse is a means of transforming human history into a narrative. The second aspect is "pessimism about the present" (10), a sense of crisis, be it social, political, or natural, and impending disaster. The third and last is the "belief in the proximate judgment of evil and triumph of the good" (10). These two final factors constitute what David Ketterer calls "the dual nature of an apocalypse": the fact that "it is both destructive and creative" (221). In all apocalyptic narratives, crisis leads

to chaos and disaster, and the final judgment is preceded by a catalogue of violent destruction and severe dislocation, but "the fulfillment of the apocalyptic imagination demands that the destructive chaos give way finally to a new order" (14). In other words, there is no chaos without creation.

Why the term apocalypse has been twisted into its current colloquial understanding as simply chaos with no expectation of creation can probably be explained by the eschatological narrative of postmodernity, when as Ketterer explains, "the atomic bomb completed the process of secularization that apocalyptic thinking has undergone since medieval times" (94). No longer was it solely the faculty of God to bring an end to human history when the two superpowers had immense nuclear arsenals ready to destroy the whole world at the touch of a button. Aside from Cold War tensions, new discoveries in physics about the nature of the universe, entropy and chaos theory, as well as grave figures about the environmental consequences of human behavior, also favored a more skeptical vision which, throughout the second half of the twentieth century, transformed the general vision of apocalypse:

> The result is that a story which once was grounded in hope about the future has become instead a reflection of fears and disillusionment about the present, a bleak shift in emphasis from the belief in an ordered universe with a cogent history to one in which the overriding sense is of a chaotic, indifferent, and possibly meaningless universe. (Rosen xiv)[10]

In the Book of Revelation,[11] apocalyptic hope is symbolized by New Jerusalem, the "new heaven" and "new earth" (Rev 21:1) which will descend upon the earth after the events revealed to Saint John of Patmos, which include the opening of the Seven Seals, the battle of Armageddon, the Millennium and the Last Judgment, have been completed.

[10] This vision of an apocalypse of despair and cataclysm without a chance for redemption, which Elizabeth K. Rosen terms "neo-apocalyptic" (xv), actually has more in common with the biblical genre of the jeremiad, "a lamentation over the degeneracy of the world" (xv) than with traditional apocalypse's doctrine of hope.

[11] Christianity, of course, is not the only religion with apocalyptic concerns, and Revelation is not the only apocalyptic text in the Bible, which also includes the Jewish apocalypses of the Book of Daniel, *Jubilees* and *I Enoch* (Cohn 163). However, as the only full-length apocalypse accepted into the canon of the New Testament and the final book of the Bible, Revelation has become, in Northrop Frye's words "our grammar of apocalyptic imagery" (*Anatomy* 141), the text that defines and names the most popular images of the apocalypse and is most strongly inscribed in the collective unconscious of Western culture. As such, while understanding that Revelation is just one of many representations of apocalypse, it will be the text that I will reference as a canonical embodiment of the concept throughout.

New Jerusalem fulfills God's promise of a timeless realm of eternal happiness for his chosen people where "the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people . . . And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away" (21: 3–4). The proclamation from the Holy City's throne "Behold! I make all things new" (21: 5) completes the transformative process of the apocalypse and confirms that the end of the world is actually the beginning of a new one: "I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end" (21:6). This promise of a new, perfect world is the ultimate key to the apocalypse, and the reason why, dressed in all kinds of guises from religious to secular and from literal to metaphoric, any impulse that strives towards a transformative change that will result in a new, fairer, and happier conception of the world, is in essence an apocalyptic impulse.

Of course, an essential part of the enduring power of the apocalypse resides in its plasticity; its resistance to adapt to one single interpretation and the way it instead allows itself to sustain very different, sometimes even diametrically opposed, attitudes towards history. The apocalyptic myth, Stephen D. O'Leary writes, "functions in our culture as a well of metaphor, a subterranean spring of symbolic resources drawn upon by those who seek to define and construct their own historical epoch" (218), and it has become so "deeply embedded in our collective consciousness" (Rosen xxvi) that it is by no means an exclusively religious concern. Rosen adds that "[a]uthors who write apocalyptic texts may not be under a direct influence so much as reflecting a subterranean current of our communal lives" (xxvi), and that is why there is no inconsistency behind the identification of an apocalyptic intent behind the work of a self-proclaimed atheist (*PS* 291) like Kurt Vonnegut, because even if he perhaps would not have given it that name, the drive behind his literature, just like the urge behind the literature of any author who has struggles to make sense of his world and aims to transform it for the better through his writing, was a thrust towards a New Jerusalem.

1.7 A means to understand: Apocalypse as a sense-making narrative

Ever since the beginning of time, humanity has wondered about the purpose of its existence, and one of the purest manifestations of this instinct has been its continuous

attempts not only to trace its origin but also to imagine and predict the end of time. O'Leary explains that "[e]very culture that has developed a myth of its divine and cosmological origin has sought to peer ahead towards its own ending" (4), and argues that the concern behind these mythical tales has been a need to rationalize our existence. This seemingly innate apocalyptic instinct to signal an ending point in history which will turn it into a complete, meaningful narrative responds to what Zamora labels as "deep psychological needs" (11) engraved in the human mind: an irreprehensible need to know, to assign purposes, to understand why we are alive.

In his study *Cosmos, Chaos and the World to Come* (1993), Norman Cohn tracks the evolution of this apocalyptic myth of the end of history and the expectation of a new, purified Earth to follow. Cohn traces how early human civilizations such as Mesopotamians and Egyptians developed myths of a constant tension between cosmos and chaos that did not conceive of a final, immutable triumph of the later, but instead envisioned history as a constant cycle of shifting equilibrium (Cohn 56) akin to the myth of eternal renewal expressed in Plato's *Statesman* (O'Leary 5). It is in the teachings of Iranian prophet Zoroaster, who lived in an approximate period between 1500 BC and 1200 BC that Cohn identifies the first instance of the apocalyptic notion of "existence as the gradual realization of a divine plan" heading towards "a glorious consummation when all things would be perfect once and for all" (77). As the first known example of what would come to be denominated "millenarian" prophets, Zoroaster promised a "total transformation of existence" (95), and Zoroastrian theological writings are the first to make a distinction between "bounded time," in which humanity is living at present and which is characterized by a constant, often violent tension between good and evil—*asha* and *druj* in Avestan terms (82)—and "unlimited time" as the eternal existence that will follow *asha*'s final triumph over *druj*, upon which "cosmos will be rid forever of the forces of chaos" (83).

The Zoroastrian notion of apocalypse was integrated into the Judeo-Christian worldview, which, of course, also conceives of time as an irreversible progress from Genesis to Apocalypse, whereupon time will be suspended in an eternal "realm of bliss" (Cohn 218). As May explains, the key concept that both Judaism and Christianity added to previous notions of the apocalypse was the "belief that the end of the world will be preceded by a series of cosmic and historical calamities that will act as its announcement" (*Toward* 12–13) which, as I have explained, to this day remains the most ubiquitous

characteristic of apocalypse in the popular imaginary. Revelation narrates how, before cosmos can be made perfect, the forces of chaos are prone to rage as never before, reaching the point where "the magnitude of the disorder can be righted only by the destruction of the world" (Zamora 116). However, apocalypse ultimately "imagines the worst because it believes in something better" (May, *Toward* 192), and above all it is a sense-making paradigm which aims to rationalize crisis and chaos as a requisite for creation. Therefore, it encompasses three key aspects, characterized by Rosen as a "moral dimension" which clearly delineates good from evil, a tendency towards "social criticism" that reasons that the state of the world is imperfect and as such has to be reformed, and finally, an attempt at "reorientation in the midst of a bewildering historical moment" (xiii), reassuring the faithful in the promise of better times to come which will justify their suffering.

Apocalyptic faith, then, is always born out of a context of crisis and, as Adela Yarbro Collins explains, its task is to resolve "the tension between expectations and social reality" (154), the at times unbearable discrepancy between what is and what ought to be, in order to "overcome the incongruity between the order it envisions and the world's indifference to that order" (May, *Toward* 176). Yarbro Collins writes that "[t]he vision of a new world is compensation for the miserable circumstances of the present" (106), and as a consequence, the final aim of any apocalyptic prophet or writer is "to comfort people whose lives are, or who perceive their lives to be, overwhelmed by historical or social disruption" (Rosen xii) by assuring them that said disruption is part of God's plan, and that their suffering will be rewarded and finally understood as a meaningful step to attain a better existence. As a genre, then, apocalypse is "written by and for the discontented" (xii), those who are in dire need of hope to illuminate the future, but also to enlighten their acceptance of the past, and strengthen their resilience to face the present.

Apocalyptic texts are "political as well as religious" (Yarbro Collins 167), and therein precisely lies one of their many dangerously dualistic ambiguities, because any theodicy, defined by O'Leary as a "religiously based legitimation of and explanation for the phenomena of suffering, evil, and death" (qtd. in O'Leary 34) can operate in two opposite ways. On the one hand, the detached, timeless perspective of apocalypse offers a logical solution to the eternal theological dilemma of why God allows for the existence of suffering in the world by asserting, in John Hick's words, that "everything will receive a new meaning in the light of the end to which it leads" (364), and hence encouraging

those who suffer to endure. Yet, on the other hand, that same argument can be used, and has often been used, to justify injustice by redefining "any *apparent* evil or calamity as a positive good by situating it within the temporal frame of the mythic narrative" (O'Leary 42).

Still, perhaps there is no better an embodiment of the paradoxical nature of apocalyptic discourse as the way it "can be disconfirmed without being discredited" (Kermode 8); the "extraordinary resilience" that allows it to endure even though time discredits it over and over again when prophecies of the end of the world refuse to become a reality. The secret resides in the human concept of crisis, defined by Maier adapting Antonio Gramsci's words as the moment in which "the past is dying but the future is not yet born" (26), the passing of an old worldview motivating a sense of loss that blends with the fearful suspicion of what is to come. Throughout history, crises have been so recurrent that they have come to seem the natural state of mankind. This, explains Kermode, is because "crisis is a way of thinking about one's moment, and not inherent in the moment itself" (101), and "It is a peculiarity of the imagination that it is always at the end of an era" (96). Apocalypse survives subsequent unaccomplished forecasts of the coming millennium because crisis is "a central element in our endeavors towards making sense of our world" (94), and the notion that we are entering the final stages of historical degeneration is an uncontrollable human instinct. Every generation "considers its own time to be the culmination of human history and imagines its present is the future's blueprint" (Carter 96), and not solely in Western cultures, as Mircea Eliade argues that no theological system has yet been discovered which positions humanity closer to the origin in a progression from Eden to apocalypse, and instead all human societies seem intent understanding their historical context as the beginning of the end of a process of constant cosmic decline (*Eternal Return* 118).

Kermode concludes that it is improbable that a more severe crisis is a real difference between our time and that of our predecessors. "Perhaps," he writes, "if we have a terrible privilege it is merely that we are alive and are going to die, all at once or one at a time" (Kermode 95). Apocalypse's emphasis on the proximity of death, then, may ultimately be a way to affirm life. As the opening lines to Ihab Hassan's literary treatise *Radical Innocence* (1961) declare:

> It is the privilege of every age to consider its predicament unique, and it is its hope that the predicament may prove the most gravid history has known. Such illusions

> are not always idle; for they are the stuff of which men make the record of their speeding days, heightening their moment with some articulate show of pride, wonder, or despair. In the end, such illusions are but the human way of stating: "We are here!" (3)

That desire to stake a claim to life, to affirm our infinite creative potential as living, breathing human beings is the force behind literature *and* apocalypse. Both are, in essence, organizing principles "imposed on an overwhelming, seemingly disordered universe" (Rosen xi); and if novelists propose plots in an attempt to order our often bewildering experience and provide possible interpretations of history, "the biblical apocalyptist [sic] proposes nothing less than God's own plot for history" (xxi).

1.8 A tension of opposites: The paradoxical nature of apocalypse

Apocalypse, in Zamora's words, embodies "two parallel quests," and if the first one is the quest "for an understanding of history," no less important is its correlative search "for the means to narrate that understanding" (14), because if apocalyptic texts and ideologies respond to a context of perceived crisis and unrelenting tension, what the apocalyptist aims at is to overcome those feelings "in an act of literary imagination" (Yarbro Collins 141). Narratives are part of our nature, the main instrument whereby humans confront traumatic situations, because, as Naomi Klein writes, "As soon as we have a narrative that offers a perspective on the shocking events, we become reoriented, and the world begins to make sense again" (579–580). Walter Fisher goes as far as to propose a definition of human beings as "*homo narrans,* the storytelling animal" (xi), and it is undeniable that creating fictions, and telling stories, is the way we make sense of being alive. The novel, in particular, is according to Glenn Meeter "the Western art form which more than any other finds meaning in history" (202), and if apocalypse, as "God's plot for history" can be proposed as the definitive, "very model of narrative plot" (Rosen xxi) then it can be argued that "all literature is, in an imagistic, archetypal sense, apocalyptic" (Ketterer 11), aiming as it does to "explore the relationship of the individual, the community, and the novel itself to the process of history" (Zamora 4) within the complex "cosmic forces in whose cross-currents" (4) all three are caught.

If all literature is, in essence, apocalyptic, then it would only seem logical to claim that the apocalypse is, at heart, literature. Yarbro Collins writes that Revelation is "not only an artifact from a specific place and time, a historical document; it is also a literary creation" (21), and not only is it so because it obeys the impulse of trying to organize and understand history, but because it is "a work of great artistic beauty and power" (21). Revelation is literature in its richest sense, "a splendidly imaginative prose-poem, full of arresting imagery . . . alternating between dazzling light and terrifying darkness" (Cohn 3); a work of "arresting imagery and powerful poetry" (Zamora 1) which, throughout the centuries, has proved to be an enduring source of "fascination for artists" (1) and has "directly or indirectly engendered and enriched other texts" (2). Not solely literature but painting, music and cinema are among the arts which have continued to feed from Revelation's seemingly inexhaustible well of inspiration into the twenty-first century. The key to its staying power may reside not just in its appealing themes and motifs, but also in the text's subtle ambiguities and allegorical nature, which allows it to "have different effects depending on who is seeking to interpret it and on the circumstances within which it is interpreted" (Yarbro Collins 167).

The book of Revelation, then, is not only a literary text but also, in a sense, a very early example of postmodernist literature. Brian McHale establishes that postmodernist texts are "dominated by ontological issues" (xii) which aim to investigate the nature of the world, which is exactly what apocalypse does. Postmodernist literature is also self-conscious in its ironic questioning of itself as a text (McHale 231), and apocalyptic fictions, according to Zamora, "address the very nature of finality—historical and narrative—more explicitly and emphatically than most plotted narratives" (14). Through the paradoxical promise of an eternal existence beyond the end of the world, apocalypse results in a story that "mocks the notion of conclusive ends and endings even as it proposes just that—the conclusive narration of history's ends" (Rosen xxi). Apocalyptic narrators also echo the complex construction of time in postmodernist novels like Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five,* as for them the future is past. In the case of Revelation, St. John exists in two different temporal spheres at once: simultaneously witnessing the future events God is revealing to him and narrating them from his present exile at the Greek island of Patmos. Through his text, John attempts to make sense of the past and incite endurance in the present through unveiling the events of the future. Time in Revelation, then, is conceived of "not only as an external fact to which discourse must

adapt itself," but also as "an experience that is perceived through symbols, and hence is subject to discursive manipulation" (O'Leary 13), just as it is in the works of postmodernist writers.

Nicol highlights how one of the definitive aspects of postmodernist writing is "its contradictory nature" (139), and apocalypse is "a literature of suspended meaning" (Zamora 176), which proposes but does not provide final conclusions, aware as it is that there can be no single, definitive reading. Ketterer points to how "[a] dialectic, conflict, or tension of opposites is the stuff of literature" (8), and through its paradoxical nature and obscure complexity, Revelation "has insured that generations of commentators, exegetes, and would-be prophets would never lack speculative possibilities" (O'Leary 64), with "the flexibility of interpretation allowed by the form" of the apocalypse (Zamora 11) implying that the nature of the text "addresses the problem of interpretation itself" (14). The meaning—or, rather, meanings—of the apocalypse does not reside in the text itself, but it is rather created through a "social process" of "cooperative interaction between rhetor and audience" (O'Leary 195), asking, like all postmodernist texts do, for the reader to become "an active co-creator of meaning rather than a passive consumer" (Nicol xiv) and consequently fashioning a seemingly endless potential for meaning.

As important literature, Revelation aims at feedback as well as sublimation, and therein precisely lies the source of its mythical power: in the affirmative effect that the apocalyptic discourse has over its audience. By reading or listening to the words of an apocalypticist, the powerless and discontented to which they are addressed gain not only a feeling of understanding but also a sense of belonging, of identity and empowerment through community. O'Leary writes that the story of the apocalyptic tradition is "one of community building, in which human individuals and collectives constitute their identities through shared mythic narratives" (6). It is this solace at the certainty of not being alone in the world, but instead forming part of a larger community, united in its suffering but also in its willingness to endure, at once discontent with the state of the world and well aware of the cleansing change announced through the "shared secrets of the apocalyptic text" (Zamora 15), that allows the audience of the book of Revelation to "rise above the banality of evil" (15). Through the "creation of a new linguistic 'world'" (Yarbro Collins 165) of "effective symbols and artful plots" (160), the apocalypse turns feelings which are "probably latent, vague, complex, and ambiguous" into "explicit, conscious, and simple" (160). As such, the text itself *becomes* the apocalypse and enacts

its revelation through a catharsis in Aristotelian terms. Just like Greek tragedy, the function of Revelation is to arouse certain emotions—fear and pity in the case of tragedy, "fear and resentment" in the apocalypse (153) —and purge them through a purifying act that induces a new world of mind in the audience (152). Whether the end of time and New Jerusalem finally arrive or not, then, the apocalypse has already effected its most profound transformation in the community of believers.

Using Yarbro Collins' argument of apocalyptic catharsis as a starting point, O'Leary outlines his hypothesis that, if Revelation represents "the conclusion of human and cosmic history in a mythic drama" (68), it is probable that "an audience's view of historical time and human agency will be shaped by these 'frames of acceptance' that are found within the dramatic representation of history as myth" (68), i.e., tragedy and comedy. In this sense, tragedy and comedy are considered not simply as literary genres, but rather as "formulations of modes of thought, attitudes toward the world, ways of coming to terms with the meaning of its triumphs and vicissitudes" (O'Leary 69). Thus, the contrasting views of the world that they express can account for the large amalgam of often contradictory attitudes toward history that apocalypse as metaphor has sustained throughout the centuries:

> Tragedy conceives of evil in terms of guilt; its mechanism of redemption is victimage, its plot moves inexorably toward sacrifice and the "cult of the kill." Comedy conceives of evil not as guilt, but as error; its mechanism of redemption is recognition rather than victimage, and its plot moves not toward sacrifice but to the exposure of fallibility. The comic plot, . . . portrays destiny as Fortune, while the tragic plot conceives of destiny as Fate. When destiny is conceived as Fortune, time is open-ended, allowing for the possibility of change, while the tragic conception of Fate promotes a view of time and human action as closed and 'predetermined.' (68)

The tragic interpretation of apocalypse, then, clearly delineates a dualistic view of the world based on a manichean moral of good opposed to evil, and saved against damned, embodied in Revelation's recurring "metaphoric contraries of Christ and Antichrist, whore and bride, Babylon and the New Jerusalem, this world and the next" (Zamora 12). In this vision, evil can only be purged through blood expiation (O'Leary 84) and so Revelation is taken as a predictive text whose events will unfold literally to bring a violent end to the current state of affairs of the world according to God's plan. The tragic frame,

hence, "grounds the authority of its pronouncements in the text of Scripture," whose meaning is "fixed and determined by a single correct interpretation" (214). It favors theodicy as a means to understand any evil as a necessary step in the path towards salvation and, in consequence, operates as a "justification for human passivity in the face of history," accepting and even condoning "the abdication of personal responsibility for our fate" (Rosen xii). Through this prism, humanity is but a pawn of history, powerless in the face of events, and the most it can do is "break the divine code" (O'Leary 214) and prepare for the coming catastrophe by orienting itself "into proper alignment toward cosmic forces locked in a titanic struggle with a predetermined outcome" (88). So it goes.

The comic frame of acceptance, on the other hand, addresses evil by defining it "in terms of ignorance and foolishness (which can be overcome by exposure, education, and progress)" (84) and recognizes the wrongs that exist in all mankind, attempting to reform those who sin instead of "projecting absolute evil onto the tragic scapegoat" (74). Comic apocalypse accepts sin as part of human nature—as St. John the apostle wrote in his first epistle, "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8)—and advocates for every individual's potential for change, understanding "apocalyptic fulfillment as a product of human action rather than divine predestination" (O'Leary 84). The comic interpretation does not understand Revelation as a prescriptive text that reflects a decaying world inevitably heading towards cataclysm, because it acknowledges that crisis is our perpetual state of existence as human beings, intrinsic not in the moment itself but the way we conceptualize the world (Kermode 101). Catastrophe, hence, "is depicted as avoidable through human choice" (O'Leary 83), and the apocalyptic jeremiad is interpreted not as an anticipation of an imminent, immutable future but as an almost satirical impulse that imagines the chaos to come "*if* humanity refuses to turn back to the path of righteousness" (83). The end, then, becomes "contingent upon human choice," (84): it is humanity's task to shape its fortune and usher in the millennium, which is not a literal prediction but a spiritual allegory, an "exhortation to the saintly life" (75) and the *metanoia*, understood as "a turning toward God by turning to the neighbor" (May, *Toward* 23). As Vonnegut would phrase it, "God damn it, you've got to be kind" (*GBY* 129).

The comic interpretation of Revelation, then, is an anthropocentric doctrine that empowers man instead of God and understands the apocalypse not as an ending but as a fundamental change. The nature and extent of that change is the responsibility of each

individual; Scripture must act as a "source of inspiration" (O'Leary 214) that motivates a different inner process in each person because "the role of the interpreter in this mode is not to determine a single fixed meaning, but to read the multivalent meanings of the prophetic code in light of one's awareness of the unavoidable fallacies of interpretation" (214). With an undeniably postmodernist flair, "the comic awareness of human fallibility requires the denial of all claims to absolute knowledge" (214).

Whereas most critics have historically perceived apocalyptic narrative as tragic, the paradoxical, open-ended ambiguities of Revelation, no less than the passage of time, which, as I explained using Kermode's argument, undermines the predictive function of the text in favor of its aesthetic function as allegory (O'Leary 76), seem to give an equally strong weight to the comic frame of acceptance. The tension between both interpretations is clearly illustrated in the dualistic visions aroused by Christ's concept of the coming kingdom, his promised realm of "righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost" (Romans 14:17). "What did Jesus mean by the kingdom and its coming?" Cohn asks (194), explaining that multiple views "have been maintained, with much learning and firm conviction, by serious scholars" (195), most of which can be divided into the twin doctrines of premillennialism and postmillennialism. The former embodies the imperatives of the tragic frame of acceptance (O'Leary 19) by claiming that the current degeneration is a sign that the events of Revelation are prone to unfold soon. Premillennialism grounds its apocalyptic claims of the coming kingdom in events like the Jewish return to Palestine, which some thought "set the stage for the conclusion of the Israelite dispensation" (O'Leary 140), and the detonation of the atomic bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which seemed to enact Saint Peter's proclamation that "the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up" (2 Pet 3:10). Paul A. Carter writes that "[t]o hold an audience there have to be Good Guys and Bad Guys" (6), and the dualistic rhetoric of the Cold War, during which "the world audience froze into the passive role of spectators transfixed by a historical drama engendering 'pity and terror' on a scale that Aristotle could never have imagined" (O'Leary 141), motivated an upsurge of American

premillennialist thought embodied the rise of the New Christian Right culminating in Ronald Reagan's and, after the end of the Cold War, George W. Bush's presidencies.[12]

Postmillennialism, in contrast, is grounded on what O'Leary labels a comic interpretation of the kingdom of Christ "not as a personal and literal earthly kingship, but as the general awakening of society to the knowledge of the divine" (O'Leary 84). Popular in the United States during the First and Second Great Awakenings of the eighteenth century Enlightenment, postmillennial eschatology has been described as "a compromise between an apocalyptic and an evolutionary view of time" (O'Leary 84). Its main archetype may still reside in the fifth century writings of Saint Augustine, who argued that Revelation not be read as "the outer events of sacred history" but as "the inner events that may occur within the soul of every person," responding to the Second Coming of Christ's failure to occur by explaining that the kingdom of God is "interior and spiritual and hence potentially present" (Zamora 17). In *The City of God,* composed between 413 and 427, Augustine claims:

> This heaven and this earth shall cease, and a new world shall begin. But the old one shall not be utterly consumed; it shall only pass through a universal change . . . Then (as I said) shall the world's corruptible qualities be burnt away, and all those that held correspondence with our corruption shall be made fit for immortality, that the world, being so substantially renewed, may be fitly adapted unto the men whose substances are renewed also. (Book XX, chapter 14)

Adapting to the comic frame of acceptance, then, postmillennialism defends apocalypse not as a catastrophic ending but as a change of paradigm. As Lorna Jowett writes, in this sense, "the world ends when it is fundamentally changed: time continues but the world we know does not" (136) and thus, being potentially present in the soul of every person, this is a change that does not require death as in the tragic frame, but represents a salvation that can be attained in life.

Nevertheless, we are all certain to experience a very real end of the world sooner or later: our own death, because, as Zamora writes, "The death of the individual and the end of the world by definition coincide" (14). Humans perceive all the elements of

[12] The popularity of a Premillennialist interpretation of Christianity in the US during the second half of the twentieth century can also be explained through the popularity of C. I. Scofield's *Reference Bible*, which claimed that Scripture divides time into seven unequal ages, or "dispensations," and that humanity was living at the close of the sixth, about to enter the seventh and last—the Millennium (O'Leary 140).

existence through their own, individual awareness and so the only real end of the world has to be the end of said awareness, which comes with death, and thus, in this sense, all apocalypses are ultimately personal. Still, if death is "the one ontological boundary that we are all certain to experience, the only one we shall inevitably have to cross" (McHale 231), that means that the realization of the concept of apocalypse in its purest sense, as a mind-altering revelation, must, ineluctably, come *before* death. That is precisely the comic view that novelists like Vonnegut express in their postmodernist reformulation of the apocalypse, whereby "New Jerusalem is less a place than a new way of seeing: a new vision" (Rosen xxiii). In Vonnegut's literature, characters do not inherit a new world. On the contrary, they unveil a new understanding of life and their role in it, which allows them "to see the world *anew*" (xxiii). American postmodernist writers, with Vonnegut at the helm, oppose the tragic apocalyptic course of the United States during the Cold War by proposing a comic understanding of the apocalypse; an anthropocentric, postmillennial vision that appeals to foundational American values of metanoia and spiritual improvement. An allegorical salvation attainable not beyond death, but in life.

However, it is precisely the paradoxical conflict between both frames of acceptance that allows for the endurance of the apocalyptic myth. Zamora argues that the apocalypse is "a model of the conflictual nature of human history" as much as a narrative of "historical desire" (12) and therefore both elements, tragic determinism and comic allegory, must exist in unison to sustain the power of the apocalypse through a sort of dynamic tension whereby both extremes complement each other nourish the rich well of apocalyptic meaning. If either the tragic or the comic impulse is lacking, "when the vision is merely optimistic *or* pessimistic" (Zamora 12), apocalypse inevitably loses its mythic force, and nowhere is this contradictory nature best enacted than in American culture and history, where "the comic faith" in the country's "divinely ordained role has a tragic dualism as its natural corollary" (O'Leary 190). The comic vision may sustain the notion of America as a wellspring of endless possibilities, but it is inexorably linked to the tragic underside of its image as a "righteous empire" chosen to "embody God's will in the world" (189, and it is precisely the tension between these two conflicting impulses that has generated the paradoxical context of American culture even before Christopher Columbus first set sail towards the New World.

1.9 The sins of God's own country: The apocalyptic origins of the United States

If "the world ends when it is fundamentally changed" (Jowett 136), few changes in the history of mankind have proven as deserving of the adjective apocalyptic as the "discovery" of America in 1492. Zamora signals how, even before his first voyage, Christopher Columbus quoted passages of Revelation and the book of Isaiah "To convey to his royal patrons his conviction that his mission represented the fulfillment of apocalyptic prophecy" (7), and in a letter from 1500 the explorer himself would claim that "God made me the messenger of the New Heaven and the New Earth of which He spoke through St. John in the Apocalypsys [sic] . . . and He showed me to that location" (qtd. in Kadil 33). Thus, over two centuries before the foundation of the United States, Columbus "initiated what was to become a perennial imaginative association of America with the promise of apocalyptical renewal" (Zamora 7).

For the first English settlers who arrived in Virginia and Plymouth at the turn of the seventeenth century, America was "a new Eden, undefined, yet one whose parameters were known because delineated in myth" (Bigsby 2). That myth was the apocalyptic expectation of a new beginning for mankind, devoid of the burden of Europe's spiritual corruption and decaying values; a chance to make a righteous new start. As such, what in time would develop into the United States of America became a paradoxical symbol from its very inception: a space where "existence preceded essence and yet essence was in a curious way assumed" (2). Bigsby explains that "No one knew what America would become and yet everyone assumed they knew it for what it was" (2) through a set of apocalyptic expectations which meant that, in a sense, "It was the future and the past at the same moment" (2). The essence of America, the identity that would be inscribed into that "blank sheet" (2) which the country seemed to the settlers, would be "a creation of the collective imagination" (Cullen 6); an act of fictional creation in which every American throughout history would participate; a perpetual apocalypse that would be "re-created as a deliberate act of conscious choice" (6) whenever a new American arrived, either through birth or by landing on the country's vast shores. In *Democracy in America*[13] (1835–1849), Alexis de Tocqueville reinforces this view of America as a literary impulse of the collective mind, claiming that the United States is "an idealized nation which exists,

[13] "There can never be a better book than that one on the strengths and vulnerabilities inherent in our form of government," Kurt Vonnegut writes of de Toqueville's treatise (*AMWAC* 8).

as it were, only in men's imaginations" (193), a region "best left to the imagination of dreamers and abandoned to innovators to experiment with at will" (40).

The paradoxical collective fiction that would popularly come to be known as America existed in a perpetual state of tension between the two opposing poles of the apocalypse as ending and as new beginning: "I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end" (Rev 21:6). Ihab Hassan writes that "[t]he American dialect is a running debate between Utopia and Eden" (*Radical* 37), and for every proclamation of the country as a re-enactment of Genesis like John Locke's 1689 words, "In the beginning the whole world was America" (319) there exists a claim to the manifest destiny of Americans as the people chosen to fulfill the final prophecies of Revelation, as "the western pilgrims" who, in J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur's words, "will finish the great circle" (70). This conflicting identity would find a constant reflection in a country of seemingly infinite contrasts, perpetually defined by "an ominous sense of catastrophe and an invigorating promise of newness in life" (May, *Toward* 27). American culture is forever split between a strong collective ethos and an almost pathological craving for individual affirmation, held together by an intangible "Dream" that appears "a birthright far more meaningful and compelling than terms like 'democracy,' 'Constitution,' or even 'the United States'" and yet of which "no one feels compelled to fix the meanings" (Cullen 5).

Andrew Delbanco argues that "[t]he myth of America has always rested on a precarious foundation" (117). Still, "it is precisely its fragility," its indeterminable allegiance with a comic or a tragic acceptance of the apocalypse to complete the narrative initiated by the Pilgrim Fathers when they signed their determination to create "a civil Body Politick" (*Mayflower Compact*) aboard the Mayflower in 1620, which was later consolidated with the promise of "Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness" in the Declaration of Independence of 1776, that makes the US foundational narrative "something different . . . than just another version of nationalist pomp" (Delbanco 117). However, as much as giving it its mythical significance in the collective imaginary, this fragile duality has also laid the path to the many dark corners in the country's history. Thomas More may have been inspired by the discovery of America to write his 1516 work *Utopia,* but the paradoxical experience of the United States would attest to Michael William Doyle's contention that "Utopian projects all too often beget dystopian realities" (153).

O'Leary defends that, in spite of "the occasional popularity of tragic visions of catastrophe," it is the comic vision of apocalypse which "sustains our culture" (189) through the promise of a new age of happiness and harmony for the community of faithful who believe in the Dream of its infinite possibilities. The American experiment presented humanity with a second chance to overcome its past evils and exert its free will in a promised land "flowing with milk and honey" (Ex 33:3). It was a whole new continent which embodied, in James Truslow Adams' words, "that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man" (404) and, to said effect, offered all that reached it a sort of tabula rasa; an opportunity to leave the past behind and begin anew in the light of God.[14] Even American place names bear witness to this emphasis on apocalyptic renewal, as if in hope that locations such as New York or New Hampshire may "be new in the ideal sense of the *New* Jerusalem" (Ketterer 27), and an actual New Jerusalem does indeed exist in the state of Ohio. This faith in the endless possibilities afforded by a myth of perpetual rebirth is embodied in the complementary ideals of American innocence, whereby "any generation, native or foreign-born, began its task anew despite the secret betrayals of history" (Hassan, *Radical* 36), and the ever-elusive American Dream, which instilled in each of those generations the comic apocalyptic sense that the future is at their command because "in the United States anything is possible" (Cullen 5).

However, O'Leary warns, there is an unequivocally "tragic underside to the American vision of the comic Apocalypse" (189) of which de Tocqueville already cautioned in 1835 when he pointed to how the myth of America as a divinely ordained new world for God's chosen people had led its citizens to develop "an inordinate opinion of themselves," assuring that Americans "are not far from believing that they form a species apart from the rest of humanity" (440). Wade Clark Roof and Nathalie Caron ordain the tragic corollaries of the comic apocalypse in the United States into three main "national myths":

> The myth of innocence, implying that the nation is righteous, just, and superior in a world filled with demonic forces and shadowy figures seeking to destroy that which is good and right; the millennial myth of a Redeemer Nation, or the notion that the country was brought into being for the final fulfillment of God's work on

[14] In his 1987 novel *Bluebeard*, Kurt Vonnegut writes that "[n]owhere has the number *zero* been more of philosophical value than in the United States" (*BB* 72).

> earth, at home and abroad; and a primal myth, locating the nation's identity outside of ordinary time, that is, as a people suspended in the eternal present with unbounded possibilities and a glorious future. (127)

The origin of this tragic vision is already apparent in John Winthrop's 1630 "A Model of Christian Charity." Delivered before reaching the colony of Massachusetts, of which Winthrop would be the first governor, the sermon famously invokes the New World settlers as a "city upon a hill" on which all the eyes of the world are set (Winthrop). With his words, Winthrop lays the foundations of the doctrine of American exceptionalism, which claims that the United States is a beacon divinely anointed to guide the rest of the world "by its principles and its great example" (Levine and Papasotiriou 16), a divine calling that somehow exempts the country "from the historical processes the rest of the world must undergo" (Carter 149). The stretch from such a conception to the "literal demonization of one's opponents" (O'Leary 189) is a short one, and, especially at the height of the Cold War, the country's leaders would sometimes go one step beyond into a rhetoric that seemingly placed the United States not just as divinely aligned with the forces of good, but situated in a dangerous point *above* both good and evil. "The calendar can't measure America," President Ronald Reagan declared in his State of the Union address in 1987, "because we were meant to be an endless experiment in freedom, with no limit to our reaches, no boundaries to what we can do, no end point to our hopes" (qtd. in Roof and Caron 128).

The country's inevitable failure to live up to its apocalyptic ideals, combined with the illusion of national innocence, led to the recurring myth of the fall from grace; a tendency "to identify crisis as a descent from innocence to experience" (Gray 2) in a metaphor that clearly echoes Adam and Eve's expulsion from the Garden of Eden. It is a story "at least as old as the American nation," Gray argues, whereby "Innocence is shattered, paradise is lost, thanks to a bewildering moment, a descent into darkness" (3). The exact apocalyptic moment that demarcates that change, the trauma that motivates the end of innocence has been identified at numerous points throughout American history. Henry James argued that, with the Civil War, Americans had "eaten of the tree of knowledge" (*Hawthorne* 135), but still, as if continually restored to its original state of perpetual innocence through some supernatural force, numerous subsequent experiences have been labelled as the country's fall from grace over and over again, from Pearl Harbor to Hiroshima or John Fitzgerald Kennedy's assassination. The tension between decadence

and renewal has been another contradictory constant in the conflicting path of the United States, throughout which "obituaries for the American Dream date back to the mid-seventeenth century, when ministers regularly lamented in their jeremiads that the latter-day Puritans were not the men their fathers were" (Bigsby 40).

Still, the strongest contradiction at the heart of the American experience, the darkest enactment of the tragic undertow of the country's comic apocalyptic rhetoric, is the ironic realization that "It is humanity's fate to dream of heaven and create hell" (Zamora 9). From the genocide of the Native Americans to the scourge of slavery, segregation and racial prejudice, and the many open and undercover projects of military intervention in Asia, Latin America and Africa during and after the Cold War era, the dark side of the promised land has cast its terrifying shadow in what Loren Barritz calls the "sins of God's Country" (qtd. in Hassan, *Radical* 36). In a dangerous moral dualism that would prove perhaps the nation's deepest flaw, the dark ironies of American history seemed to go unchecked amidst the sedative illusion of national innocence. It was commonplace in the United States for a slave owner like Thomas Jefferson to be "also one of the world's greatest theoreticians on the subject of human liberty" (*BOC* 34); for a community which took pride in its deep communal bonds to hang nineteen of its members under charges of witchcraft, as infamously occurred in Salem in 1693; for a country that claimed to be a beacon of freedom to systematically deny a whole sector of its population their humanity based on the color of their skin.

In Thomas Pynchon's 1997 novel *Mason & Dixon*, the fictionalized counterpart of the historical Jeremiah Dixon laments "Christ Mason . . . Where does it end? . . . No matter where in it we go, shall we find all the World Tyrants and Slaves?" as he reasons that "America was the one place we should not have found them" (692–693). The truth, however, is that exactly that same apocalyptic thrust that manifested itself in the conception of America as the land of freedom and opportunity necessarily had to reveal its opposite face in a country of tyrants and slaves, because both are the two sides of a single coin. The same frontier that, according to Frederick Jackson Turner, gave America its "restless, nervous energy" (9), its continuous thrust towards a renewing future, inevitably became a line of demarcation between the binary oppositions of saved and damned, free and slave, North and South, too. It was the invisible but deeply felt "line between America and not-America, that which it will leave behind and that which it will exclude" (Cohen 41); an imaginary barrier which, in effect, signals "the delineation of a

New Eden; everything else is without, unsaved" (41). This demonic corollary of the utopian American character in its fundamentalist tendency to draw lines and scapegoat those which are thought to exist beyond the limits of a homogeneous American ideal of what is acceptable still resonates in the twenty-first century through the ongoing racism that motivated the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement or President Donald Trump's proclaimed intention to "build a wall" along the US-Mexican border to prevent people from entering the country illegally.

O'Leary says that "[t]he division of humanity into forces of light and darkness, historical embodiments of absolute and absolute evil that is so characteristic of the tragic apocalypse, perfectly mirrored the cold war ideology of the post-World War II years," (190). This was a period of "technological plenty amid mythological poverty" (May, *Toward* 206) in which the country embraced the most extreme ideological principles of capitalism "at the cost of diminishing certain individual choices and freedoms" (Simmons, *Anti-Hero* 44) which were supposed to form the essence of its national character. As such, it seemed to confirm the suspicion that "American society is, in fact, a projected utopia that now seems to have turned into a dystopia" (Ketterer 23), giving the country a role in international affairs for which it seemed not to be prepared, and validating the notion that "America has managed to pass from adolescence to decadence without ever reaching maturity" (Hassan, *Radical* 94). Numb by the imposing shadow and contradictory nature of technological changes which "are trumpeted as advances into a new age of progress even as they figure in our cultural nightmares of destruction" (O'Leary 216), individuals of the era "froze into the passive role of spectators transfixed by a historical drama engendering 'pity and terror' on a scale that Aristotle would never have imagined" (141).

The nuclear age of the opposing superpowers was marked by apocalyptic expectations from the beginning, being as it were, just like the Christian rhetorical epoch, "defined and constituted from its inception with reference to a point of ultimate ending that seemed perpetually imminent" (O'Leary 217). In the Cold War, however, there was no juxtaposition between images of destruction and salvation, as the millennial promise "of a kingdom of perfect justice and eternal life for believers" (217) that had made the perspective of imminent chaos bearable in the book of Revelation was discarded by the very real eschatological threat of nuclear annihilation, which seemed to eclipse all hopeful visions of the apocalypse as comical allegory and favor in its stead premillennial images

of merciless desolation. As the extinction of all forms of life on Earth at the touch of a button seemed increasingly plausible, the end of the world ceased to appear a moral fable to become a fearfully real possibility. Few lessons on the significance of human history could be extracted from such scenario, which seemed to invalidate the individual potential of ushering in the millennium as a new world of mind. Yarbro Collins suggests that "When an immediate objective or limited good is pursued without sufficient attention to the whole picture, the process can get out of control and become demonic" (173); the Cold War years are an example of such situation, in which people unwillingly "get caught up in collective processes with evil or destructive effects" (173). In such a tragic context, it would seem that the only means to assert the comic potential of the individual, the last refuge for an impotent humanity, lay in the power of art.

1.10 Writing the apocalypse: Apocalyptic literature in the United States

If America is essentially a collective fiction, "a work of art" (de Tocqueville 193), then it should be no surprise that American fiction has been, from its earliest examples, an apocalyptic force which has not only commented on the country's history and identity but contributed immensely to their creation, too. From Mark Twain to F. Scott Fitzgerald and beyond, American writers have chronicled the highs and lows of their culture, elaborating an impassioned commentary on the myth of America, "against which every author feels that he must assert his own identity" (Hassan, *Contemporary* 1). James Farrell says that "any radical movement, to be popular in the United States must draw upon the biblical language of rebirth, liberation, purification, and dignity" (259) and, as a radical force of change within its culture, American literature has always relied on Revelation as a bountiful wellspring of inspiration. Stanley Schatt writes that "American writers have always been fascinated by the idea of the Apocalypse" (67), a reflection of their culture's strong eschatological impulse that can be traced from Michael Wigglesworth 1662 poem "The Day of Doom," which became the first best seller in US history (May, *Toward* 27), through an endless stream of novels that, to this day, still recur to the literal end of the world as a "useful metaphor, used to offer didactic lessons about the importance of living a proper life" (Glover 197), from Fitzgerald's *This Side of Paradise* (1920) to Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle* (1963).

Still, the apocalyptic impulse of American writers is not limited to their recurrent scenarios of destruction, as literature has been a historically crucial apocalyptic force in the consolidation of the country's identity. Ketterer claims that "all apocalyptic writers might be said to inhabit an America of the mind" (332), an insightful thought considering how it was writers who originally gave form to that "kaleidoscope of shifting possibilities" (Bigsby 3) that was the blank canvas of the American spirit. The original "apocalyptic formulation of the New World concept" (Ketterer 35) that linked the American experience to a theological culmination of history was developed in the texts of the predominantly Puritan writers of the early colonial period, names like William Bradford, Jonathan Edwards, John Winthrop and Cotton Mather (35), and when "A distinctively literary strand of American apocalypse developed during the nineteenth century," its creators were not theologians but novelists like Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville and Edgar Allan Poe (May, *Toward* 32). Throughout the twentieth century, American writers continued to show an explicit awareness of their inherited "sense of the eschatological significance of their historical and national destiny" (Zamora 9) which manifested not only in their themes but also in their apocalyptic interrogation of the form of the novel itself, addressing "in their own narrative structures, the means by which to narrate history, a question as essential to apocalypses as the nature of history itself" (4). Alluding to a common critical denomination during the sixties, Fresán argues that the concept of the "new American novel" is redundant, because the idea of novelty, experiment and innovation lies at the heart of all American literature (Fresán 1); it is the essence of its creative force as an apocalyptic medium in a seeming echo of the God of Revelation's triumphant assertion "Behold! I am making all things new" (21: 5).

Zamora reasons out how "[t]he resurgence of apocalyptic modes of thought and expression is a predictable reaction to social disruption and temporal uncertainty" (11), thus explaining the understandable revival of apocalyptic literature during the Cold War, when American writers responded to the smothering political context in different ways. Some explored the personal dimension of apocalypse, modifying the classic motifs of the myth to make them refer "not to a common end but to personal death or to crisis" (Kermode 35) and resorting to the way apocalypse inevitably links individual and collective fate to "concern themselves with essential relations between the self and its surroundings, between autonomy and solidarity" (Zamora 190). Others reflected the climate of the age through a turn to what Elizabeth K. Rosen terms a "neo-apocalyptic"

literature that "assumes that all mankind is beyond renovation, that this degeneracy is so complete that the Ending can only be so, too," and no New Jerusalem awaits on the other side (Rosen xv). Still, even the gloomiest depictions of catastrophe seem to serve a didactic purpose, as Mathias Nilges explains that twentieth century artistic visions of destruction can be understood as "a popular way of working through or at least highlighting psychological contradictions produced by moments of severe crisis" (24).

As I have explained, however, the strongest impulse of apocalyptic literature is not only to oppose but also to overcome its political, social and spiritual context, and as such, the purest articulation of the myth in post-World War II American literature may be the development of "a new breed of apocalyptic response" (May, *Toward* 206) that May calls "humorous apocalypse" (*Toward* 173) whereby the writers "find the world so absurd that their apocalypse is laced with despair and laughter" (206). Although its precedents, surveyed in R.W.B. Lewis' essay "Days of Wrath and Laughter," date from the nineteenth century in the work of authors like Melville and Twain, who proposed the doctrine of laughter as the only enduring antidote to the absurdities of life in novels like *The Mysterious Stranger* (1916), in which Satan himself declares that "[a]gainst the assault of laughter nothing can stand" (248), the trend fully blossomed during the Cold War, when the viable threat of meaningless human extinction meant that, in Frank Kermode's words, "Apocalypse is a part of the modern absurd" (123). Using Albert Camus' concept of a tragic humanism in an absurd world as outlined in works such as *The Stranger* (1942) and *The Rebel* (1952) as "at least the subconsciously followed ideological guideline" (Hassan, *Radical* 386), writers like Joseph Heller, Thomas Pynchon and Kurt Vonnegut found in laughter a means to endure, "to ease the pain of adjustment to a better world or to accompany the acceptance of life's joke" (May, *Toward* 206).

In "The Great American Joke" (1976), Louis D. Rubin Jr. argues that "the essence of comedy is incongruity" (109) and that incongruity "lies at the heart of the American experience" of the mid-twentieth century; a society "based theoretically upon the equality of all men, yet made up of human beings very unequal in individual endowment" (4). Rubin explains that humor is a reaction to the "gap between the cultural idea and the everyday fact" (4) and works as a critical means to expose the hypocritical, hollow nature of the ideal. But again, true apocalyptic writers not only wish to expose injustice but also attempt to work it out, to transcend it, and for them, laughter is not just a defense mechanism but a humanizing value. Saul Bellow once said that comedy is "a more

energetic, wiser, and more human" force than complaint (Fresán 18), and the norm of judgment of this humorous apocalypse is precisely not divine but human law, "against which man is considered defective" (May, *Toward* 215). The hope in these writers' novels is based on psychological necessity rather than religious faith, "a wish that man will prevail, that somehow we can show our fellow man the minimal respect that is necessary to keep us from destroying each other" (217). Often mislabelled "black humor," its main difference with said movement's nihilistic despair, is that the absence of a vision of New Jerusalem does not imply a denial of its possibility, simply "an admission at most of the impossibility of imagining one" amid the confusing state of the world. Still, humorous apocalypse places its hope in future change, even if it is uncertain about the nature of that change: "Through an affirmation of some saving quality in man, humorous apocalypse does affirm the future; it simply refrains from imagining it concretely" (May, *Toward* 217).

May writes that "When the traditional apocalyptic symbols are transformed into a secular or worldly analogue, we are dealing with American literary innovations in apocalypse" (*Toward* 215), and no other American novelist of his time responded to the tragic apocalyptic rhetoric of the Cold War by proposing a return to a comic apocalyptic conception of the country and human existence like Kurt Vonnegut. Throughout a career that lasted over half a century, the writer sought to transform the contemporary cultural symbols of his era into an amalgam of apocalyptic themes and motifs, an impulse that translated into his constant experimental interrogation of the limits and possibilities of the novel, always with the clear didactic aim of motivating an apocalypse of the mind in his readers. In the words of David Ketterer: "Kurt Vonnegut, Jr, more than any of his contemporaries, has exploded the full scope of the apocalyptic imagination" (296). Vonnegut's apocalyptic impulse has often been misunderstood in the light of the more common and inaccurate notion of apocalypse as a synonym of disaster. As such, a novel like *Cat's Cradle,* which relates the literal end of human life on Earth, has been referred to as "one of the most apocalyptic of Vonnegut's works" (Vallina Samperio, "Wasteland" 106) when actually all of his works respond to an equally apocalyptic desire to create a better world in a comic sense, whether their plots explicitly deal with catastrophe on a worldwide scale or not. To this respect, Meeter argues that "[a]ll of his work could be said to form an apocalypse" (201), whereas Ketterer explains the many forms that the apocalypse takes in his novels arguing that "Vonnegut is the kind of writer who illustrates

particularly well the satiric, philosophical and visionary, utopian-to-dystopian range of the apocalyptic imagination" (332). Nevertheless, that is not to say that cataclysm of biblical proportions is not one of Vonnegut's major motifs because, as Rosen declares, "no contemporary American writer has done more to bring the end of the world to the attention of his readership" (45), a feeling echoed in Charles Berryman's question: "Is there another novelist more concerned with visions of destruction and mortality?" (99)

For Vonnegut, however, the end of the world is always a satirical comment on what may happen if America and humanity do not work to improve their ways. He is "more concerned with our response to existence than with the philosophical nature of that existence" (Davis, *Crusade* 10) and, as such, his endings are not so much gloomy predictions of an unavoidable future as didactic proposals for "possibilities of a new beginning" (Glover 197). Although it has led to repeated accusations of contradiction and ambiguity—Freese explains that "his seemingly self-contradictory world view is still understood as either that of an optimistic humanist or a pessimistic nihilist" ("Critical Reception" 5)—Vonnegut's hesitation to unveil a definitive solution is a rejection of the tragic apocalyptic rhetoric of his era. That is why he "rarely presents simple black-and-white situations" (Schatt 69), because, although "[h]e sees things all too clear" (Scholes, *Fabulation* 205) he understands his role not as a prophet but as a man, as fallible as any other, who can simply guide the reader on the path to comic apocalypse; just as in Revelation, the final meaning must be created through the reader's own interpretation, not the writer's imposition. As such, the apocalypse in Vonnegut's literature rests on strictly human terms, through the humanizing values of art, humor and community: "There is hope . . . only if man respects the limits for truly humane contributions to his fellow man" (May, "Vonnegut's Humor" 36).

Another insightful chronicler of Cold War American reality, John Updike, once wrote that "The end of the world is not an idea to Vonnegut, it is a reality he experienced" (*Hugging* 270). Through his struggles during the Great Depression, World War II and his own literary career, Vonnegut understood how changes on a large scale have profound effects on the lives of individuals, and as such his novels are equally concerned with personal apocalypses and with global cataclysm. His literature is "about confession, redemption, and rebirth" (Broer, "Duty Dance" 188), and it is devoted to the exploration of the various responses to frustration, crisis, change and death experienced not only by his characters but also by himself. These postmodernist experiments in personal

metafiction, whereby Vonnegut introduces himself as a main character in many of his novels in order to seek apocalyptic expiation through writing, are not only the source of some of his most original innovations, but also of the profound appeal which turned his literature into an apocalyptic refuge for readers who felt identified, understood, and inspired by Vonnegut's words.

David Ketterer proposes four observations to "shed some light on the potential of the word apocalyptic as a critical term":

> First, it is readily apparent that the word has both a negative and a positive charge: there is a necessary correlation between the destruction of the world and the establishment of the New Jerusalem. Secondly, the prophetic side of John's work is compromised to the extent that he is governed by a historical context. He writes as a reaction to the persecuting Roman Empire. Consequently, the visionary aspect of his work is radically undercut by an indirect satiric bitterness and possibly a sense of paranoia. Thirdly, because of the book's self-conscious use of echoes from other parts of the Bible, it functions as a kind of recapitulative coda, an often incoherent microcosm of everything preceding it – namely the more intellectually available biblical macrocosm. Or, alternatively, the promissory aspect of the Bible is set in a final, celestial context that presumably vindicates its meaning. Fourthly, the scope and grandeur of the Apocalypse necessitate a diminution of the human element. (7)

Kurt Vonnegut's novels perfectly fulfill these four criteria. Firstly, as I have explained, his is a fiction that embraces contradiction as a natural aspect of human nature and American culture instead of trying to solve it; a tension apparent in every aspect of his work. His refusal to propose clear answers and instead revel in the complex tragicomedy of postmodern reality—"It was all so sad. But it was all so beautiful, too," he writes in *The Sirens of Titan* (312)—is reflected in his formal experiments, which favor a pastiche of highbrow and lowbrow, tread the boundaries between genres, and blur the limits between fiction and nonfiction. His yearning for a more humane world exposes the opposite pull between the revelation of an apocalyptic future and a return to a purer past of primal innocence, with characters longing for the future unveiling of the secrets of "what people are for" (*PP* 320) while at the same time "constantly pursuing geneses" (Mustazza, *Forever* 1), and thus reflecting America's running dialectic debate between Eden and New Jerusalem. Also, Vonnegut's opposite claims on humanity's cosmic

insignificance and transcendent potential form the backbone of a personal philosophy that has been deemed "Misanthropic humanism" (Tally 114), equating a vision of "most people as fundamentally flawed, petty, avaricious, and prone to acts of almost incredible cruelty" (113) with an almost pathological humanism, whereby the author "marvels at man's folly, noting sadly or just curiously man's absurd perseverance" (113).

Secondly, Vonnegut's literature is deeply rooted in its socio-political context. It establishes a running commentary not just on the events of the Cold War era but also of the decline of American culture and values in a deep exploration of "what it means to be an American—recalling the country's great promises and its equally great failures" (Mustazza, *Forever* 2). To counteract the country's declining path towards a tragic understanding of apocalypse, as I have explained, Vonnegut proposes an adoption of the comic frame through a return to foundational values of community and an embrace of the humanizing value of laughter, always highlighting the often-ignored social dimension of the apocalypse "insofar as it insists that the marginal, the relatively poor and powerless, must assert themselves to achieve their full humanity and dignity" (Yarbro Collins 171). Thirdly, Vonnegut's books can all be seen "parts of a single tapestry" (Hume 177), independent pieces that, placed together, form a network of complex interconnections in which characters, places and events recur time and again. As such, each book works to further enrich the whole macrocosm of his literature and expand its self-referential nature, culminating with his final novel, *Timequake,* which fulfills Ketterer's third criterion of Revelation as a final "recapitulative coda" (7) to the Bible. Upon its release in 1997, the author himself would declare: "I don't see it as a freestanding novel, but as the last chapter in one long book" (qtd. in Sumner 312), and in a very significant sense, *Timequake* vindicates the meaning of Vonnegut's whole preceding oeuvre in a final recasting of many of his main themes, characters, and techniques.

Finally, as much as his novels promote a deeply humane philosophy, in a further contradictory aspect they also often diminish the human element to place our existence in the grand scope of the universe. Just as Revelation relativizes human suffering by placing it in the context of God's plan, presenting a "total view of history" that "hopefully affords sufficient distance from the crisis at hand to permit the believer to discover God's will for the present as well as the overall meaning of human existence" (May, *Toward* 13), Vonnegut recurrently plays with the boundaries of time in novels like *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Galápagos* in order to afford a comfortable distance from which to view

existence as a whole and examine humanity's often trivial role in the cosmic narrative. However, Vonnegut's novels not only play with temporal but also with spatial dislocation to achieve this humbling cosmic perspective which he hopes will attune humanity to its real potential and concerns. For him the world is "an exquisitely flexible concept" (Klinkowitz, *Disruptions* 45) and he benefits from the apocalyptic myth's mingling of "fantasy and reality" (Meeter 201) to present a revelation that often comes not from Heaven but from the heavens. If in the gospel of John, Jesus Christ claims that "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36), Vonnegut responds with a gospel from outer space. It is now that I turn to the writer's use of science fiction, a conflictive aspect of his writing which, nevertheless, entails the purest expression of his literature's apocalyptic impulse.

1.11 "The infantile excrescence of a stultifying mass culture": Science fiction[15]

Kurt Vonnegut was a science fiction writer. Over 70 years after the publication of his first short story, "Report on the Barnhouse Effect," this still seems a problematic statement, prone to raise unease among Vonnegut scholars and science fiction experts alike, but the fact is that "Vonnegut's fiction couldn't have existed without science fiction, and science fiction . . . wouldn't be the same without him" (Sanford "So Goes"). Not only were his early short stories clear examples of the genre, populated by scientists with superpowers ("Report on the Barnhouse Effect," 1950), tyrants governing futuristic dystopias ("Harrison Bergeron," 1961), and complex machines that develop human traits ("EPICAC," 1950), but science fiction was a "major device" (Nagy 46) in many of his classic novels, which featured frequent voyages to other planets, astonishing scientific discoveries, and even alien invasions. Vonnegut himself, in a 1950 letter to his friend Miller Harris, declared "I hope to build a reputation as a science fiction writer" (Wakefield, *Letters* 33), and, in the early years of his career he was certainly considered one; his stories appearing in publications like *Galaxy Science Fiction* and *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, as well as being anthologized in collections like Robert Heinlein's 1952 *Tomorrow, the Stars* and Harlan Ellison's 1972 *Again, Dangerous*

[15] The title of this epigraph is borrowed from Marc Bould's affirmation that "[f]or most of the eighty or so years since science fiction (SF) was identified and named as a distinct genre, it has typically been dismissed as the infantile excrescence of a stultifying mass culture, a literature doubly debased by its fantastic elements and mediocre prose" (1).

Visions. During his stint as an English teacher at Hopefield Riverview in the early sixties, he even used science fiction novels to teach literature in his classes (Shields 175). However, the truth remains that Kurt Vonnegut is "the most famous author to ever be ignored by the science fiction genre" (Sanford, "So Goes").

The origin of the controversy dates back to an essay entitled "Science Fiction" published in the *New York Times Book Review* in 1965. In it, Vonnegut explains how, after publishing his first novel, *Player Piano*, he "learned from the reviewers that [he] was a science fiction writer" (*WFG* 1). His crime, he explains, was to include technology in his books, as "[t]he feeling persists that no one can simultaneously be a respectable writer and understand how a refrigerator works" (1). Vonnegut complains of how "I have been a soreheaded occupant of a file drawer labeled 'science fiction' ever since, and I would like out, particularly since so many serious critics regularly mistake the drawer for a urinal" (1). For years, the label had plagued him like "a badge of inferiority" that critics understood as a synonym of "quickly written work and lurid packaging" (Sumner 37) and impeded the serious critical examination of novels like *The Sirens of Titan,* which was denied its status as "literary fiction" (Shields 161) because of its presentation as a science fiction paperback. For reputable critics, Vonnegut's novels were part of that "infantile excrescence of a stultifying mass culture" (Bould 1) called science fiction, "a literature doubly debased by its fantastic elements and mediocre prose" (1). As such, Frederik Pohl claims that Vonnegut's strategy to "deny that he was a science fiction writer, because he didn't want his books in the science fiction section of the bookstore," was "a very sensible decision" (qtd. in Shields 189).

The fact is, however, that Vonnegut's relationship with science fiction had been paradoxical from the beginning, and if literary critics had quickly dismissed his novels as barren adventure fantasies, science fiction fans had not fully embraced them either. Stanley Schatt explains how "*Player Piano* was ignored by most literary critics because it was science fiction; unfortunately for Vonnegut, many science fiction critics dismissed it as good satire but bad science fiction" (17), underscoring a situation that would repeat itself upon the publication of his second novel, *The Sirens of Titan*, which received a lukewarm reaction in specialized magazines. Reviewers, says Shields, "had a hard time recognizing what he was doing," as they failed to understand how Vonnegut was "broadening the genre of science fiction to think about topics in an unusual way" (161), and so his postmodernist use of the genre's motifs was largely unnoticed and left him in

a sort of critical oblivion where reputable publications ignored his work for being science fiction and genre fanzines felt "uneasy about him" (Hildebrand 129) and refused to consider him part of their club.

It should come as no surprise, then, that an author who always saw his career as "a perfectly straightforward business story" (Klinkowitz, "Why" 332), would struggle to liberate himself from such a paradoxical situation. After his 1965 *New York Times Book Review* essay, Vonnegut tried to distance himself from the label again in *Welcome to the Monkey House,* a 1968 collection of his early short stories. The collection included a short profile of the author written by Vonnegut himself in which he claimed that a young generation of readers had "embraced him as more that a science fiction writer" (Shields 232) a genre that, as he wrote in the book's preface, constituted "the very lowest grade of fiction" (*WTTMH* xiv). As his popularity as a cult figure turned into national prominence with the release of *Slaughterhouse-Five,* a curious phenomenon started to take place whereby critics seemed to echo Vonnegut's detached attitude towards science fiction, seemingly justifying his early ties with the genre as an already overcome juvenile infatuation while praising a novel whose main plot involves a man who travels through time and is abducted by a spaceship that takes him to another galaxy. In 1969 Tony Tanner wrote that Vonnegut was "not only the science fiction writer he first appeared to be (181), whereas Goldsmith claimed that "It is difficult to understand why Vonnegut was dismissed for so long with the disreputable title of science fiction writer" (6). This process of "critical purification" had twin consequences: the author managed to free himself from the stigmatizing tag of science fiction but, at the same time, it motivated a backlash whereby he became "an author openly resented within the science fiction community" (Luckhurst 116) which, to this day, still contemplates his mainstream success with suspicion, considering that it was premised on doing "everything possible to disassociate himself from science fiction as a genre" (116).[16]

Still, the truth remains that Vonnegut's success "decisively contributed to a recognition of science fiction as a serious form of literature" (Freese "Man" 238) and, even after his controversial denial of the genre, the author never ceased to embrace science fiction themes and motifs until the end of his career. In this sense, Norman

[16] Roger Luckhurst suggests another factor that may have irritated the science fiction community, intimating that the name of the protagonist of Vonnegut's third novel, *Mother Night,* the American Nazi Howard W. Campbell, Jr., could be an allusion to John W. Campbell, Jr., editor of *Astounding Science Fiction* since 1937 and one of the key figures of "hard" science fiction whose right-wing stance was well-known (116).

Spinrad notes how "[j]ust as Vonnegut had finished wiping the SF mud from his bootheels, Kilgore Trout began to haunt his work" (*Science Fiction* 178). Probably the author's most beloved character and a parody of the bankrupt science fiction writer Vonnegut himself once feared he might become (qtd. in Shields 158), Trout adds his insightful comments to many of Vonnegut's novels, and the summaries of his outlandish plots would become an instantly recognizable feature of the author's postmodernist style of fiction within fiction. In *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater,* the 1965 novel in which Trout makes his first appearance, the titular character and Trout fanatic Eliot Rosewater delivers a drunken speech at a science fiction convention where he claims:

> I love you sons of bitches. . . . You're all I read anymore. You're the only ones who'll talk about the *really* terrific changes going on, the only ones crazy enough to know that life is a space voyage, and not a short one, either, but one that'll last for billions of years. You're the only ones with guts enough to *really* care about the future, who *really* notice what machines do to us, what wars do to us, what cities do to us, what big, simple ideas do to us, what tremendous misunderstandings, mistakes, accidents and catastrophes do to us. You're the only ones zany enough to agonize over times and distances without limit, over mysteries that will never die, over the fact that we are right now determining whether the space voyage for the next billion years or so is going to be Heaven or Hell. (18)

These words seem to echo Vonnegut's own feelings about the genre, because even though his 1965 essay was taken as an affront to science fiction writers, critics and followers alike, it was indeed a heartfelt tribute as much as a deliberate attack. In it, the author praises the genre for its invaluable community-building and, recurring to his typically dark humor, defends the work of science fiction publishers as "brilliant and sensitive" (*WFG* 4), arguing that "[a]long with the worst writing in America, outside of the education journals, they publish some of the best" (4–5).

Vonnegut continued to defend the inclusion of themes and motifs from the fields of science and technology in literature until the end of his career, arguing that "novels that leave out technology misrepresent life as badly as Victorians misrepresented life by leaving out sex" (*AMWAC* 17). Kilgore Trout stories and regular trips to the planet Tralfamadore would remain staples of his books, and he would often playfully align himself with the genre he had once tried to break free from, such as when he praised

Arthur C. Clarke's *Childhood's End* (1953) as "one of the few masterpieces in the field of science fiction," jokingly adding that "[a]ll the others were written by me" (*PS* 158). Bradbury goes as far as to claim that science fiction is "the form opened by Kurt Vonnegut" (*Modern* 283) and yet, the author's categorization as a science fictionist remains a polemical issue. In 1973, Karen and Charles Wood raised a question that remains unsettled:

> In order to be considered one of America's foremost contemporary writers, must Vonnegut be rescued from the annals of science fictionist and placed firmly in the Jamesian, Joycean, or Faulknerian tradition of the fiction of experience? Or may he retain the aura of the novelist of idea, an aura which has made him what he is, and yet be considered one of America's best practicing writers? (134)

The search for an answer to this question requires a closer examination of what science fiction actually is and the prejudices and misunderstandings it has been subjected to throughout the years. Only then may the paradoxical contradictions beneath an assertion like Goldsmith's claim that Vonnegut should not be considered a science fiction writer because "from the very beginning he has been dealing with metaphysical, ethical, and epistemological questions in his work" (6) be exposed. Unbeknownst to many, metaphysical, ethical and epistemological questions are precisely some of science fiction's gravest concern as a genre that, in Ketterer's words, "gives uniquely direct expression to all the basic themes of the apocalyptic imagination" (x).

Writing about Theodore Sturgeon in 1999, Vonnegut explained that, back in the fifties, the science fiction writer and original inspiration for his character Kilgore Trout had been victim of a "hate crime then commonly practiced by the American literary establishment" (Sturgeon ix) The name of the crime was "genreism, or the dismissal of any writer who wrote science fiction" (Sanford "So Goes"), and its main justification was "the fallacious argument that the fantastic is always escapist" (Jowett 134). As a genre dealing with space travel and fanciful inventions, science fiction was not considered serious writing but merely a superficial pastime; a clear example of sublimation with no feedback, seeking amusement without achieving any depth. Science fiction is also, according to Moreno Serrano, the only genre to ever be judged with non-literary principles (21), as if its function was prophetical instead of poetical, resulting in a tendency to ridicule it when its predictions fail to become reality (18). Why, Moreno Serrano asks, isn't Homer's *Iliad* judged by the fact that in real life a goddess cannot

intervene in a battle, but Verne's *2,000 Leagues under the Sea* is dismissed as obsolete by the fact that submarines exist in the present? (21).

But what exactly *is* science fiction? The truth is that the genre's bad reputation is comparable to its elusive quality. Almost everybody has a mental image of what science fiction is; after all, in Thomas Disch's words, "There are fewer fields that have had so brief a history in proportion to the extent of their cultural impact" (qtd. in Luckhurst 10), but said images rarely seem to correspond with each other, which has lead Willis E. McNelly to claim that the genre has "as many definitions as literature itself" (89). Science fiction, Nickianne Moody says, "is whatever is sold as science fiction" (179), an ironic commentary that nevertheless conceals one of the genre's greatest peculiarities, defined by editor and critic David Hartwell as the fact that "one of the great unarticulated foundations of the science fiction field, perhaps the most basic at the deepest level of the field's collective unconscious, is that the wonderful, inchoate family of science fiction all know what science fiction is by intuition" (166). Perhaps the clearest outline of the genre's preoccupations remains Mary Shelley's description of her 1818 classic *Frankenstein; or, the Modern Prometheus,* considered by many as the first science fiction novel (Aldiss 78) as a book "concerned with the possible consequences and ethical implications of a hypothetical scientific development" (Milner 215). Taking Shelley's cue, Luckhurst characterizes the genre as "a popular literature that concerns the impact of Mechanism (to use the older term for technology) on cultural life and human subjectivity" (3), and he highlights the style's paradoxical nature explaining how, at the extremes, mechanism may be characterized as "an agent of progress and transcendence or an insidious weapon that cuts into and undermines the integrity of the human" (5).

In 1842, Scottish poet Thomas Carlyle could proudly exclaim "These are our poems" at the sight of a locomotive (Milner 224), but as history evolved, several voices started to show a growing skepticism regarding the lauded benefits of technology. In 1888, Edward Bellamy wrote that "while technology has advanced far beyond the wildest utopian dreams even of the last century, the essential quality of human life has hardly improved to the point that it could be called utopian" (qtd. in Ketterer 114); and by the time the Cold War rhetoric of mutual assured destruction became dominant and Albert Einstein warned in 1947 that "There is no defense in science against the weapons which can now destroy civilization" (qtd. in Krepon 58), it was apparent that the impact of Mechanism alluded to by Luckhurst was actually traumatic, violently disrupting the

"sense of community and subjectivity" (27). As a genre concerned with this evolving impact, Luckhurst argues that science fiction "will not conform to a particular literary typology or formalist definition: rather, it will be marked by sensitivity to the ways in which Mechanism is connected into different historical contexts" (7). This dependence of science fiction on its immediate context to create its rhetorical effect validates the pronouncement that "[hi]story and society are not an external yardstick to be applied to the literary work: on the contrary they constitute its very structure and texture" (Suvin, *Positions* 4). Evoking Eliot Rosewater's speech at the convention in Vonnegut's *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater,* novelist Robert Heinlein says that science fiction is the only literature that "has as its primary postulate that the world *does* change" (qtd. in Luckhurst 94) and as such, by outlining possible future scenarios, is actually concerned not with predicting what will happen but with condemning what is happening: "Oriented toward the future, it criticizes the present" (Hassan, *Contemporary* 85).

Thus, the recurring argument that science fiction is an evasive fantasy is completely invalidated. Quite the opposite, Moreno Serrano argues, as science fiction actually intends for the reader never to forget that what is being narrated has to do with the "crudest and deepest sphere of reality" (105). It is precisely the relationship between the context of the narration and the real-life context of the reader, and not any kind of narrative or thematic unity, that defines science fiction as a genre (88) and distinguishes it from fantastic literature. Signaling a landmark so influential for the genre that it is popularly referred to as "The Suvin Event" (Bould 18), in 1972 science fiction critic Darko Suvin proposed his concept of "novum" as science fiction's main formal device and the key to its rhetorical potential. The "novum" is a fictional novelty that does not exist in the author's present context but is nevertheless validated by cognitive logic (*Metamorphoses* 63). It is not a fantastical disruption of the empirical rules that inform reality, like the existence of dragons and elves in fantastic literature, but an imaginative reordering of metaphysical principles that is impossible in the present but could work on a hypothetical basis, such as a time machine or long-distance space travel.[17] The worlds created in science fiction literature, therefore, may be radically different from the reader's, yet they exhibit "the consistency and coherence of actuality" (Paik 2), which is why Suvin

[17]Mary Shelley already highlighted this difference between fantasy and science fiction when she compared *Frankenstein* to the popular Gothic romances of the era: "The events on which the interest of the story depends," she said, "is exempt from the disadvantages of a mere tale of spectres or enchantment" (13).

defines science fiction as the "literature of cognitive estrangement" (*Metamorphoses* 4) that aims, in Fredric Jameson's words "not to give us 'images' of the future but rather to defamiliarize and restructure our own experience of our own *present*" (*Archaeologies* 285–286). Through this defamiliarization, science fiction hopes to make readers consider their own world from a new perspective, pondering the differences, positive or negative, between the reality they inhabit and the one presented in the text.

One of the genre's earliest practitioners, H. G. Wells, already hinted at this almost didactic dimension of science fiction when he claimed: "We are going to write of wasted opportunities and latent beauties until a thousand new ways of living open to men and women" (*An Englishman* 156). However, in a field characterized by a great variety of subgenres and parallel phenomena (Moreno Serrano 89), this conception of science fiction as "an opportunity to think about your native planet from a fresh and beautifully detached viewpoint" (*SOT* 90), a quote by a character in Vonnegut's *The Sirens of Titan* which might as well serve as a pocket definition of the genre, has not always prevailed. Following World War I, a particular strand of science fiction started to flood the American market with magazines adorned by colorful covers and filled with stories of unreal scientific developments and interstellar adventures. Due to the "untreated woodpulp paper" in which they were printed, which was "cheaper to produce and was taxed at a lower rate than the bleached, quality papers" (Luckhurst 18), these magazines became commonly (and deridingly) referred to as "pulps" or "slicks," a distinction that "mapped onto class and automatically determined the cultural value of journal content" (19). Immensely popular among the American youth of the interwar years, publications like *Amazing Stories* and *Astounding Science Fiction* developed a strongly American, action-oriented style of science fiction which, to this day, remains the prevalent stereotypical image of the genre as militaristic space fantasy.

In his first editorial for *Amazing Stories* in 1926, Hugo Gernsback delineated the clearly elitist character of what he deemed "Scientifiction": "a branch of literature which requires more intelligence and even more aesthetic sense than is possessed by the sex-type reading public" (291). This literature concerned with "things vast, things cataclysmic, and things unfathomably strange" (63) obeyed the American frontier impulse that encouraged writers "to look to the future for their myths" in response to the country's "lack of a usable past" (Ketterer 23) acting out the imposition of human will on the vast, unexplored expanses of outer space. It was an ode to the "American

technological sublime," a celebration of the lone space explorer as a futuristic cowboy and "his engineering feat that masters recalcitrant Nature" (Luckhurst 51) as an almost apocalyptic calling.[18] Adding a component of melodrama to its interstellar frontier exploits, this branch of the genre would reach its height between 1938 and 1946, a period commonly referred to as the "Golden Age of Science Fiction" (Clute and Nicholls 258). During that time, Wilson Tucker coined the term "space opera" "to lambast the clichés of the interstellar pulp fictions," which were unanimously disapproved as childish, low-grade distractions with no literary quality whatsoever by the literary intelligentsia. Some commentators even them genre dangerous, such as Bernard Rosenberg, who in 1957 wrote that the artefacts of American popular culture, among them science fiction, threaten "not merely to cretinize our taste, but to brutalize our senses while paving the way to totalitarianism" (9). The development of science fiction cinema in the fifties also had deleterious effects, as Moreno Serrano suggests that the popularity of B-movies such as *It Came from Outer Space* (1953) or *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) was perhaps the greatest impediment for the social consideration of science fiction, linking it to laughable blockbusters about alien invasions with lackluster plots and special effects (97).

As British science fiction writer Michael Moorcock states, however, "[i]mportant writing . . . rarely gives the exact flavour of its period," whereas "[v]ery minor literature, on the other hand, is the Baedeker of the soul" (qtd. in Luckhurst 157). Parallel to the technical, "hard" science fiction advocated by Gernsback and which clearly leaned towards an "increasingly right-wing perspective" (Luckhurst 67), the genre also developed a "more 'literary' or 'soft'" branch. Through it, writers such as Isaac Asimov and Judith Merrill, collectively known as the Futurians, exposed "a broadly left-liberal view" (67) which broadened the scope of the genre, whose aim, according to Judith Merrill should be "to explore, to discover, to learn by means of projection, extrapolation, analogue, . . . something about the nature of the universe of man, of reality" (60). Asimov proposed a timeline of the evolution of American science fiction, describing the three stages of its development as "Adventure dominant," "Technology dominant" and, finally, "Sociology dominant" (*WFG* 87). This final stage, more concerned with matters of the human mind than with technologically sublime adventures in space, would be epitomized in the work of authors like Philip K. Dick, Ursula K. Le Guin, and Kurt Vonnegut, who

[18] In his 1930 novel *First and Last Men*, Olaf Stapledon illustrates this view with the claim that "God has appointed the American people to mechanize the universe" (72).

used science fiction to develop a profound socio-political commentary on post-World War II American reality, utilizing its motifs to address considerations of politics, gender, or race. Robert Scholes writes that "If we consider literature as a way of looking at the world, for every age certain modes serve better than others to bring things into focus, to align the ideals of the age with actuality" (*Fabulation* 143) and, amidst the postmodern climate of the atomic era, science fiction suddenly found "much to give it new authority" (Hassan, *Contemporary* 85). By the back half of the twentieth century, modern technology had turned some of the wildest dreams and most terrifying nightmares of science fiction into reality, and this combined with the oppressive climate of McCarthyist America seemed to coalesce into a perfect context for the genre to fulfil Ray Bradbury's ideal of it as "the only form of literature in which philosophy, sociology, psychology, and history can be 'played with' without ruining the work as literature; it creates 'outsize images' of the problems that face society" (Clareson xi).

In his *Poetics,* Aristotle claims that "it is not the function of the poet to relate what has happened, but what may happen" (17), a dictum seemingly echoed in modern terms by science fiction author Robert A. Heinlein's metaphorical warning to writers: "We cannot drive safely by looking in the rear-view mirror; it is more urgent to watch the road ahead" ("Science Fiction" 41). While literary critics dismissed the whole genre based on stereotypes of Golden Age fantasies of cowboys and Indians in outer space, science fiction writers of the early Cold War discovered the political and sociological potential of a medium that, through its estrangement of space and time, was afforded a freedom to comment on the events of the present, and hold up a mirror of satiric exposure "(Nagy 48). Their stories were "not about aliens or other planets and not about the future" (Jowett 133) but, in essence, constructed what Fredric Jameson labels "a symbolic meditation on history itself" ("Change" 275). In an era of anti-communist paranoia, atomic threat and repressive conformism, the supposedly escapist fantasies of science fiction became the only medium to oppose the destructive course of society. With freedom of speech under threat, science fiction became, in the words of Frederik Pohl, a "political cryptogram;" a means to "say things in hint and metaphor that the writer dares not say in the clear" ("Politics" 10). During "that miserable decade we look back on as the era of McCarthyism," Pohl declares, "about the only people speaking up openly to tell it like it was were Edward R. Murrow, one or two senators, and just about every science fiction writer alive" ("New Mythology" 86). In a sense, then, the genre benefited from its

ostracism to become a critical instrument that authors who were more respectable and therefore thoroughly scrutinized could not afford to use. Masqueraded as a tale of an atomic scientist who develops superhuman mind powers, a story like Vonnegut's "Report on the Barnhouse Effect" could actually fire a shot "across the bows of what Eisenhower would later call 'the military industrial complex'" (Morace 151) from a national print run magazine like *Collier's* without raising any suspicion while more respectable authors were being blacklisted and even forced to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee for their political allegiances and the connotations of their work.

In 1954, writer and editor Malcolm Cowley complained that while World War I had produced fiction of great complexity and experimentation, World War had solely produced "conventional realism" (Bradbury, *Modern* 161). If Cowley had dared to look at science fiction, he would have found a genre that not only singles out the status quo as "the villain" (Bloch 104) but also offered writers "the radical potential for thinking differently about the world" (Bould 2). In his 1891 essay "The Rediscovery of the Unique," H. G. Wells had written that "Science is a match that man has just got alight" while "around him . . . darkness still" (111); now, science fiction writers found in their medium an experimental vehicle to explore that darkness. Philip K. Dick, who defined himself as "a fictionalizing philosopher, not a novelist" (*In Pursuit* 161), argued in a 1955 essay entitled "Pessimism in Science Fiction" that authors of the genre should fully examine topics like war and cultural retrogression to reflect the "world-wide loss of faith in science and progress" (*Shifting* 54) of the era, because to avoid them would be "unrealistic and downright irresponsible" (56). This sense of socio-political purpose would continue into the sixties, with authors like J. G. Ballard claiming that "it's *inner* space, not outer, that needs to be explored" (*User's Guide* 188) because "The only truly alien planet is Earth" (197). Science fiction, says Ballard, is the only literature "capable of recording the transformation of human subjectivity by the technological revolution" that followed World War II. All other genres, he asserts, "are doomed to irrelevance" (*User's Guide* 99).

It was in the sixties that critics finally started to recognize that science fiction was a viable area for literary study, "a critical, historically engaged mode of cultural production" (Jorgensen 196) that not only explored deep philosophical and sociological concerns but also phrased them through innovative literary experiments, finally acknowledging that "a novel such as *The Martian Chronicles* can open up to intense

critical scrutiny just as *Moby Dick* can" (Ketterer x). In his 1964 study "The New Mutants," Leslie Fiedler identified science fiction as the area where "radical transformations" in culture were being recorded (*Collected* 381), a genre that perfectly fit his later description of postmodernist art as a phenomenon that closes the gap "between elite and mass culture" (468). Assuming a wide perspective, Robert Scholes explains that "From its beginnings prose fiction has emerged from the despised world of popular culture to challenge established literary forms" (*Fabulation* 218), and argues that the modern novel had arisen in precisely that same manner and that the fact that new, supposedly lowbrow forms were continuing to transfigure the shape of literature was a "heartening sign" (218). It is no wonder, then, that experimental writers like William Burroughs, Thomas Pynchon and Kurt Vonnegut embraced science fiction as "a means to strain against the bonds of traditional narrative" (Shields 162) recognizing it as "the ontological genre *par excellence*" (McHale 16). In his influential study *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987), Brian McHale explains that ontological concerns are the distinguishing feature of postmodernist writing, as opposed to modernism's emphasis on epistemological issues:

> An ontology . . . is a "theoretical description of a universe" . . . not of *the* universe; that is, it may describe *any* universe, potentially a *plurality* of universes. In other words, to 'do' ontology in this perspective is not necessarily to seek some grounding for *our* universe; it might just as appropriately involve describing *other* universes, including 'possible' or even 'impossible' universes – not least of all the other universe, or heterocosm, of fiction. (McHale 27)

Through its exploration of possible universes, therefore, science fiction can be viewed as "postmodernism's noncanonized or 'low art' double" (McHale 59). As I have explained, the revelation of a new world, be it mental or physical, is the purest essence of an apocalypse, as David Ketterer concedes that the apocalyptic imagination can be defined in terms of "its philosophical preoccupation with that moment of juxtaposition and consequent transformation or transfiguration when an old world of mind discovers a believable new world of mind" (13). Subsequently, I posit that, with its "novum"-based explorations of alternative human realities, science fiction becomes not only the epitome of postmodernist but of apocalyptic literature, too.

1.12 The gospel from outer space: Kurt Vonnegut's apocalyptic use of science fiction

In 1979, John J. Collins issued the following definition for apocalypse through the Society of Biblical Literature Genres Project:

> A genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an other-wordly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another supernatural world. (Collins 9)

With its references to other-wordly revelations of a temporal and spatial nature, the definition could perfectly be mistaken for a description of science fiction itself. David Ketterer assures that "science fiction gives uniquely direct expression to all the basic themes of the apocalyptic imagination" (x), and the fact is that there is an impressive correlation between both; from the similarities between the stereotypical plot of science fiction and that of the Book of Revelation (124) to the distorted prevalent notions about both genres: "Just as the popular imagination understands the apocalypse as a vision of the world in flames, so the same popular imagination senses that science fiction is primarily concerned with tales of world disaster and atomic destruction," Ketterer explains (124).

Jacques Derrida explains that "An invention always presupposes some illegality, the breaking of an implicit contract; it inserts disorder into the peaceful ordering of things, it disregards the properties" ("Psyché" 312). Any kind of technological advancement irremediably depends on an original context, a series of principles valid during its process of creation which it then proceeds to violate with its insertion into that context. The world in which this new invention exists is different from the one prior to its appearance, and as such all technologies can be seen as apocalyptic, because through their very existence they validate themselves "as part of a new narrative system" (Pinsky 60). A genre like science fiction, which Luckhurst defines as a popular style of literature concerned with the impact of technology on "cultural life and human subjectivity" (3), is thus apocalyptic by its own nature, as its main concern is with the creation of new worlds through literary inventions based around technological "novums." Peter Paik argues that one of the most important aspects of science fiction is that it not only presents the reader with the result of these apocalyptic changes, but "through its roots in the practice of philosophical

speculation" (2), it exposes the process whereby "familiar realities are destabilized and transformed" (2). Just like Revelation operated on a political dimension by underscoring injustice and encouraging the oppressed to believe in an alternative order, Paik proposes that "By compelling us to imagine a different order, science fiction cultivates in us the capacity to conceive of our contemporary situation in a dynamic manner" (2). This critical stimulus makes it "the literary genre that perhaps most actively fosters a sense of historical . . . consciousness in the present" (2) in a very similar way to the already discussed impulse of the apocalypse to find a meaning in history that will encourage endurance in the present.

Ketterer explains that the final purpose of science fiction is to create a "philosophical apocalypse" (20) in the reader; to reveal the existence of a possible, allegorical New Jerusalem through a credible "process of extrapolation and analogy" (16). He claims that "What all science fiction aims at is destroying all assumptions and suggesting a new, and often visionary, reality" (18) the notion of which will abruptly expand the horizons of human reality, "temporal, spatial, scientific, and ultimately philosophic" (16) with the effect of creating a new world of mind, "an apocalyptic transformation" (16) in the reader. This notion of science fiction as vehicle for a philosophical apocalypse—a comic transformation following O'Leary's nomenclature—coincides with Brian Aldiss' description of the genre as "The search for a definition of mankind and his status in the universe which will stand in our advanced but confused state of knowledge" (4). One of the most common motifs to enact this revelation in science fiction is, of course, contact with an extra-terrestrial civilization, as is the case in Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five.* Robert Plank argues that alien contact would be a "fifth mental revolution" (39) for humanity, which would culminate a revelation about humanity's diminished importance in the universal order previously advanced by the theoretical discoveries of Copernicus, Darwin, Marx, and Freud (40–42). Ketterer insists on the apocalyptic potential of the discovery of extra-terrestrial life asserting that "To truly discover an *alien* planet would be to fulfil the Apocalypse of John the Divine" (189). However, many science fiction authors have insisted that humanity should look for that revelation within its own nature, in inner as opposed to outer space, a notion best encompassed by Vonnegut's *The Sirens of Titan.*

Science fiction is also related to apocalyptic literature in its treatment of time. The "total view of history" (May, *Toward* 13) shared by both is an attempt to divert the focus

from the context of the present and achieve a cosmic perspective that causes "the individual human being to shrink from view," making earthly problems "utterly inconsequential" (Ketterer 300–301). Just like Plank's theory of the humbling consequences of alien contact, the broad narrative scope of a novel like Vonnegut's *Galápagos,* which extends over millions of years, attempts to place humanity within the context of cosmic time, not to diminish its importance, but to encourage a mental revelation in line with J. B. S. Haldane's prophecy that "Man's little world will end," but "If humanity can enlarge the scope of its will as it has enlarged the reach of its intellect, it will escape that end" (326). Echoing Zamora's notion that "the means by which to narrate history" is "a question as essential to apocalypse as the nature of history itself" (4), science fiction writers have often recurred to complex experiments with the concept of narrative time, deforming it at will and speculating with the real nature of time as a physical phenomenon, as is the case of the Tralfamadorian view of time in Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five.* This, according to McHale, has proven to be the genre's greatest influence on postmodernist writing, which sought to "adapt science fiction's motifs of temporal displacement rather than its spatial displacements" (66). But science fiction's temporal displacements also have an analogue in the apocalypse's "prophetic, visionary . . . invocations of utopia" (Hassan, *Contemporary* 85). Cohn explains that "an apocalypticist commonly received his revelations in visual form, whether as dreams or as ecstatic visions," and "sometimes he even felt himself transported to some distant region of the earth or of the heavens" (16), where he was shown images of Heaven and Hell analogous to speculative projections of utopia and dystopia in a process that closely resembles Vonnegut's science fictional apocalyptists Billy Pilgrim and Malachi Constant.

Fantasies of uninhibited space flight in science fiction award humanity with a "pragmatic equivalent of immortality," an apocalyptic "means of surmounting death" (Ketterer 149). Ketterer claims that "When the new heavens and the new earth opened up by man's cosmic voyaging coalesce to form a celestial city, then the 'new heaven' and the 'new earth' of the Apocalypse will have been objectively realized" (149), presenting space as the final frontier left to be tamed by humanity in a sense that clearly resembles the American notion of the frontier as an apocalyptic source of constant renewal. Moreover, the link between science fiction and American apocalyptic rhetoric goes much further, as Ketterer writes that "The discovery of America did in fact what the best science fiction stories attempt to do in imagination" (26), providing "a radical reorientation of

man's perceptions and his understanding" which, in a way that recalls Derrida's concept of inventions as apocalyptic creations, "placed man in a new context, with the result that a previously accepted, stable reality was cast abruptly into question" (26). The contradictory nature of America, that nation of "manifold contrasts" which "began as a 'contractual' society without a 'prehistory'" and is perpetually trapped in "the antithesis between Eden and Utopia based on an unresolved view of man's place in the world" (Hassan, *Radical* 39) is expressed in the very term "science fiction," which, linking two apparently incompatible terms, seems to reflect American culture's "sharp juxtaposition . . . of pragmatism and materialism with the transcendental and speculative" (Ketterer 21). There is no more appropriate vehicle to capture the apocalyptic impulse of "a society born out of its own imaginings" whose "natural tense is the future perfect" (Bigsby 1); a country where history "seems to be consumed before it is made," where "the modern age belongs already to the past, the contemporary period yields to the immediate present, and the present . . . fades in pursuit of an uncreated future" (Hassan, *Radical* 61) than science fiction. And perhaps no author epitomized the American apocalyptic spirit in science fiction better than Kurt Vonnegut.

In his novels, Vonnegut "seeks to characterize reality as science fiction and science fiction as reality" (Ketterer 206) as a reflection of his own times, a postmodern age after Auschwitz and Hiroshima where technology seemed to surpass humanity on a daily basis. "There was no avoiding it," the author himself said in reference to his use of the genre in his first novel, *Player Piano,* inspired by his tenure as a public relations man in General Electric in the late forties, "since the General Electric Company *was* science fiction" (*WFG* 263). In science fiction, Vonnegut finds a vehicle to question not only "the nature of reality as it is commonly perceived" (H. Klein, "Genre") amidst a new era characterized by a growing sense dislocation and unreality, but also "the conventions by which it has been described in literature" ("Genre"). His science fictional experiments with space and time are a craft suited to an age in which the line between fact and fiction seems ever blurrier, a phenomenon reflected in Vonnegut's "structural discontinuities (which are really a new continuity) and radical juxtapositions of space fantasy and homely everyday existence" which combine to constitute a sort of "social surrealism" (Ritter 43) far more appropriate to report the Cold War age than straight realism could ever be. Not only do motifs like space ships and time travel "represent the latter half of the twentieth century far better than would the riverboat journeys of Twain, the small town life of

Sherwood Anderson, or the physical encounters with death of Ernest Hemingway" (Goldsmith 6), but in the hands of Vonnegut they are shaped into a style that echoes the fragmentary experience of life in an age of modern communications, creating a fiction that is "a clever formal approximation of, or at least shares many elements of the experience of, watching television" (Bellamy, "President" 85–86).

Through his techniques, Vonnegut effects a postmodernist twist on science fiction, "broadening the genre . . . to think about topics in an unusual way" (Shields 161), and, by introducing science fictional tropes into novels deeply rooted in their sociopolitical context, he integrates "two modes of literature in order to ask anew the questions which form the lifeblood of literary art" (Wood and Wood 155). These questions are the great, timeless philosophical concerns about the meaning of life and history and the purpose of human existence, which Vonnegut channels with a scientist's impulse to interrogate the physical nature of the world and the way humans perceive it. He was, after all, a student of chemistry and anthropology, and as such, unlike most science fiction writers, whose deployment of physical properties and scientific laws is usually focused on creating "spectacular effects," Vonnegut approaches the same topics as "very much a metaphysician" (Nadeau 122), utilizing his fiction to examine matters like relativity and quantum theories and their effect on humanity's daily life. Because of this, perhaps more than any other writer's, his style merits the distinction of *science* fiction, a fact that Vonnegut always thought hindered his critical recognition, as he often explained how "Critics who have come up through English departments don't like science mixed with novels" (Wakefield, *Letters* 309). Still, it also meant that his novels had a dimension that extended beyond the literary, as famed paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould must have realized when he assigned Vonnegut's 1985 novel *Galápagos* to students in his science courses at Harvard University (Sumner 259).

Throughout his books, Vonnegut often sounds "more like a social scientist than a novelist" (Olderman 192), benefiting from the broad, apocalyptic perspective of science fiction to study humanity like a biologist would observe the behavior of a particular animal species. "When I write," he once said, "I don't want to write a story about a man, a love affair, or a trial" (qtd. in Shields 162); on the contrary, his aim was "to write about the whole damned planet, the whole society," in an attempt to "discuss our whole planet in human terms" (162). As such, Martin Amis argues that Vonnegut's "most crucial imaginative habit is to gaze down at humanity as if from another world" ("After the

Slaughterhouse"), a technique that he developed in novels like *Breakfast of Champions* to defamiliarize American history by retelling it through the deadpan vision of an extraterrestrial with the ingenuous innocence of a young child. This way, the author adapts science fictional methods to his strongly sociopolitical works and is able to "challenge the ideologies and founding myths of US society through rewriting US history from a future perspective" (Jowett 138). Through what McHale terms the "rhetoric of contrastive banality" (76), a Kafka-indebted method whereby characters fail to be amazed at happenings that seem paranormal to the reader, Vonnegut can present interstellar travel and American slavery in the same context, forcing the reader to consider how, although both seem equally irrational occurrences, the latter was actually a hideously real circumstance for centuries, and one whose consequences extend well into the present. Jerome Klinkowitz writes that "The recording of a personal and historical horror in the world of fact calls for an act of style and fantasy" (*Kurt Vonnegut* 63), and as such "Vonnegut does differentiate or privilege the factual over the fictional, or even the fantastical," choosing instead to use them all evenly as "building blocks for constructing his narrative" (Abele 83).

However, as much as science fiction affords Vonnegut a means for detached estrangement, he never allows his novels to become impersonal scientific reports. "Science fiction's long perspective affords distance," writes Jowett, "but Vonnegut's voice creates intimacy" (143), and if he uses science fiction as a means to face the horror of human history and his own personal pain, his aim is never to minimize such horror and pain but to transform them into something positive. John Updike argues that the transpositions of science fiction allow Vonnegut to "instead of turning pain aside, to vaporize it, to scatter it on the planes of the cosmic and the comic" (*Hugging* 271), in other words, to channel negative energy into a constructive force of comic apocalyptic creation. Of course, his main strategy to achieve this transmutation is his "untraditional" use of humor in science fiction, whereby he "seizes on the comic possibilities of the otherworldly settings and bizarre events" typical of the genre (Reed xvii) to alleviate the pain of reality. Vonnegut himself equated his use of science fiction with Shakespeare's comic interludes, declaring that "Trips to other planets, science fiction of an obviously kidding sort, is equivalent to bringing on the clowns every so often to lighten things up" (*WFG* 263). He was, after all "a passionately honest heart and mind working over the bewildering facts of contemporary experience" (Olderman 192) and as such his science

fictional projections always maintain an intrinsically humanistic impulse. Not in vain did he equate science fiction with porn, arguing that both constitute "fantasies of an impossibly hospitable world" (*GBY* 21). Moreno Serrano says that the best science fiction must present a tendency towards reflection without neglecting popular appeal (15) and Vonnegut never forgot that his commitment was towards the creation of a greater good for the people. He trusted Hassan's dictum that "At its best," science fiction "can enlarge the realm of human possibilities" (*Contemporary* 87), and it was with that goal in mind that he embraced the tropes and techniques of the genre and, in the process, broadened its limits and possibilities, demonstrating that he was "essentially an apocalyptic writer who utilizes a major science-fictional component" (Ketterer 299).

Robert Nadeau writes that it is "artists versed in the scientific" who should "employ their own mythopoeic imaginations in fashioning the intellectual and emotional landscape" of Western societies in light of the shocking discoveries of the new physics, which imply a whole new metaphysics for humanity (63–64). What better candidate to reveal the way to keep on living in "a world beyond alienation" (Wood and Wood 140), then, than Kurt Vonnegut, a novelist who not only sought to include complex notions of science into his fiction, but did it in a such a simple manner that his revelations were available to all kinds of audiences. In his unmistakable way, Vonnegut managed to make "accessible advanced fictional strategies to a wide audience" (Freese "Man" 239) in a manner that garnered him a paradoxically privileged position that few artists manage to attain: that of "a writer simultaneously at the heart of his popular culture and in the forefront of the literary avant-garde" (Klinkowitz, *Kurt Vonnegut* 89). However, for all his accessibility and wide appeal, Vonnegut's prose "looks easy only in retrospect" (Updike, *Hugging* 272), and his ideas are not as simple as they may seem at first glance, because "[n]othing easy or simple exists in the pages of Vonnegut's novels," (Thomas 28). Contradictory as it may seem, simplicity is indeed the key to Vonnegut's complexity, as through the techniques of science fiction and comedy, the author attempts to defamiliarize the familiar, "only to bring it back in fresh awareness of how answers to our problems can be much simpler than assumed" (Klinkowitz, *America* 82). With his deadpan vision and his philosophy of "cosmic cool" (Olderman 198), Vonnegut presents us with the paradoxical notion that complexity is simpler than we think, and aims to show us that the answers to most our problems have "been there all along, obscured only by our weakness for making matters more simple than need be" (Klinkowitz, *America* 82).

In a world in which the obsession with intricate meanings leads to violence, anxiety and destruction, Vonnegut "suggests that it is the duty of the artist to break in Americans the habit of attempting to order experience in terms of the old cosmology present in the work of 'old-fashioned' storytellers" (Nadeau 130). To make sense of a senseless world, he argues, humanity should not try to overcome contradiction but rather to recognize it and embrace it as the purest essence of reality.

As a counterculture hero dressed in a Brooks Brothers suit and tie, an innovative writer posing as a science fiction hack, a philosopher who wrote for money, and "a satirist of American life . . . feeding at the trough of celebrity up to his ears" (Shields 351), Kurt Vonnegut was a walking contradiction. He was "Part satirist and part visionary" (Hassan, *Contemporary* 45), a champion of "misanthropic humanism" (Tally 114) with "a darkly satirical yet largely optimistic outlook on human life" (Simmons, *New Critical* xi) who, as "a vulgar sentimentalist" who was also "a crude humorist" (Scholes, *Fabulation* 150) presented "a difficult case for elitists to confront" (150). His multiple identities were a reflection of his own country, a nation "built on contradictions" (Bigsby 9) that "has never ceased to explore and question its own coherence, no least when it insists that coherence to be self-evident" (11). What is more, they were also a reflection of his craft: the novel; a medium eternally split between its "two reputations" as a means through which to express "pleasure in tale" and to expose "the ambiguities of narrative" (Bradbury, *The Novel* 8), whose history has been a constant tug of war between realism and experimentation (*MAN* 264). Through his apparent contradictions, Vonnegut not only forces his readers "to step back from their assumptions . . . and re-examine essential truths" (Thomas 28) but he also echoes the paradoxical nature of the many modes of his fiction: a genre such as science fiction, which constitutes an oxymoron in its very name, a postmodernist literature characterized by an "inherently paradoxical structure" (Hutcheon 222) and a comedy of entropy whereby the "satirist is always in the awkward position . . . of trying to obliterate his material" (Scholes, *Fabulation* 165), considering how, if the world actually heeds his advice and changes, then he will not be any longer necessary.

As an artist versed in the scientific, Vonnegut is aware that "order and chaos are not in opposition, they are collaborative" (Boon 47). He knows that irreconcilable contradiction lies at the heart of human nature and that recognition is the essence of his message as a comic apocalypticist, Thomas writes that "Vonnegut is no ideologue" (28),

and explains how, instead, his "work depends on paradox" (28) in the hope that each reader will complete the meaning of his texts and employ it in his or her own creative endeavors. Facing the ultimate existential dilemma of "man's necessity to invent meaning in a world in which no meaning can be discovered" (Freese "Man" 228), Vonnegut decides to celebrate the meaninglessness of the cosmos: "Let others bring order to chaos," he declares in *Breakfast of Champions,* "I would bring chaos to order, instead" (215). His final commitment is with the creation of deliberately artificial meanings whose sole norm of judgment is human law, embracing Pablo Picasso's famous dictum that "art is a lie that makes us realize the truth" (qtd. in Scholes, *Fabulation* 205) to create an art that is comically apocalyptic in its didactic essence and anthropocentric stance.

To answer Karen and Charles Wood's fifty-year-old unresolved question of whether it is necessary for Kurt Vonnegut to be "rescued" from "the stigma of being considered a science fictionist" in order to be accepted into the pantheon of "America's foremost contemporary writers" (134), my answer is "no." Not only is science fiction the source of his unique technique, the form that allows him to write books on subjects "inaccessible to normal novelistic approaches" (Crichton); it is also the essence of his apocalyptic creation, as recognized by the author himself in *Slaughterhouse-Five,* where he concedes that "Science fiction was a big help" in his characters' attempt to "re-invent themselves and their universe" after their traumatic events in the war (*SH5* 101). Finally, it stands as an embodiment of the contradictory elements of human nature, American experience and apocalyptic regeneration, embracing the techniques of popular culture to enact the aspirations of high literature and make them accessible to the whole of society. With this unique mixture, "Vonnegut scored a victory for the people" (Klinkowitz and Somer 12), vindicating "Art Power" (12) in a time of existential unease obscured by a dehumanizing, tragic apocalyptic rhetoric.

Will Hermes writes that "Sometimes the worst situations produce the deepest beauty, and the most profound change" (xi). Kurt Vonnegut's science fiction novels embody that change, symbolizing the comic apocalyptic potential to reinvent life which is present in every human being. Vonnegut's words teach us that, in times of crisis, humanity must acknowledge the chaos that underlies the conundrum of existence in order to embrace its creative potential and transform the world into a comic enactment of the promise of New Jerusalem. Thus, as Paul L. Thomas signals, "there is much within his work that speaks to the human race in the twenty-first century" (28).

2. CRISIS

2.1 A time of perpetual crisis

Like apocalypse, crisis is an overused, even clichéd word. As Ihab Hassan writes, "[m]an's awareness of his history has seldom caused him great jubilation" (*Radical* 11) and, as such, it is a constant of every generation to experience a deep sense of decline; of old, safe values degenerating into cultural, spiritual and moral decadence. This phenomenon is perhaps best expressed by Frank Kermode's famous dictum that the proclamation that "ours is the great age of crisis" is "no more surprising than the opinion that the earth is round" (94).

In *The Myth of the Eternal Return* (1949), Mircea Eliade alludes to a sort of innate apocalyptic impulse whereby all human societies have historically agreed in situating themselves at the end of a process of progressive decline (118). For thousands of years, people have conceived of their present as an evil age immediately preceding the end of time. However, the fact that this definitive ending that has as yet failed to materialize indicates that, in the words of Kermode, "crisis is a way of thinking about one's moment, and not inherent in the moment itself" (101). Rather than a tangible quality, crisis is a subjective phenomenon, "a matter of perception, of feeling" (Gray 5) through which human beings seek to understand and make sense of their world. Kermode writes that "[i]t is a peculiarity of the imagination that it is always at the end of an era" (96), and as such, the abuse of the term crisis reveals more about humanity's natural tendency to consider reality in apocalyptic terms than about reality itself.

Still, what does crisis exactly mean? The word originates in the Greek *krisis*, a medical term used to describe "[t]he point in the progress of a disease when an important development or change takes place which is decisive of recovery or death" ("Crisis, n."). It is, therefore, a moment of existential uncertainty when radically opposing possibilities can materialize into reality; quite literally a matter of life or death. Charles S. Maier explains the most common current use of the term as a sociopolitical analogy:

> Applied to a society or a regime, it refers to a situation in which institutional arrangements no longer deliver the results expected of them—whether public order, economic transfers and social justice, or economic growth—and where normal corrective actions seem only to make the situation worse. Societies and regimes appear caught in vicious circles: policy responses produce only more disorder, less justice, and more stagnation. Crises also differ from isolated political turmoil or conflicts because they afflict different social mechanisms simultaneously. The economy falters, politics stagnates, families fall apart, crime and violence rise. In a crisis all regulative institutions seem to disappoint at the same time; there is a sense of profound interconnection. (25)

Even if, in Kermode's view, crisis is mainly a matter of human perspective, Maier's definition of a moment of complete sociopolitical unrest seems to acutely epitomize the experience of the second half of the twentieth century. Under the ever-present threat of nuclear annihilation posed by the Cold War, which promised a final conflagration of biblical proportions, this period supplied the realest sense of existential dislocation and eschatological expectation in modern history; the first time in which humanity was able and prone to cause its own final destruction. Already in 1950, Sorokin warned that the twentieth century was "the period of the greatest crisis . . . a catastrophic transition to a new culture" (8). In the immediate aftermath of World War II, the end of the world seemed to be closer than ever.

In the United States, the period was marked by violence and unease at home and abroad, and punctuated by dramatic events that included assassination, war, political scandals, economic recession and utter internal division. Levine and Papasotiriou explain that the events of the era motivated a "crisis of confidence in America's public institutions" (157) which, together with ever-more-evident racial and economic inequalities threatened "the very fabric of American ideology" (282). New generations started to question and reexamine what it meant to be American, and many reacted against American cultural hegemony and underwent an apocalyptic process of reinvention whereby they "conceived anew what they were" (Braunstein and Doyle 10). Just as any crisis is marked by a "sense of profound interconnection" (Maier 25) between different social mechanisms, the United States also had to confront its conflictive role in a world that was becoming progressively more interconnected through the globalization of markets and the advance of telecommunications.

The intense feeling of dislocation motivated by this turmoil of events infiltrated Western culture and was reflected in an "imaginative crisis" (Levine and Papasotiriou 128) which, among other names, came to be known as Postmodernism (128). In her 1962 novel *The Golden Notebook*, Doris Lessing identified the source of this crisis in "the thinning of language against the density of our experience" (302), a phenomenon that would be examined in depth in intense debates over the role of the author and the novel itself in a postmodern reality. As a consequence, American literature of the period is marked by conflicting aesthetic notions on what literature should be, and is often characterized by an intense "sense of personal crisis that may be distinctive of a culture in which increasing consolidation of economic power and estrangement from political process throw the individual back upon himself" (Hendin 242). Still, just as Richard H. King remarks that "America's finest moments have rarely been during times of national unity or consensus" (68), the apocalyptic ambiance of the Cold War caused a surge of innovative literature which remains one of the most revealing historical and social records of its time.

Kurt Vonnegut's body of work is, in Jerome Klinkowitz words, "the popular artifact which may be the fairest example of American cultural change" (*Kurt Vonnegut* 16). Not only did the author write throughout the whole period and in a myriad of forms, constructing a body of texts that "read together as a kind of diary, an impassioned and sometimes brokenhearted meditation on the American Dream" (Sumner ix) but, as I explained in the previous chapter, he was for many years just one more middle-class American struggling to make a living in difficult, shifting times. Vonnegut's work is definitely articulated as a response to the American events of his lifetime. His novels are an attempt to comment on the socio-political context and mediate the contradictions of his culture from the point of view not of a well-known celebrity, but of an everyday man who is shocked, scared and affected by everyday occurrences just as any of the characters he writes about. After all, "the function of the artist," as Vonnegut once said, "is to respond to his own time" (qtd. in Sumner xi).

However, as a successful novelist, Vonnegut had the privilege of not only experiencing his context but also contributing to its creation. Steven Connor describes the novel "not just as passively marked with the imprint of history, but also as one of the ways in which history is made, and remade" (1); and thanks to his unexpected success at the end of the nineteen sixties, when he suddenly was hailed as a spokesman for

America's countercultural youth, Kurt Vonnegut's writings played an important role in determining the outcome of his times. As such, they stand as a prime example of how, in Timothy Parrish's words, "the postmodern novel engages with and even establishes the models for how political and social meaning has been shaped since the Cold War" (6).

Aware of his potential as an artist to incite change, but also conscious of how the power of fiction is used to shape reality with other means, Vonnegut sought not only to utilize his creative possibilities as a fictionist but also to expose them to the public, illuminating how the very concept of reality is often a fictional construct. Kermode explains that crisis is a subjective notion, a useful fiction to make sense of history. Nevertheless, he warns that understanding crisis as an objective, unquestionable truth equates to "yielding to irrationalism" and leads to fundamentalism and fascism; to the danger of "committing an error against which the intellectual history of our century should certainly have warned us" (103). In his novels, Vonnegut sought to expose this rhetorical construction of crisis, as, in Jerome Klinkowitz's words, "Reminding the reader that fictions are provisional realities and not bedrock truth is the essence of Vonnegut's work: his one enduring theme and the metafictional center for each of his novels" (*Kurt Vonnegut* 17). Throughout his career, Vonnegut strongly opposed the tragic apocalyptic course of a country that increasingly demanded blind devotion to a fixed set of ideals presented as the one acceptable American dogma, and used fictions within fiction to disclose how, in David L. Altheide's words, "fear is the foundation for much of the dominant narrative of the last 50 years" (12). This message of fear is institutionalized through the mass media's supposedly realist narratives and, to oppose it, Vonnegut deliberately flaunted the fictionality of his novels which, through willfully surreal tales of spaceships, time travel and natural disaster, disclosed some very harsh realities.

This chapter seeks to examine how the science fictional novels of Kurt Vonnegut engage in a profound dialogue with the sociopolitical context of the United States in the second half of the twentieth century, as well as to place them at the heart of a cultural vanguard that played an integral role in the creation of said context. As such, it corresponds to what John R. May labels the first constitutive element of apocalypse: judgment (*Toward* 209), as in these books Vonnegut essentially acts as a severe judge to the circumstances of his time. It also fits David Ketterer's first phase in the progress of science fiction plots: dystopian fictions which "imply a worsening state of affairs" (123), a view that coincides with the author's preoccupation with the prevailing tragic

apocalyptic understanding of the world during the Cold War in dualistic terms of good versus evil. As I have explained, the apocalyptic imagination demands that circumstances get progressively worse before they can be righted, and so crisis is the best starting point to arrive at a new creation.[19]

2.2 This age of conformity: The 1950s

The fifties are embedded in the popular imagination as a period of quiet stability in the United States. They represent "the reign of affluence *cum* conformity" (Hassan, *Contemporary* 4), a decade "celebrated for its 'normalcy' and complacency" (Williams 106) in which a generation deemed "Silent" by the editors of *Time* and *Life* (4) enjoyed the economic fruits of World War II by celebrating a newfound middle-class affluence in the paradise of American suburbia. However, "This Age of Conformity," as Irving Howe christened the era in 1954 (Howe, *A Voice* 3), concealed a growing feeling of existential anxiety motivated not only by the anti-communist paranoia of the first years of the Cold War, but also by the progressive recognition that the domestic paradise of "endless acres of look-alike split-level tract housing, with their forests of television antennae tuned to the same program" (Carter 96) did not necessarily convey the happiness it promised. As such, Levine and Papasotiriou claim that the decade "brought Americans a dual legacy of unprecedented affluence and unparalleled anxiety" (79).

The unprecedented affluence of the fifties was the result of a massive post-war economic boom. Fulfilling Secretary of War Henry Stimson's dictum, "If you're going to try to go to war . . . in a capitalist country, you have to let business make money out of the process or business won't work" (qtd. in K. O'Brien 243), American corporations were dramatically enriched by World War II and, by the end of the conflict, with most of the major industrial economies of the world in ruins, the United States found itself producing fifty percent of the planet's industrial goods (247). The figures seemed to

[19] This chapter is structured by decades because, even though digit changes are artificial boundaries which don't represent a real, categorical change, I agree with Raymond Olderman in his view that "it is no longer cutting it too fine to talk about the vision of a single decade," as writers are "conscious of history and of the symbolic value of turning points," a circumstance which has led to decades being "treated with the same sense of symbolic new directions as centuries have been treated in the past" (x).

confirm Thomas Pynchon's subsequent affirmation that "the real business of the War is buying and selling" and that "true war is a celebration of markets" (*Gravity's Rainbow* 105), as the outcome of World War II certainly contributed to a higher standard of living for a blossoming American middle class.

Moving to the burgeoning suburbs outside major American cities, the middle class reveled in a new transfiguration of the American Dream, deemed "the Dream of the Good Life" by Jim Cullen (11), in which the house and car became "widely celebrated as the emblem of democracy even for those who had not yet acquired one" (149–150). It was the advent a new standard, whereby "the celebration of affluence became the hallmark of 'the American Way of Life'" (Levine and Papasotiriou 3) and market capitalism became the defining creed of a country embarked in an ideological crusade against the "evils" of Soviet communism. President Eisenhower's Republican government adapted the New Deal philosophy of 'pump-priming,' or pouring money into the economy in times of stagnation to stimulate it into motion with a new twist: "there was no necessary reason why *government* had to prime the pump," Paul A. Carter writes, "the consumer could be asked to do the spending instead" (36). Consumption, hence came to be celebrated as "the American means of social cohesion" (Zunz 90), a national duty exalted with patriotic fervor by advertising creatives turned into "a new breed of political magician" (Carter 35), whose slogans united capitalist zeal with a Cold War rhetoric that defended buying as a counterrevolutionary force against communism. Carter ironically concludes that "[t]he real dampener of any movement toward socialism in America, rather than McCarthy or the FBI, may have been the thirty-year, fixed payment home mortgage, which converted more than half of the population into property owners" (16).

However, beneath the patina of a perfect life afforded by happiness in consumption, the cracks in "that ideological edifice, the American Way of Life" (Luckhurst 109) revealed the apocalyptic duality of the suburbs, where material comfort soon revealed its flipside of loneliness and a growing sense of alienation. In 1963 Betty Friedan would publish *The Feminine Mystique*, her widely influential study of the existential anxiety rooted in the fact that "fulfillment as a woman had only one definition for American women after 1949—the housewife-mother" (Friedan 92). The notion of American identity itself was forced to undergo a severe paradigm shift by the pressures of the Cold War, which "called for a closing of ranks, and projected the ideal of homogeneity" (Whitfield 257). Ever a nation that celebrated singularity in uniqueness,

the tragic apocalyptic rhetoric of the nineteen fifties essentially erected "a New American Myth" (Thomas 35) whereby the "American Way of Life was understood to be singular" (Whitfield 257). Striving to erase the social realities of a past in which "many of the most revered minds of American history have been Deists, Socialists, Free Thinkers, and radicals of all stripes" (Thomas 35), this new desire for unity under the banner of capitalism bowing to the simplistic binaries of the Cold War "helped to nationalize and, arguably, to homogenize American culture" (R. King 59). As early as 1947, Simone de Beauvoir could identify the symptoms in a country which "once so passionate about individualism, had itself become a nation of sheep; repressing originality, both in itself and in others; rejecting criticism, measuring value by success" (372).

The manichean rhetoric of the Cold War not only homogenized but also politicized American culture (Whitfield 259), contaminating every aspect of the social reality of the decade with a simplistic narrative of good versus evil. In 1950, the Truman administration adopted a new policy of containment which "abandoned geopolitical priorities and moved toward an unrestricted anticommunist crusade" (Levine and Papasotiriou 54), starting a new era in which "winning" the Cold War became the main priority guiding Washington's policies. When the Korean War started in June of that same year, it inaugurated a dramatic process of rearmament of the US, as the country's defense budget went from $12.8 billion in 1947 to $46.1 billion in 1952. Even when, in the aftermath of Korea, President Eisenhower sought to avoid another costly full-scale war by resorting to covert operations in the Middle East and South America, military spending continued to drain over 50% of the US budget throughout the whole decade, amounting to essentially a permanent war economy. This militaristic mentality erased any semblance of a past in which, as Kurt Vonnegut recalled, "We used to boast of how small our Army and Navy were, and how little influence generals and admirals had in Washington" (*BB* 71). By 1987, the author could only lament that "[i]t's hard to believe how sick of war we used to be" (71) as the "New American Myth" had long since established an image of the United States as purveyor of military and economic imperialism all over the world; a nation which, by the end of the twentieth century, was spending more on its military than the next fifteen nations combined (Levine and Papasotiriou 250).

The unprecedented military buildup was justified through a discourse of fear which institutionalized a "cartoonlike view created about Communism, Socialism, and Marxism" (Thomas 35) that contributed to the contradictory feeling of anxiety among

affluence in the common citizen. Alan Moore writes that "[i]t was impossible to live through the nineteen fifties without a sense of impending catastrophe bearing implacably, down upon the whole country, the whole world" (107), alluding to the ever-present shadow of nuclear war during what Max F. Schulz terms "the Dulles-Eisenhower years of brinkmanship—Communist Conspiracy, Cold War, Domino Theory, and Atom Bomb Threat" (78).[20] The persistent rhetoric of eschatological threat inevitably instituted a numbing feeling of paranoia in the everyday reality of the American fifties, forcing citizens to "take sides" in a persistently tense environment in which "neutrality was suspect, and so was a lack of enthusiasm for anti-communism" (Whitfield 263).

Nowhere was this tension best epitomized than in the advent of McCarthyism, a phenomenon that took the anti-communist hysteria and cultural homogenization of the era to its direst extremes. From 1950 to 1954, hundreds of Americans, from government officials to personalities in the entertainment industry, union activists and academics, became subject to anti-communist "witch hunts" which investigated their actions and acquaintances and forced many to testify before the so-called House Un-American Activities Committee in a fervor that seemed to suggest that "the interest of the state could not be reconciled with the freedom of the individual" (Carter 273). Wisconsin Senator Joe McCarthy's Red Scare was a prime example of the ultimate consequences of democracy as the tyranny of the majority that Alexis de Tocqueville had warned of when he wrote, "If ever freedom is lost in America, blame will have to be laid at the door of the omnipotence of the majority" (304) taken to its ultimate consequences. Back in 1835, Tocqueville had written that "In America, the majority erects a formidable barrier around thought" (293), and over a century later, when 50 percent of Americans declared that they "looked favorably upon Joe McCarthy" (Carter 45), the inescapable irony was that, by brandishing the flag of liberty in a tragic apocalyptic crusade against communism, the United States had "come to resemble—rather uncomfortably" (Whitfield 259) the totalitarianism it claimed to oppose. Braunstein and Doyle write that "[t]he mania to

[20] The dread of mutual assured destruction was fed into the general public from all sides, with Secretary of State John Foster Dulles "verbally dividing the existing world into 'they' and 'we' – 'the Communists' and 'the free world'" (Carter 66), Democratic presidential candidate Adlai Stevenson warning of how "One by one the lamps of civilization go out and nameless horrors are perpetrated in darkness . . . by an enemy of a kind we have never faced before" (qtd. in Carter 13), and President Eisenhower himself, who flatly declared "I'd rather be atomized than communized" (qtd. in Stone and Kuznick 154). Of course, a very similar manichaean discourse emanated from the other side of the Iron Curtain, as Soviet Foreign Minister Viacheslav Molotov justified nuclear conflagration in 1955 by assuring that "What will perish will not be world civilization, but it will be that rotten social system with its imperialist basis soaked in blood" (qtd. in Carter 72).

expose and purge 'card carrying' communists and their 'fellow traveler' sympathizers undermined the very civil liberties that made up the foundation of a self-described liberal democracy" (9) and managed to oppose with no impunity the very principles upon which the United States of America were founded. There is simply no way in which the notion of "Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness" could be reconciled with an institution such as the House Un-American Activities Committee, which in its very name "asserted that there was only one true and proper way to be an American" (Simmons *Anti-Hero* 14)?[21]

The pluralistic American tradition in which Kurt Vonnegut was raised during the Great Depression seemed to be long forgotten as the dualistic rhetoric of the Cold War harbored the most outrageous contradictions. The homogenization of the American Way of Life during the fifties resulted in "the suffocation of liberty and the debasement of culture itself" (Whitfield 259), and even after Joe McCarthy's fall from grace, the "ubiquitous quest for 'security'" (Buhle 402) ascertained a cautious low profile whereby citizens were fearful of raising their voice against the established order to plead for reason, progress and social activism. It is no wonder, then, that the fifties are "often criticized as an era of social complacency and intellectual darkness" (Levine and Papasotiriou 75).

Still, the decade has often been "simplified into everything the sixties generation rebelled against" (Dickstein 1) when it was actually "also a flourishing period in all the arts" (Levine and Papasotiriou 75). American literature of the time exhibits a clear "darkening of the intellectual outlook" (34) that clearly echoes the anxiety of the postwar era in a series of central concerns which Levine and Papasotiriou identify as "the lack of illusions of the new generation, the decline of values in a competitive economy, the loss of self in an impersonal society" (77). As works written under the shadow of the atomic bomb, most major novels of the decade reflect what C. Wright Mills describes as "the development of a tragic sense of life" (158), with authors seeking new forms to reflect the disorienting experience of living in a postmodern world after Auschwitz and

[21] In his 1955 volume *The Liberal Tradition in America*, Louis Hartz proposes an interesting historical explanation for the Red Scare, arguing that the lack of a feudal past in America manifests itself in the absence of political extremes. Historically, the country has neither had a reactionary conservatism on the right nor a strong socialist tradition on the left, leaving Lockean liberalism as the sole, unchallenged, American creed. According to Hartz, this scenario breeds intolerance for other ideologies and explains how the notion of embracing communism could be identified with being un-American (3–5, 284).

Hiroshima, seemingly echoing the question: "How could we go on thinking in the old trite ways when every day we had to imagine the unimaginable?" (Rosen 126).

In a frightful world in which human existence appeared "increasingly senseless" (Brüning 378) and the individual found himself "on trial for nothing less than his *being*" (Hassan, *Radical* 60), "Man – the great sufferer" (Brüning 377) became the favorite figure for fifties novelists. Saul Bellow writes that the situation reflected in American fiction of the period is how "[t]he self is asked to prepare itself for sacrifice" ("Notes" 69) and, in the face of a world that constitutes a continued affront to his survival and understanding, Ihab Hassan adds that the only response the protagonist can take is that of "the rebel or victim, living under the shadow of death" (*Radical* 4–5). It is no wonder, then, that the largest part of the literature of the era came "under the rubric of alienation" (77). Alienated from his culture, his surroundings and often even from his own self, the "inability or unwillingness to communicate" (Brüning 380) forces the fictional hero of fifties novels like J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* (1951) or Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) into estrangement and isolation, a theme which, according to Brüning, the authors of the era turned into a myth (380). Bellow writes that the individual in American fiction of the period resembles "a colonist who has been sent to a remote place, some Alaska of the soul," where he is forced to contemplate "a barren emptiness within himself" ("Notes" 60). Under these circumstances, the character accepts that "only private exploration and inner development are possible," recognizing "the opposition of public and private as fixed and indissoluble" (61). This view is confirmed when he seeks help in others, as joint action for improvement in a communal basis "is immediately rejected as unreal and illusive: the hard facts of life are said to be against it" (Brüning 380). In this scenario of excruciating stalemate, only "the tone of complaint prevails" (Bellow, "Notes" 64), as the protagonist finds that, even if the public realm reduces his potential to act, "it cannot take away his power to despair, and sometimes he seems to be making the most of that" (64).

Still, some novels develop a paradoxical sort of existential celebration among the seeming hopelessness; an attitude that Hassan identifies as "radical innocence" (*Radical* 6). The critic describes this impulse as "an expression of man's quenchless desire to affirm, despite the voids and vicissitudes of our age, the human sense of *life*!" (6). The aspects of life vindicated by the "rebel-victim" (30) celebrated in these novels usually have seldom in common or are directly opposed to the values exalted by the new national

myth of the American Way of Life in clean, affluent, carefree suburbia, as their characters oppose the barren elitism of American consumerism and rebel against the general flow of the times while flaunting their inability to suggest a solid alternative. Simmons argues that the emergence of this new type of protagonist reflects "the growing schism in American society" (*Anti-Hero* 12) during the early years of the Cold War, and remarks the irony in how, as the United States assumes an international role "consistent with the heroic vision" (12), its writers "take a U-turn, rejecting the grandiloquence of the conventional heroic figure, and opting instead for the comic everyman" celebrated as "flawed but essentially spiritually intact" (12). Kurt Vonnegut's 1952 *Player Piano* was one of the first novels to foreground this new type of American anti-hero.

2.3 "A book about what could be": *Player Piano* (1952)

In the seven years between his return from the World War II and the publication of, *Player Piano,* in August 1952, Kurt Vonnegut studied anthropology at the University of Chicago, moonlighted as a reporter for the Chicago City News Bureau, started a family, and worked as a public relations man for General Electric. In 1951, after publishing three science fiction stories in *Collier's,* Vonnegut left General Electric and moved his family to Cape Cod to pursue a career as a full time fiction writer, but his experience working at a company whose motto was "Progress is our most important product" and which symbolized "the decade's optimism and the extension of the wartime can-do spirit" (Reed xv) as well as its dark corollary, would become the basis for his first novel.

Promoted as a tale of "America in the Coming Age of Electronics" (Sumner 36), *Player Piano* is set in the town of Ilium, a fictional counterpart of Schenectady, New York (Goldsmith viii), where the General Electric Research laboratory was located, and which appears in several of Vonnegut's novels as a symbol of the American technological sublime. The novel paints the picture of a near future after a hypothetical Third World War and a Second Industrial Revolution which has brought about the "miracle" of "production with almost no manpower" (*PP* 1). Most of the jobs formerly carried out by human beings have been rendered obsolete, and are now performed by advanced machinery which is maintained by a small elite of engineers. Meanwhile, the majority of the population is assigned to superfluous repair and reconstruction jobs and essentially

leads a comfortable life of leisure and high-tech commodities. The novel's protagonist, Paul Proteus, is an engineer who finds himself at the heart of a moral dilemma concerning the benefits and detriments of technology and ultimately determines to oppose a narrative of "progress for its own sake" which promises happiness but actually erodes core, "simple values based on the most central structures of human society" (Klinkowitz, *Kurt Vonnegut* 21).

Player Piano is Vonnegut's denunciation of the United States' "love affair with technological (read: superficial) improvement" (Glover 194), with that "Mechanical Bride" that Marshall McLuhan argued Americans adored with almost sensual intensity, "just as Narcissus loved his image" (Magome 372). Hassan argues that the socio-political experience of the twentieth century reveals "two opposite tendencies at work: the unremitting organization of society and the unleashing of vast destructive energies against civilization" (*Radical* 14), and at the Ilium Works, Paul Proteus encounters this contradictorily apocalyptic nature of a "superstate which is at once utopian and demonic" (14). The ultimate consequence of an "intemperate faith in lawless technological progress" (*PP* 302) is the belief that "man is on earth to create more durable and efficient images of himself and, hence, to eliminate any justification at all for his own continued existence" (302–303). Originally intended to make life more comfortable, unchecked technological development ultimately corroborates "a persistent and indissoluble lack of harmony between material and technological progress and human spiritual improvement" (Vallina Samperio, "Wasteland" 100), unleashing a dehumanizing process whereby "[h]uman beings become less and less human as they come closer to a machine-like existence, all in the name of progress and a supposedly more 'civilized' world" (103).

The title of the novel itself, which refers to a device that performs music without the need of a human interpreter, is "a rich techno-artistic symbol" (Magome 372) of the "hybridity between man and machine" (370); but Vonnegut argues that this hybridity is always to the detriment of humanity. In 1959, Paul Tillich warned of the temptation in an industrial society to yield to "one of the fundamental expressions of sin [which] is to make the other person into an object" (210) and Paul Proteus witnesses this temptation become a reality as men are displaced by the creations that were intended to serve them. The machines relieve them from their labor but, in the process, they steal their human dignity, too: "Anybody that competes with a slave becomes a slave" (*PP* 281).

Still, Vonnegut does not intend *Player Piano* as a luddite attack on technology per se, but rather as an "indictment of science as it is being run today" (Shields 123): "Science and technology are not the villains," Shields writes, "it's the failure to consider their impact on people's lives under the excuse that progress is always good" (124). One of the main themes of Vonnegut's literature is the apocalyptic need to invent purpose in order to endure life in an essentially meaningless world. However, he encourages humanity to approach this creative process from a comic apocalyptic perspective, foregrounding the fictional nature of their creations, and issues dire warnings against the tragic apocalyptic tendency towards fundamentalist devotion to a particular narrative. As such, *Player Piano* is constructed as a critique of how "technology has become its own reason for being, its own justification of life—in other words, its own religion" (Klinkowitz, *Kurt Vonnegut* 23) and, as such, has displaced all manner of human concerns. In 1951, Eric Hoffer linked all mass movements by the way in which they "demand a blind faith and a single-hearted allegiance," regardless of "the doctrine they preach and the program they project," arguing that "the fanaticism which animates them may be viewed and treated as one" (62). This is the kind of technological fundamentalism that Vonnegut had witnessed at General Electric and which, by the fifties, had become a badge of loyalty to the New American Myth as inescapable as ardent anti-communism and compulsive consumerism. So great was the power of the American technological sublime, that "any other solution, any other philosophy, is silenced" (Eiseley 39) and deflecting from the norm of the American Way of Life was seen as an unacceptable deviation.

The savage technological fundamentalism of *Player Piano*, then, becomes a metaphor of the American government's desire for homogenization amid the tragic apocalyptic rhetoric of the Cold War. Michael Pinsky explains how the imposition of a technological narrative can be understood as a means to consolidate a particular socio-political system:

> Technology is the material product of the drive toward a specific future. It is intended to legitimize the system of law in much the same way that a discovered artifact legitimizes a myth of the past. It completes the myth of a future by appearing as an artifact *from* that future. By imposing meaning, technology enforces a particular notion of the future, placing law above critique and at the upper limit of legitimacy. (184)

In Vonnegut's mind, the future that the American government sought to project in the early years of the Cold War by standing as a firm contrary to all the values represented by Soviet communism implied a betrayal of foundational American values and sought to transform Americans into the docile "nation of sheep" alluded by Simone de Beauvoir (372). The result promised to be a country in which "[e]ternal vigilance was the price of efficiency" (*PP* 73).

Echoing the Declaration of Independence, Paul Proteus laments that "[m]achines and organization and pursuit of efficiency have robbed the American people of liberty and the pursuit of happiness" (*PP* 314). Through the elimination of labor in a projected utopian society, the engineers of *Player Piano* essentially invalidate that most captivating myth on which American culture is founded: the American Dream that "one could realize the fruits of one's aspirations through applied intelligence and effort" (Cullen 159–160). A character in the novels explains that there "[u]sed to be there was a lot of damn fool things a dumb fool bastard could do to become great, but machines fixed that" (*PP* 207), and the result has not been an ideal leisure state but a dystopian reality in which the population has been traded out of "the most important thing on earth to them—the feeling of being needed and useful, the foundation of self-respect" (175). A firm believer in the American doctrine of dignifying labor as outlined by Benjamin Franklin,[22] Vonnegut assures that "men, by their nature, cannot be happy unless engaged in enterprises that make them feel useful" (*PP* 302). During his tenure at General Electric, the author had sensed that the company that promised progress "delivered the goods but at the unsustainable cost of making people feel superfluous" (Morace 152) and his first novel reflects his fear that the path of progress in the fifties may not lead to idle happiness among a leisure society, but to a future where people will be devoid of jobs that "require energy and draw on some of one's best capacities; and that can be done keeping one's honor and dignity" (Goodman 17).

Vonnegut designed *Player Piano* as a science fiction novel: "there was no avoiding it, since the General Electric Company *was* science fiction," the author declared (*WFG* 263). Its foreword announced "[t]his book is not a book about what is, but a book about what could be" (*PP* xi), and the novel itself was a dystopian tale in the tradition of George Orwell and Aldous Huxley, a sort of "American version of *1984*, with the

[22] "No man e'er was glorious, who was not laborious," Franklin famously writes in *Poor Richard's Almanac* (451).

corporation as Big Brother" (Wakefield, "*Karass*" 63).[23] In her essay "Writing Utopia," Margaret Atwood writes about the difference between utopias and dystopias, and explains that the latter constitute "dire warnings . . . , dark shadows cast by the present into the future" in which writers alert of "what will happen to us if we don't pull up our socks" (94). Hence, in spite of its future setting and depictions of advanced machinery, *Player Piano* is a novel rooted in a very real present which expresses "the way a lot of people felt in the fifties about the way things were going; about the kind of life we were all going to end up with" (Wakefield, "*Karass*" 63). However, apart from its projection of the consequences of Cold War technological fundamentalism, the book also constitutes an acid satire of American society in the fifties.

Much of *Player Piano* can be read as a parody of corporate America and the concentration of post-war society into "increasingly faceless and standardized organizations" (Levine and Papasotiriou 76) such as General Electric. The depiction of the nameless Ilium corporation, for which Vonnegut not all too subtly draws from his own experience at General Electric, stands as a rejection of a mass consumer economy in which "the new priorities of standardization, cooperation and conformity were replacing the older American values of self-reliance, competition and rugged individualism" (76). In this aspect, a clear parallel can be established between Vonnegut's novel and William H. Whyte's 1956 study *The Organization Man*, a severe critique of a social ethic which "makes morally legitimate the pressures of society against the individual" (7). Whyte argues that, whereas the old-fashioned tyrant demanded his workers' sweat, the new corporate employer "wants your soul" (97), as companies build a complex, psychological infrastructure that functions as a trap for the worker, as "the demands of his surrender are constant and powerful, and the more he has come to like the life of organization the more difficult does he find it to resist these demands, or even to recognize them" (97).

The sociological consequences of the corporatization of America are analyzed by Riesman, Glazer, and Denney in their influential 1950 study *The Lonely Crowd,* which explained how the shift from "an age of production to an age of consumption" (6) had transformed the national character from that of an "inner-directed" *producer* to an "other-directed" *consumer* (96) and prognosticated a near-future society in which the old spirit of American individualism would be replaced by a new paradigm in which

[23] Vonnegut went as far as declaring that he had "cheerfully ripped off the plot of *Brave New World,* whose plot had been cheerfully ripped off from Eugene Zamiatin's *We*" (*WFG* 263).

"contemporaries are the source of direction for the individual" (19). *Player Piano* argues that the consumerist thrust of the fifties is a dehumanizing force comparable to technological fundamentalism. Where machines rob human beings of their dignity in labor, the corporate consumer economy robs them of their uniqueness, instituting what Herbert Marcuse calls "a second nature of man which ties him libidinally and aggressively to the commodity form" (*Liberation* 11). As the need for "possessing, consuming, handling, and constantly renewing" material gadgets becomes a "biological need" (11), purchases stop responding to an actual necessity as needs become artificially manufactured by advertisers who incite a yearning to possess as much as your neighbor. In *Player Piano,* a visit to Proteus Park, "a postwar development of three thousand dream houses for three thousand families with presumably identical dreams" (*PP* 160) reveals the extent to which individual initiative has been numbed in the age of the technological sublime, when the consumer is "protected from the old economic ups and downs by the orderly, predictable consumer habits the payroll machines give him" (166).

However, instead of happiness, what the inhabitants of Proteus Park find in this predictable, carefree life of comfort among technological commodities is boredom and an existential anxiety which brings to mind John Steinbeck's dictum, "[i]f I wanted to destroy a nation I would give it too much, and I would have it on its knees, miserable, greedy and sick" (qtd. in Carter 110). Alluding to the old time consumption habits of the American population, a character in *Player Piano* says: "[u]sed to be he'd buy on impulse, illogically, and industry would go nutty trying to figure out what he was going to buy next" (*PP* 166). However, by the fifties the culture industry had reduced the masses to "an object of calculation; an appendage of the machinery" (Adorno, *Culture* 85) as, in Adorno's words, capitalism's "technological evil" had resulted in the replacement of imagination by a "mechanically relentless control system" (*Culture* 55); a mechanism that obeyed the same tragic apocalyptic rhetoric as McCarthyism in its pursue of what Irving Howe dubbed "the disintegration of individual belief and taste in the face of mass-produced, homogenized culture" ("Mass Society" 421).

Vonnegut's complex criticism of the dehumanizing drive behind fifties American society goes well beyond stereotypical science fiction. His gloomy projection of a future in which advanced machinery deems its creator obsolete is somehow "closer in spirit to sociology couched in fiction" (Shields 125) than to the usual Golden Age future fantasies of the American engineer as a technological *übermensch*. As such, *Player Piano* is a

prime example of the development of a heightened social consciousness in science fiction during the fifties and fittingly matches Frederik Pohl's concept of the genre as a "political cryptogram" used to evade the pitfalls of the McCarthy era and "say things in hint and metaphor that the writer does not say in the clear" ("Politics" 10). However, whereas the literary establishment at large dismissed Vonnegut's first novel as another disposable future fantasy, dooming it to an irrelevance that culminated in its 1955 paperback reprint under the title *Utopia 14*, the close-knit science fiction fraternity was not willing to embrace *Player Piano's* hazy use of the genre, either. Retrospective analyses would credit Vonnegut with turning "conventional science fiction inside out" (Wood and Wood 143) by writing "a science fiction novel that puts the emphasis on characters – upon human experience and actions" (142); but for the time being, the release of *Player Piano* left its author in a sort of middle ground of critical ostracism that implied that, to quote Philip K. Dick, "Nobody knew who Vonnegut was" (qtd. in Shields).

2.4 "I guess somebody up there likes me": *The Sirens of Titan* (1959)

Tom Wolfe writes that, in the fifties, the novel was "no mere literary form" (*New* 19) but an embodiment of the American Dream: "one of the last of those superstrokes, like finding gold or striking oil, through which an American could, overnight, in a flash, utterly transform his destiny" (20). *Player Piano* was no superstroke towards upward mobility for Kurt Vonnegut who, after his first novel failed to attain any success, found himself having to go back to writing short stories for magazines to support his family. However, the rise of a new medium as American's favorite means for entertainment would soon render that line of work obsolete. In 1946 there had been only 7000 television sets in use in the United States, but by the time the fifties came to an end the figure had gone up to over 50 million (Levine and Papasotiriou 79), and as families all over the country increasingly found themselves spending hours in front of a screen, the consequences were soon felt by the magazine industry. Peter Reed explains how "[t]he audience for magazine stories turned increasingly to television for entertainment, while the advertisers who were the magazines' lifeblood found the new medium irresistible" (xvii), and, as a consequence, Kurt Vonnegut unexpectedly lost his main source of income.

After a failed attempt to become a car salesman with a SAAB dealership that went bankrupt in less than six months (Shields 144), the author found his situation worsened when the death of his brother-in-law and sister in the space of a week in September 1958 left him and his wife Jane in charge of the late couple's four sons (148). With seven children to maintain, Vonnegut turned to the pulp-paperback market, which "demanded a steady supply of novels that unsophisticated readers could comfortably enjoy" (Klinkowitz, *Kurt Vonnegut* 33), and resigned to accept that he probably would never be considered a "serious" writer. With this mindset, he set aside his aspirations to write the Great American Novel and industriously set out to work in "the production of paperback originals to fill the book racks in drugstores, airports and newsstands across America" (33). Ironically, in the process he created one of the richest, most philosophically profound works of his career.

The Sirens of Titan was published in 1959 with a prototypical pulp science fiction cover featuring semi-naked women in an intergalactic landscape that Vonnegut's literary agent Knox Burger described as "a ridiculous way to publish his work" (qtd. in Shields 160). The novel found the author embracing all the wildest clichés of science fiction and developing an aggressively unreal plot punctuated by space travel, a Martian invasion and a florid cast of beings from other galaxies, and as such it was immediately relegated to critical ostracism, neglected for being "Vonnegut's most overtly science-fictional work" (Ketterer 298). However, beneath the space opera gloss lays "a serious and highly original metaphysical treatise which, although totally different in style, is in the tradition of *Siddhartha, Der Zauberberg,* and *L'etranger*" (Goldsmith 10). Whereas the few contemporary critics who actually bothered to read the novel "completely missed the satiric elements" (Schatt 35), a deep examination of *The Sirens of Titan* reveals how Vonnegut is parodying the conventions of science fiction in a "proto-postmodern way of drawing attention to his act of fabrication and discouraging any suspension of disbelief" (Klinkowitz, *America* 29). As if to reinforce this nature of fiction as forgery, the author relies on the deliberately simple storytelling devices that would since become his trademark technique, opting for short chapters, quick characterization and sentences designed as aphoristic punchlines. Still, filled with complex references and allusions,[24]

[24] Numerous scholars have delved into these references, finding in the characters and themes of *The Sirens of Titan* overtones of Nietzsche and Camus (Goldsmith 10–11), biblical figures like Job, Christ and Yahweh (11–12) and anthropologists from Joseph Campbell—whose outline of the mythical journey of life in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) is the pattern which Vonnegut's characters follow according to Peter

this deceivingly ludicrous tale of a journey to the seventh moon of Saturn actually forms the basis of Vonnegut's apocalyptic philosophy and the essence of his unique and unprecedented postmodernist use of science fiction.

In many ways, *The Sirens of Titan* is a continuation of the social themes first introduced in *Player Piano*. The chronicle of the annihilation of the original inhabitants of the planet Tralfamadore, exterminated by machines of their own device (*SOT* 282), reads like a fulfilment of the darkest consequences of the technological fundamentalism described in the first novel, and the book is filled with the type of satirical vignettes of American social customs that are a distinctive trait through Vonnegut's entire career. Nonetheless, *The Sirens of Titan* adds a new dimension in its criticism of the tragic apocalyptic rhetoric of organized religion, which was becoming more and more apparent as the fifties progressed. The popularity of the Scofield Reference Bible in the United States, whose annotations preached a premillennial interpretation of scripture by placing the twentieth century as the final prelude to the events forecasted in the book of Revelation (Williams 100), was reinforced by the eschatological climate and simplistic binary narrative of the early Cold War. Hence, as the American government aligned itself ever more strongly with a unilateral understanding of Christian values, with President Eisenhower declaring that "[o]ur government makes no sense unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith" (Carter 124), and evangelical preachers like Billy Graham attained huge success using TV to preach a combination of "apocalyptic prediction, Marian devotion, and anticommunism" (Williams 105), Thomas Jefferson's maxim that "The wall of separation between church and state must be kept high and impregnable" (qtd. in Carter 116) seemed to fade into obsolescence. Perhaps nowhere was this fundamentalist shift more evident than in the introduction, in 1954, of the phrase "under God" after "one nation" in the 1892 flag pledge, an initiative by Reverend George M. Docherty, who argued that "an atheistic American is a contradiction in terms" (115). The new pledge, still in use today, seemed a tragic apocalyptic reminder to Americans that, in times of the Cold War, sides had to be taken, and if God was on the side of the United States, that could only mean that the Soviet Union was the devil's nation.

A self-declared "atheist" (*PS* 191) who nonetheless admired the social values of Christianity (*WFG* 246), Vonnegut despised the fundamentalist use of religion as an

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Freese ("Man" 234)—to Frank Boaz—whom Stanley Schatt reads as a model for the character of Boaz in his decision to devote his life to the Harmoniums of Mercury (31).

unchallengeable, rigid rhetoric of unshakable truth at the service of a particular ideology. As such, his novels always investigate the "unavoidable ideological consequences of fictions and their makings" (Hutcheon 194), and *The Sirens of Titan* is full of examples of how religion is surreptitiously used to justify particular narratives. Thus, we encounter wanton millionaire Malachi Constant, who recurrently explains his immense wealth by claiming "I guess somebody up there likes me" (*SOT* 15), and learn of how his father, Noel Constant, built his fortune in the stock market by randomly investing on companies whose names coincided with the letters in the first verses of the Old Testament (71), thus suggesting a direct relationship between good luck and divine will. Even when, following the failed Martian invasion of Earth, Winston Niles Rumfoord creates a new religion called the Church of God the Utterly Indifferent, which claims to oppose such past blunders under the twin precepts that "Puny man can do nothing at all to help or please God Almighty, and luck is not the hand of God" (183), he ends up succumbing to the same fundamentalism he wishes to suppress.

In his desire to vanquish inequality, Rumfoord, whose showbiz flair and inexhaustible "supply of dumfounding new sensations" (*SOT* 266) clearly resembles the religion-as-entertainment formula of Billy Graham, actually creates a totalitarian regime whereby he becomes the dictatorial head priest of a cult of "exclusive self-praising absolutism" (Vallina Samperio, "Wasteland" 102). Blinded by his desire to abolish injustice, Rumfoord is oblivious to his dehumanizing means, and his project for a humanistic religion finally echoes Adela Yarbro Collin's idea that "[w]hen an immediate objective or limited good is pursued without sufficient attention to the whole picture, the process can get out of control and become demonic" (173). Faith in a holy cause, Vonnegut seems to imply, is always dangerous and a manifestation of what, in his third novel *Mother Night*, he would describe as "the totalitarian mind": a "system of gears whose teeth have been filled off at random" (*MN* 223) in which "[t]he missing teeth, of course, are simple, obvious truths, truths available and comprehensible even to ten-year-olds in most cases" (224). That novel's protagonist, Howard W. Campbell, Jr., seems to summarize his creator's opinion of religious fundamentalism when he declares, "[s]ay what you will about the sweet miracle unquestioning faith, I consider a capacity for it terrifying and absolutely vile" (160).

Rumfoord's totalitarian mind does not only manifest in his religion, however. Cut off from a conventional human experience of space and time after his interaction with

what Vonnegut calls a "chrono-synclastic infundibulum" which forces him and his dog to exist "as wave phenomena – apparently pulsing in a distorted spiral with its origin in the Sun and its terminal in Betelgeuse" (*SOT* 7–8), Rumfoord decides to alter human history by orchestrating a proverbial "war to end all wars." "Enough of these frizzles in leadership in which millions die for nothing or less," he says, "Let us have, for a change, a magnificently-led few who die for a great deal" (177). To such effect, he arranges a deliberately failed Martian invasion, whose brutal defeat leads humanity to finally embrace peace. Herbert G. Klein argues that Rumfoord's misguided actions constitute a "devastating commentary on all endeavors to manipulate mankind for its own good" as well as a "critique of the American political system, where the rich shape the destinies of the less affluent" ("Genre"). In the New England millionaire's Machiavellian acceptance of "a genial willingness to shed other people's blood" (*SOT* 176) as a requisite to change the world for the better as well as in his own paradoxical existence in space and time, one can find echoes of Reinhold Niebuhr's dictum that "most evil arises because finite men involved in the flux of time pretend that they are not so involved" (*Structure* 89). Rumfoord places ends above means and thus "makes the mistake of believing he is above all other individuals, and constricts the values of the revolution to himself" (Vallina Samperio, "Wasteland" 102), which results in a contradictory reading of apocalypse in the tragic vein, whereby, in order to redeem humanity, he resorts to dehumanizing means, treating people as mere pawns in a game. In a form of cosmic justice, Rumfoord will finally find that he too has been used against his will by forces above his control, and to ludicrous means at that, as the end of the novel exposes how the whole of human history has been manipulated by the planet Tralfamadore as a tool to send greetings across the universe, and makes clear that anyone looking for a higher purpose in life is doomed to find only disappointing anguish.

The second US President, John Adams, famously said that "Power always thinks it has a great soul and vast views beyond the comprehension of the weak; and that it is doing God's service when it is violating all its laws" (qtd. in Burleigh xi), and, appearing as it did at the end of the fifties, it is hard not to read Rumfoord's acts in *The Sirens of Titan* as Vonnegut's comment on his country's actions in the Cold War. Holding on to a tragic apocalyptic rhetoric in which America was the embodiment of all things good in a crusade against evil, but fearing a full-scale nuclear exchange with the USSR, at the beginning of the decade the United States started to become involved in

counterinsurgency operations guided by President Eisenhower's metaphor of nations as a row of dominos, whereby the fall of one country to communism would inevitably bring down all the rest (Levine and Papasotiriou 72). These schemes, which often required backing authoritarian regimes that symbolized the antithesis of the American credo of freedom and the rule of law were, once again, justified by the overarching narrative of the Cold War, and led to the US government's surreptitious use of force in places where "the communist threat was imaginary or minor" (Levine and Papasotiriou 71). Their ultimate outcome was the fueling of anti-Americanism all over the world, instituting a widespread view of the country as a violent empire which stood firmly against its self-image as a champion of liberty and. To the eyes of many, the United States was moving ever closer to the blind totalitarianism it pretended to oppose and, as we will see, the direct consequences of several of these actions such as the promotion of the 1951 overthrow of the Mossadeq regime in Iran or the support of French colonialists in Indochina, would soon come to haunt Americans in the near future.

In the fifties, the United States rejected its tradition of isolationism to claim a new, higher calling which was no less than "saving the world" (Morace 154), and through the metaphor of Rumfoord's massacre for peace, Vonnegut exposes the dehumanization inevitably inherent in the acceptance of any such endeavor. Peter Paik explains how Vonnegut's novel presents the reader with a scenario in which "world peace is won not only through deception and genocide, but also exhorted by means of myths concocted by the very perpetrators of the slaughter" (26), and ultimately results "not in the abolition of oppression but rather in its redistribution" (25). Thus, *The Sirens of Titan* depicts "the moral abyss above which the residents of utopia must levitate" (36) by enacting a paradox whereby man's inhumanity to man can only be remedied "through a supremely inhuman act" (55). However hard it tries, the United States cannot elude, nor even conceal, the violence and horror that are irremediably inherent in its self-appointed responsibility as world savior. Again, this is an example of how Vonnegut's employment of the science fiction mode allows him to address certain topics, to "approach the dangerous and painful truths he (and we) might not otherwise be able to bear" (Rose 163). Only within "the exaggerated scaffolding provided by the fantasy" (Paik 21) can the author afford to expose the very real atrocities of his time, and thanks to the prism of detachment endowed by science fiction, the reader is allowed to coldly consider the spectrum of growing

contradiction and senseless violence of postmodern reality without falling into the moralist stance that would be inevitable in the frame of a realistic narrative.

Just as the final picture of *Player Piano* is that of a failed revolution which proves "pointless, producing violence and revealing that modernity cannot be reversed" (Luckhurst 117), *The Sirens of Titan* presents the reader with an utterly meaningless cosmos, pointing to the possibility that "man has a tragic flaw that relentlessly moves him in the direction of self-annihilation" (Schatt 28). However, both novels also plant the seed of a contradictory impulse that will mark Vonnegut's whole oeuvre: his hope in a comic personal act of creation that will turn this world into a more human place. In *Player Piano,* Paul Proteus is finally reassured that "It doesn't matter if we win or lose, Doctor," because "[t]he important thing is that we tried" (*PP* 334), whereas in *The Sirens of Titan,* Malachi Constant undergoes an apocalyptic process from the profligate assurance that "somebody up there likes me" to an acceptance of man's cosmic insignificance in his assertion that "I was a victim of accidents as are we all" (*SOT* 232), thus rejecting his initial fundamentalism in favor of a more humane philosophy. Klinkowitz writes that "Malachi's adventures parallel the experiences of many Americans of Vonnegut's age" (*Kurt Vonnegut* 44), and in his experience, as in that of Paul Proteus, the author defends the apocalyptic potential of the everyman to oppose the dehumanizing narratives in the tragic framework and enact change, at least at a personal level.

Proteus' and Constant's very different but inherently linked acts of rebellion, even if they yield no tangible results in the larger historical picture, constitute a sign of hope. Both characters embody a means to resist the fundamentalist rhetoric of their time and to assert human worth in the face of dehumanization. Instead of spending "long hours in introspection" (Olderman 15) like the prototypical protagonist of fifties American literature, Vonnegut's characters point to a new paradigm in American fiction: the "humanist utilization of the anti-heroic" (Simmons, *Anti-Hero* xi) in opposition to the triumphalist narrative of the Cold War. Simmons explains that this phenomenon would soon become "one of the more important literary techniques employed by a decade's worth of writers in effectively documenting and conveying the ideological condition of a postwar generation" (xi). The sixties protagonist seeks to "pursue his identity haphazardly through conflict with nearly everything and everyone" (Olderman 15) and Vonnegut's fifties novels are a clear forerunner of this change. At the close of the fifties, Paul Riesman declared that "serious discussion of the future is just what is missing in the United States"

(139) whereas Irving Howe sentenced that it was practically impossible to produce significant literary art amidst the homogenizing affluence of American society ("Mass Society" 422). If both authors had read Kurt Vonnegut's first two novels, they might have reconsidered their statements. However, it would take ten more years after the publication of *The Sirens of Titan* for its creator to finally achieve his due recognition.

2.5 A battle for America's soul: The 1960s

The nineteen sixties may well be the most talked-about decade of the twentieth century. Mark Lilla explains that everybody recognizes "a before and after" the sixties, yet "we are still groping for the meaning of what happened in between" (4) as, over half a century later, historians, critics and citizens alike continue to try to come to terms with the legacy of one of the most "colorful, complex, and eventful periods in American history" (Farber and Bailey xi).

The American sixties were undeniably apocalyptic years, not only because their constant "rhetoric of showdown and recklessness" created a sense that "[t]he end was always near" (Gitlin *The Sixties* 287), but also due to their contradictory nature, with the combination of "national affluence and massive discontent, global leadership and military defeat" (Farber and Bailey 75) contributing to a very particular idiosyncrasy. Perhaps above all, the controversies of the decade served to engage "fundamental American ideals of freedom and equality with a vigor and depth rarely matched before and not matched since" (Macedo 16). The question of what constituted the "true" American identity was brought to the forefront in a struggle over "the meaning of the American past and the direction of the nation's future" (Farber and Bailey xi), but the debate remains open over whether the outcome of such struggle represented "a fuller realization of American ideals or their betrayal" (Macedo 168). For an entire generation of Americans, the decade instituted a fresh paradigm based on the questioning of old assumptions; a new tradition "more important for questions than for answers," for "assumptions than for conclusions," and for "ideas than for lasting institutions" (J. Farrell 260). On the contrary, for the "cultural-conservative revanchists" (Farber 167) that would rise to power in the eighties, the sixties were the beginning of an apocalyptic "battle for America's soul" (167).

Literature, of course, reflected the contradictory impulses of the decade, which provided a fertile ground for some of the most innovative American writing yet, as writers engaged on a creative argument over the possibilities of the novel as a medium and art form. Klinkowitz argues that "Kurt Vonnegut's fiction is a precursor of the great turnabout that American culture experienced" during the sixties (*Kurt Vonnegut* 89) and "the popular artefact which may be the fairest example of American cultural change" (16). The author not only contributed to but also experienced this zeitgeist himself because, after almost twenty years of writing, the sixties would finally place him at the forefront of the American literary vanguard. Kurt Vonnegut entered the sixties struggling to write for a living and left it as the most popular novelist in America, and he bookended the period with two novels that remain two of the most significant literary artifacts of the decade: *Cat's Cradle* (1963) and *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969).

2.6 "Nothing in this book is true": *Cat's Cradle* (1963)

For all the radical shifts that he would experience as the decade unfolded, nothing much changed for Kurt Vonnegut during the first years of the sixties. Unable to "rise above the status of a ham-and-egger as an author" (Shields 168), he accepted any job he could to support his family and maintain his writing career afloat. In 1961, he published his second paperback original, *Mother Night*, written as the memoir of a German American Nazi propagandist who was in truth an Allied spy during World War II. The book was a further indictment of the tragic apocalyptic good-versus-evil rhetoric which, in its hall-of-mirrors-like spy thriller plot, revealed instead many morally-relativistic shades of gray. As usual, it sold poorly and garnered no reviews (Shields 173).

The change of decade did not seem to alter the contradictory impulses that had become characteristic of the American socio-political reality during the past ten years, either. Hence, as *Time* magazine victoriously declared in August 1959 that the United States was a country "in which fear and fretting were made ridiculous by the facts of national life" (qtd. in Carter 109), the following year author John Cheever sentenced that "Life in the United States in 1960 is Hell" (Donaldson 179). Still, the 1960 election of John Fitzgerald Kennedy seemed to promise change in the young Democrat's rehashing of one of the great American foundational symbols: "We stand today on the edge of a

New Frontier," he assured (qtd. in Farber and Bailey 7), promising to guide the country out of the darkness of the fifties and into a bright, "safe and sane future" (7). In his inaugural address, President Kennedy assured "we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, to assure the survival and the success of liberty" (qtd. in Levine and Papasotiriou 103), but perhaps even more indicative of times to come was his precursor Dwight Eisenhower's farewell speech, in which the former General warned of a "military-industrial complex" which had gained "total influence, economic, political, even spiritual" throughout the country and threatened to "endanger our liberties or democratic processes" (qtd. in Stone and Kuznick 166). The extent of the threat would be felt during Kennedy's presidency, during which the defense budget was increased by 13% (Levine and Papasotiriou 103) and which was punctuated by the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962, probably the episode in which the United States and the Soviet Union came closest to a direct nuclear exchange in the entire Cold War. The incident dangerously highlighted the contradictory rhetoric of Cold War politics in Kennedy's assurance that "[w]e will not prematurely or unnecessarily risk the costs of worldwide nuclear war, in which even the fruits of victory would be ashes in our mouth – but neither will we shrink from that risk at any time it must be faced" (qtd. in Farber and Bailey 9–10).

It is difficult not to read a metaphor of the Cuban Missile Crisis in Vonnegut's fourth novel, *Cat's Cradle*, published barely a year after the event. In the book, a journalist named John follows the children of Dr. Franklin Hoenikker, one of the "Fathers of the first atomic bomb" (*CC* 6) to the Caribbean Island of San Lorenzo with the intention of writing a book about the Hiroshima bombing entitled *The Day the World Ended.* "The book was to be factual" (1), John writes, nodding at the irredeemable apocalyptic change brought by atomic power in 1945; and factual it turns out to be, as the narrator when bears witness to the definitive end of human life on Earth when Hoenikker's final creation, *ice-nine*, a chemical that instantly freezes any liquid it makes contact with, is accidentally dropped into the Pacific Ocean. *Cat's Cradle* is "a rollicking burlesque of the Cold War" (Sumner 81), but it is also a new type of science fiction novel with the emphasis on "science." Science fiction is at the heart of *Cat's Cradle* from its inception, as the plot was inspired by H.G. Well's visit to the General Electric plant in Schenectady in the 1930s, when head scientist Irving Langmuir proposed Wells an idea for a story "about a form of water that solidified at room temperature" (Shields 176). Vonnegut, however,

developed the pretext into a deceivingly simple examination of the moral and existential stalemate posed by the military-industrial complex in the United States of the early sixties.

By the time *Cat's Cradle* was published, the scope of the consequences of potential discoveries and inventions by morally careless scientists like Hoenikker had expanded dramatically. Far from a fanciful pretext for an amusing science fiction story, Langmuir's idea now seemed chillingly dangerous, as the experience of the Cold War arms race established "a growing sense of genuine terror over the malign potential of science practiced without a social conscience" (Kirk 357). Wedded to the military rhetoric of communist containment, science had proven a dehumanizing agent through the development of technologies which made it "both necessary and easy to destroy without having to confront the consequences of one's acts of destruction" (Abele 73), instituting a fundamentalist mentality whereby the heads of the military carelessly looked upon figures like Dr. Hoenikker as "a sort of magician who could make America invincible with a wave of his hand" (*CC* 42). Concurrently, scientific developments in the arena of the new physics were starting to question the very concept of "truth" itself, with Karl Popper arguing in 1959 that science should not be looked upon as a "body of knowledge" but rather as a "system of guesses or anticipations . . . of which we are never justified in saying that we know that they are 'true' or 'more or less certain' or even 'probable'" (317). The result of these dual advancements is an apocalyptic contradiction in itself, a world in which, in Robert Nadeau's words:

> The once-prevalent faith in this culture that science and its handmaiden technology could wrest from the forces of nature all that was needed to sustain and nurture the entire human population dims, and yet the mushroom-shaped cloud hovers perpetually in the recesses of our minds as sign and symbol of our dreadful mastery over these forces. (13)

Far from a despiser of science, Kurt Vonnegut was a chemistry student whose brother Bernard was one the pre-eminent atmospheric scientists of his time. However, precisely because of his scientific background and his experience at a company like General Electric, Vonnegut could sense the dangerous consequences of the Kennedy administration's faith in the application of reason and science "to work for social improvement by brand-new technological methods" (Levine and Papasotiriou 99) coupled with a military agenda that prioritized Cold War interests. Kennedy himself

warned that "[m]ankind must put an end to war – or war will put an end to mankind" (qtd. in O'Leary 164); in order to do so, Vonnegut believes, the United States must reject a military-industrial rhetoric of science as "magic that works" (*CC* 218) and stop trying to cynically impose liberty through warfare and scientific superiority, emphasizing human concerns instead. As he has a character say in *Cat's Cradle,* "Sometimes I think that's the trouble with the world, too many people in high places who are stone-cold dead" (69).

In direct opposition to the military-industrial complex taken to its direst consequences as represented by *ice-nine,* Vonnegut creates Bokononism, a fictional religion based on the concept that all its precepts are lies. Robert Scholes famously wrote about *Cat's Cradle* that "[a]s the scientist finds the truth that kills, the prophet looks for a saving lie" (*Fabulation* 158), a dichotomy apparent in the "gentle holy man" (*CC* 175) Bokonon's concept of truth not as desirable goal to pursue but as "the enemy of the people" (172). Faced with the harsh realities of everyday life in poverty-stricken San Lorenzo and, in a mindset not too far removed from Karl Popper's, aware of the "folly of pretending to discover, to understand" (4), Bokonon chooses to make up lies "so that they all fit nice" in order to make "this sad world a par-a-dise" (127). As a religion, Bokononism is based around the concept of *foma,* "harmless untruths" (vii) that seek to make life more bearable by teaching people to behave humanely in a senseless world. It is no coincidence that, while Dr. Hoenikker develops *ice-nine,* the substance that ultimately destroys life on Earth as an assignment to fight the mud in which troops and tanks get trapped at war zones, Bokononism describes man as "sitting-up-mud" (220), because what Vonnegut's fictional religion presents us with is a narrative system that uses humanity as its sole unit of measure.

Schatt writes that "Vonnegut has always attacked massive institutions whether they be political, social, or religious on the grounds that they tend to dehumanize people" (92), and just as *Player Piano* was not an attack on technology and *The Sirens of Titan* was not an attack on religion, *Cat's Cradle* is not a critique of science per se. The warning in all of these novels is about the dangers of any type of metanarrative "allowed to go unchecked" (Allen 220), because it is prone to fall into fundamentalism. When perspective is lost, and the distinction between literal and figurative is blurred so that mere hypotheses are taken as bedrock truth, Vonnegut sees the dangers of the "totalitarian mind" and how its tragic apocalyptic understanding of the world can only lead to violence and fanaticism. The author argues that it is "crucial that humanity is able to critique and

revise such narratives lest they run out of control" (Allen 220), and by presenting the reader with a fabricated religion that is "overtly honest about its dishonesty *and* yet still meaningful" (Thomas 33), he argues that the value of fictions as useful tools for the human race strives precisely in their nature as fictions. Be they religious beliefs, political systems or scientific hypotheses, human constructs must always be open to debate, understood as flexible and given value according to their worth to mankind; because if they are understood as unquestionable truths they not only lose their value but become dangerous totalitarian instruments. With Bokononism, Vonnegut presents the reader with a religion for which the only sacred thing even above God, is humanity (*CC* 211), which it holds as the measure of all things. The key to its dogma is to ensure that humans behave with kindness to each other, not whether its metaphors and parables can be proven empirically true. As John declares, "Anyone unable to understand how a useful religion can be founded in lies, will not understand this book either" (5–6).

For the first time in Vonnegut's career, *Cat's Cradle* received some significant attention upon its publication, with Terry Southern calling it "a work of a far more engaging and meaningful order than the melodramatic tripe which most critics seem to consider 'serious'" (Southern archive.nytimes.com) and Graham Greene listing it among his three favorite novels of the year in the *London Spectator* and hailing Vonnegut as "one of the best living American writers" (Wakefield, *Letters* 97). *Cat's Cradle* was a prime exponent of the new identity of the American novel of the nineteen sixties as a "strongly humanist and politically engaged form" (Simmons, *Anti-Hero* 2) but it was much more than that, too. With its telegraphically short chapters, dark sense of humor, hodgepodge of genres, and appealing narrative voice, it became an indispensable cultural artefact of its time; a new type of novel in which "attitude and pace are as important to the impact as any of the plot devices" (Sumner 81). The book would be discovered by a generation of readers who, in the face of the apocalyptic changes to come in the United States, would soon embrace Vonnegut as a humanist prophet akin to Bokonon himself.

2.7 "The country is in disease": The crisis of the 1960s

The assassination of President Kennedy dramatically altered the course of the nineteen sixties. With Kennedy's election in 1960, Americans had entered "a new era of

intensified public awareness and accelerating historical consciousness" (Levine and Papasotiriou 123) spearheaded by the President and First Lady's juvenile style and aesthetic. Norman Mailer had predicted that, with the Kennedys in the White House, "America's politics would now also be America's favorite movie, America's first soap opera, America's best-seller" (*Honorable* 21), but on November 22, 1963, the movie made an unexpected detour into darkness. "The seven seconds that broke the back of the American century," as Don DeLillo termed the sequence of the President's murder in Dallas (*Libra* 181), were repeated endlessly on television, freezing the shocking images in time and inevitably embedding them in the minds of all Americans. JFK's murder inaugurated the relentless "pace of momentous events" (Braunstein 255) that would characterize the rest of the decade and lend it an unreal quality of "unprecedented experiential density" (255). History, it seemed, was no longer "a pattern of factually and philosophically analyzable causes," but had instead turned into "a nightmare" (Braudy 116) of violence and insanity. The Kennedy assassination instilled an acute feeling of paranoia, leaving "a huge hole in the life of America" (Gray 8) that people attempted to fill with conspiracy theories, in search of an apocalyptic narrative[25] that could explain the apparent chaos and randomness of existence and offer a sense of coherence. When the Warren Commission issued its final report on the investigation of the President's assassination less than a year later, polls showed that a majority of Americans did not trust the official narrative, and continued to speculate on the "unseen forces [that] were behind this catastrophic turn of events" (Hellmann 300) and would seem to stir the course of the nation for the next ten years.

Kennedy's successor, former Vice-President Lyndon B. Johnson, set aside the New Frontier rhetoric of the previous administration in favor of a domestic agenda for the achievement of what he termed "The Great Society," a state that "rests in abundance and liberty for all" and "demands an end to poverty and racial injustice" (qtd. in Farber and Bailey 26). For years now, the growing Civil Rights movement had been denouncing the "yawning gap between the cherished ideals of the Declaration [of Independence] and the appalling realities of American life" (Cullen 56). In an era of modern communications and mass media, the United States could no longer conceal the shamefully contradictory

[25] Stephen D. O'Leary delves further into the link between conspiracy and apocalypse, explaining how "[t]he discourses of conspiracy and apocalypse . . . are linked by a common function: each develops symbolic resources that enable societies to define and address the problem of evil. While conspiracy strives to provide a spatial self-definition of the true community as set apart from the evils that surround us, apocalypse locates the problem of evil in time and looks forward to its imminent resolution" (6).

realities of racial segregation in the South; a disgracing fact for a nation that boasted of being the beacon of liberty in its crusade against communist totalitarianism and was instead exposed as a hypocritical land of inequality. The American Dream, held Martin Luther King, Jr., was "a dream yet unfulfilled" (qtd. in Cullen 126) that would not materialize into reality as long as skin color determined the reach of an American citizen's scope of possibilities.

Defending the Voting Rights Act of 1965 before Congress, President Johnson claimed how "[s]hould we defeat any enemy, should we double our wealth and conquer the stars, and still be unequal in this issue, then we will have failed as a people and as a nation" (qtd. in Levine and Papasotiriou 110). However, the outlawing of segregation did not result in an eradication of racial inequality. Over a century earlier, Alexis de Tocqueville had prognosticated that the abolition of slavery in the South would not end racism, as it would "increase the hostility of the southern white population towards Blacks" (412), and, rather than result in "freedom for the slave," was prone to simply cause "a change of master from southerner to northerner" (404). Now, de Tocqueville's words seemed to ring true as an "urban geography of socioeconomic and racial segregation" (Scott 264) developed in American cities in the wake of the Voting Rights Act, whereby Black Americans escaping the "dehumanizing conditions of *de jure* segregation" in the South faced a new reality of "*de facto* discrimination . . . in employment, housing, and education" (267). Instead of resulting in greater racial integration, the new demography of post-segregationist America created a sort of vicious circle in which the arrival of blacks at inner cities created declining urban ghettos marked by high unemployment and crime rates while the middle class fled to all-white suburbs in the outskirts (Levine and Papasotiriou 15). Facing a new form of segregation not by law, but "by custom" (Hodgson 41), a new generation of Black rights activists would trade the nonviolent resistance tactics of the Civil Rights for a more violent approach attuned to the zeitgeist of the times. By mid-decade, major riots were starting to break out in major cities all across the nation, as Black Power leader H. Rap Brown warned "Black folks built America, and if America don't come around, we're going to burn America down" (qtd. in Scott 270).

However, racial differences were not the only cause of socioeconomic inequalities in sixties America. The cul-de-sac that, again, Tocqueville had identified in the American Dream when he had argued that "The same social state that incessantly spurs [citizens']

desires circumscribes those desires within necessary limits" (748) was becoming more apparent as the economic gap widened and the poverty rate rose. Jim Cullen explains how the acceleration of industrial capitalism in the late nineteenth century coupled with an economic reading of Social Darwinism had resulted in the popular American notion of "freedom as the right of the individual entrepreneur . . . to make as much money as he could without interference." The big business tycoon, then, was traditionally free from regulations and allowed to exert his economic domination at will, rejecting claims for greater equality as constraints on freedom that "smacked of socialism" (Cullen 107). In a cruel twist of Social Darwinism, those that did not reach the top were blamed for not having been smart enough to take advantage of their opportunities – after all, all men were created equal – combining with the old Protestant ethic to create the assumption that "the wealthy are God's chosen people and that the poor are guilty of sin or natural depravity" (Schatt 75).

President Johnson sought to address this deep-rooted scenario with a number of federal health care, education and welfare programs deemed the "War on Poverty," which became the setting for Kurt Vonnegut's fifth novel, *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater.* In it, the author investigates how "the American Dream turned belly up, turned green, bobbled in to the scummy surface of cupidity unlimited, filled with gas, went *bang* in the noonday sun" (*GBY* 9), all because of the folly of the Founding Fathers, who "had not made it the law of the Utopia that the wealth of each citizen should be limited" (8). Nevertheless, Vonnegut indicts both the Republican rhetoric of fundamentalist justification of wealth and Johnson's welfare rationale, arguing that simply throwing money at the poor is not the solution. If the nation is to progress into real equality and a true realization of the dreams of its founders, the author claims that there is a need for a new American myth, a comic apocalyptic transformation that will "eliminate the seeds of destruction inherent in the status quo" (Wakefield, *Letters* 19) by "treasuring human beings because they are *human beings*" (*GBY* 265). The War on Poverty definitely did not manage to bring an end to inequality in America, as many of its policies "bogged down in poor management, waste, and political feuding at the local level" (Levine and Papasotiriou 23) while funds were increasingly deviated to cover the expense of the war in Vietnam. The failure of Johnson's policies not only demonstrated how entrenched and intractable many social issues were in the "Land of the free," but it also fostered a conservative backlash that argued that welfare programs "created dependency on government handouts instead of

fostering individual responsibility" (Farber and Bailey 29). In the late seventies, this backlash would grow into a full-scale New Right movement that would culminate with Ronald Reagan's election to the White House in 1980.

Still, by the mid-sixties, no other issue seemed more pressing than the escalating war in Vietnam. Even though US military "advisors" had been actively engaged in the struggle between South and North Vietnam since the late nineteen fifties, Lyndon Johnson positioned himself as a peace candidate in the 1964 election, assuring that "we are not going to send American boys nine or ten thousand miles away from home to do what Asian boys ought to be doing themselves" (qtd. in Hellmann 300), in opposition to Republican Barry Rosewater, whose running-mate, General Curtis Lemay, summarized his proposed Vietnam policy as "Bomb them back into the Stone Age" (Braunstein and Doyle 8). However, after winning the election, Johnson passed the Gulf of Tonkin resolution, which gave him full authority to increase the military presence in the former French Indochina and by the end of 1964, over twenty-three thousand US troops were stationed in the Southeastern country, as opposed to the mere three thousand in 1961 (Hellmann 300). Meanwhile, Americans at home became the audience for the first televised war in history. In a further manifestation of the disorienting nature of reality in the nineteen sixties, every evening families throughout the country sat in front of their television screens to watch images of shocking violence which "disturbingly turned upside down the dream of Vietnam as setting for the transformation of a New Frontier into a Great Society" (Helmann 302). Thomas Pynchon once wrote that death and killing play a "useful" part in a war, serving "as spectacle, as diversion from the real movements" which are political and economic (*Gravity's Rainbow* 105), and the American entertainment industry was certainly adept at turning combat into a form of amusement. Still, the news reels that arrived from Vietnam were far removed from the expected Western or World War II action blockbuster, as the visions of jungles burned by chemicals like napalm and of the senseless slaughter of soldiers and civilians alike, seemed more akin to "a horror movie" (Hellmann 302).[26] As the decade progressed, the Vietnam War "undermined American's most cherished images of themselves" (303) as a fair people fighting in the defense of freedom, and became in its stead a "nightmarish

[26] Perhaps the most disturbing of these episodes was the My Lai massacre, during which a company of US soldiers murdered between 347 and 504 unarmed people including men, women, and children in the South Vietnamese district of So´n Tinh on March 16th, 1968.

demonstration of the inability of Americans to fulfill the scenario of their national mythology" (302).

On January 30, 1968, during the celebration of the Vietnamese New Year, North Vietnamese forces launched a surprise attack on several major South Vietnamese cities which would become known as the Tet Offensive. American forces managed to repel the attacks, but still, the televised chaos that ensued exposed the inability of the US army to prevent such a full-scale offensive and created a "credibility gap" (Hellmann 303) in American public opinion about the trustworthiness of the administration's auspicious statements about the war's progress. Amid a climate of massive anti-war demonstrations, Johnson responded to the upsurge in criticism by announcing that he would not seek reelection, a decision that turned the initially unsuccessful Tet Offensive into a strategic masterstroke for the North Vietnamese. The war would persist for seven more years, taking the lives of over 58,000 Americans, and severely affecting the country's economy and its social stability. Just as important, the Vietnam War drastically altered the self-image of the nation forever. Richard H. Innerman claims that, in Vietnam, "America lost its innocence and ethos of exceptionalism as well as its confidence in its invincibility" (118), an apocalypse whose consequences would dramatically shape the course of the country in the decades to come.

As the Vietnam experience was turning into a suicidal deadlock and "the nation's image of itself was cracking apart" (Hellmann 304), a grassroots movement grew among the disenchanted American youth, who demanded that the country put an end to the war and act according to its foundational principles. Loosely encompassed under the term "counterculture," popularized by Theodore Roszak in his 1969 study *The Making of a Counterculture,* it was not so much a social movement as "an inherently unstable collection of attitudes, tendencies, postures, gestures, 'lifestyles,' ideals, visions, hedonistic pleasures, moralisms, negations, and affirmations" (Braunstein and Doyle 10) united in their discontent. Its members defined themselves by opposing an American hegemony which they deemed "un-American" (Simmons, *Anti-Hero* 33) and obeyed a common apocalyptic impulse whereby "[w]hat they were was what they might become – more a process than a product" (Farber and Bailey 10).

The countercultural surge was bolstered by the twin postwar booms in the American population and economy, which meant that by the mid-sixties half of the country was under the age of twenty-five (Richardson 70), a Baby Boom generation

raised in the most prosperous period of US history. Early on in the decade, the Kennedy presidency had motivated a rejuvenation of US culture, whereby youth became "a metaphor, an attitude toward life, a state of mind that even adults could access" (Braunstein 243), turning the baby boomers into the focus of media attention and consecrating them as "the driving force behind American pop culture" (249). This new generation saw the world differently from their parents, and believed that "whatever Americans wished to make happen, would happen" (Farber and Bailey 8); a belief that contributed to an unprecedented optimism, but also to an inflated sense of their own importance (Braunstein 249) that turned into a smug but idealistic rebellious impulse as the decade progressed and the American Dream transmuted into the nightmares of Vietnam, racism, economic inequality and senseless violence. Doyle explains that, ultimately, the ideals of the counterculture "must be understood as an expression of the utopian premises that form the wellsprings of American civilization" (152); a yearning for the accomplishment of the Constitution's promise of "a more perfect union."

The media painted a simplified picture of the counterculture as "hippies," who Governor of California and future US President Ronald Reagan famously ridiculed as somebody who "dresses like Tarzan, has hair like Jane and smells like Cheetah" (qtd. in Levine and Papasotiriou 117), but theirs was actually a complex ethic compounded of different attitudes ranging from environmentalism to women's liberation, Black Power, communalism, gay rights and New Left pacifism. United under the banner that "the personal is political" (J. Farrell 5), counterculturalists awoke their consciousness to a recognition that "the country in which they thought they lived – peaceful, generous, honorable – did not exist and never had" (Young 3), and that the US was indeed "dealing death, not only to people in other lands, but to its own people" (Reich 1), a fact that turned it into "a desperately poor country . . . in most of the things that throughout the history of mankind have been cherished as riches" (1). The United States, in Martin Luther King, Jr.'s phrase, was "approaching spiritual death" (qtd. in Stone and Kuznick 193), and the only way to remedy its path seemed a process of apocalyptic transformation in pursue of "a higher reason, a more human community, and a new liberated individual" that would result in "a renewed relationship of man to himself, to other men, to society, to nature, and to the land" (Reich 2).[27] This aesthetic peaked in the so-called Summer of Love of

[27] The apocalyptic rhetoric of the counterculture is manifest in events such as the "First Human Be-In," celebrated in San Francisco on January 14, 1967 whose promotional posters announced its intent to "shower

1967, which epitomized the counterculture's quasi-messianic desire to "sample or create a new life based on transcendence" (Richardson 96). By the time the Woodstock Music and Arts Fair congregated almost half a million people in upstate New York in August 1969, "Woodstock Nation had presented itself as a utopian, if spontaneously and vaguely achieved, alternative to the Great Society" (Hellmann 310).

For Kurt Vonnegut, who had entered the sixties as a largely unknown pulp writer,[28] the ethos of the decade brought along a whole new generation of avid readers. Allen Ginsberg once explained that, far from a mere drug reference, the countercultural moto of "[t]uning in" also meant "reading fiction like Salinger and Heller and Vonnegut" (qtd. in J. Farrell 211), and, unbeknownst to Vonnegut himself, with the turn of the decade *The Sirens of Titan* had become a favorite among college students, starting a phenomenon that, with the publication of *Cat's Cradle,* grew to "cult-like proportions" in campuses all over the country, where students even adopted the terminology of Bokononism as private slang (Schatt 149). Vonnegut was enshrined as "a hip philosopher" (Berryman 98), and suddenly found himself at the center of a cult following by youngsters the age of his children. There was no deliberate "guru-making" around his figure (Klinkowitz, *Disruptions* 53), because, as Dan Wakefield explains, "Vonnegut didn't go looking for the kids, they adopted him" (*Letters,* 152).

What these young, equally idealistic and disillusioned readers found in Vonnegut's novels were parables of the strange times they were living phrased in a new, seemingly anti-intellectual style (Klinkowitz, "Why" 34) and presented in a form that was "perfectly tuned to the mind of the emergent generation" (DeMott 38). These moral fables were written by a real citizen who raised a humane protest against the disorienting anxiety of living in uncertain, apocalyptic times, "under the bomb, in an eroding ecology, in deteriorating cities" (Klinkowitz, "Why" 35). Vonnegut's voice was that of a sarcastic but caring old sage who, unlike parents, teachers and politicians, addressed young Americans as equals. As a "fatalistic moralist, cynical pacifist, holy atheist, anti-intellectual philosopher, apocalyptic futurist, and grim humorist" (Bellamy, "President" 85), Vonnegut encompassed the whole spectrum of paradoxical impulses that had

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the country with waves of ecstasy and purification" and welcome the advent of a new era by becoming "the first manifestation of the Brave New World" (Braunstein 250).

[28] In *Wampeters, Foma & Granfalloons,* Vonnegut remembers how his name was not included in a 1964 list by *Esquire* magazine which presupposed to include "every living American writer of worth," a fact that, he declares, made him "feel subhuman" (282).

motivated the rise of the counterculture. Hence, probably no other book expresses the complex contradictions of US culture amid what John Barth called the "exceptional apocalyptic environment" (Fresán 153) of the height of the sixties better than Vonnegut's sixth novel, *Slaughterhouse-Five.*

2.8 "Farewell, hello, farewell, hello": *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969)

The year 1968 was a turning point that marked "the end of the utopian phase of the counterculture" (Simmons, *Anti-Hero* 38). More than 120 urban uprisings dramatized the social unrest of the country, and the discontent over Vietnam coupled with the shocking assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. in April and Robert F. Kennedy in June created a climate of tension that culminated in the August riots during the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, with images of police severely beating up protesters broadcast live to living rooms all across the nation. The country was "intensely divided over the meaning of its past and its direction for the future" (Hellmann 311) but still, polls showed that "dislike of the Vietnam War was surpassed among the general populace by detestation of radicals and hippies" (310). Tapping into this discontent, Richard Nixon appealed to the "silent majority" (qtd. in Wilentz 85) of Americans who felt that "forces of rebellion and chaos were tearing at the national fabric" (Farber and Bailey 46) and defeated Democratic candidate Hubert Humphrey in the November presidential election with the promise to restore law and order. Nixon's victory did much to deflate the counterculture's spirit of naïve optimism, but did not manage to assuage the unstoppable forces that seemed to threaten the foundations of the American Way of Life. As the sixties neared their close, an apocalyptic feeling that "the final showdown of good and evil, order and chaos, was looming" (Gitlin, *The Sixties* 342) was tangible all over the country.

Larry King reflects on how, offered as a novel, the events of American reality at the tail end of the sixties would have been soundly rejected: "This story smacks too much of fantasy," he claims a publisher would have reported, as there is "too much random violence, nameless complications, and wild probabilities" (24). Yet, it was all real, and now it was the task of fiction writers to figure how to react to this "universal descent into unreality" (Roth 35) and find a way to, as Philip Roth had anticipated in 1961, at least try

to "understand, describe, and then make *credible*" a reality which stupefied, sickened, infuriated, and ultimately became an "embarrassment to one's own meagre imagination" (34). Writers soon understood that they could not rationalize this new "unreality," as it was incompatible with "the stylistic patterns which render the introspective, contemplative, domestic imagination of the fifties" (Stevick 198). In order to translate the fragmented experience of the sixties to paper, they would need to discover a whole new mode of expression that could convey the fragmented and chaotic experience of the times, the prevailing violence and sense of discontinuity between the individual and society. Paradoxically, this apocalyptic context liberated writers to experiment with the limits of fiction, and they embraced the prevailing unreality in an ontological investigation of the meaning of meaning itself with "increasing doubts about the existence of God, authenticity, or reality itself" (Deloria 161). History and reality had ceased to be "a place of hope, opportunity, and humanity," and had instead morphed into "an arena of distorting power-plays, vast technological systems, conspiratorial structures, and apocalyptic threats to individual survival" (Bradbury, *Modern* 199). The reaction of American writers to this new paradigm was a new, innovative fiction that would be labelled postmodernist.

Postmodernist writing, however, is not a unified style, reveling as it does in "the dissolution of convention and the playful breaking down of genres" (Bradbury, *Modern* 195). Discarding moral realism in an era where objective certainty seemed an unavailable illusion, authors embraced avant-garde techniques of randomness, pastiche and openness, and added a deliberate "note of disquiet, absurdity, and extremity" (200) to their works. To postmodernist writers, the realist novel had come to symbolize "the literary equivalent of official structures of power and oppressive social convention" (Nicol 72), so they sought to push as far as possible in the opposite direction, flaunting their own authorial presence in a new kind of fiction that foregrounded its artificial nature with its "tendency toward play and game, its stress on art as forgery, and its surreal fabulous dimension" (Bradbury, *The Novel* 10). The disparately plural nature of sixties postmodernist writing encompasses works that range "from the documentary to the reflexive, from historical narrative to grotesque and absurdist black humor and surrealism" (Bradbury, *Modern* 204), but at the heart of them was an aesthetic debate over the "death of the novel"

(Klinkowitz *Disruptions* 7)[29] that, in the United States, manifested in two opposing camps.

On the one hand, novelist John Barth, in an influential article entitled "The Literature of Exhaustion" (1967), famously addressed the "used-upness" (70) of conventional elements of traditional fiction, such as character construction, realistic dialogue, omniscient narrators and scene-by-scene structure. Barth argued that these constitutive characteristics of the novel were no longer of use to writers except in the form of parody, pastiche, and irony, thus certifying, in a sense, an end to literary imagination. Simultaneously, a new school of writing started to apply those very same techniques to journalism, reporting real-life experiences through the prism of imaginative literature in a way that would gain them the title of New Journalists. The New Journalism, according to Tom Wolfe, constituted "the first new direction in American literature in the last fifty years" (*New* 71), an unexpected innovation whereby nonfiction managed to "wipe out the novel as literature's main event" (22) by focusing on the very nature of writing which Barth and his followers rejected and which, to Wolfe, constituted "the richest terrain of the novel" (43). Each in its own way, both schools of thought had abandoned the notion of "the Great American Novel" (Klinkowitz, *Disruptions* 4), but the scenario would be radically altered in March 1969 with the publication of Kurt Vonnegut's sixth novel.

In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut combined all the contradictory impulses of American literature during the sixties to create a new kind of novel, equally experimental and accessible, rooted in a very real social context but concerned with timeless aesthetic and moral questions. Levine and Papasotiriou hold that "Vonnegut spoke for all the writers of the nineteen sixties" (126) in *Slaughterhouse-Five*'s passionate search for a new form that would try to encompass the fragmented nature of postmodern experience; a form which should neither be a cynical rejection of conventions that would turn the novel into "an elitist, academic diversion" (Klinkowitz, *Disruptions* 4), nor a sound rejection of fiction of the imagination to stick to a factual report of social "manners and morals" (Wolfe, *New* 43). Instead, Vonnegut yearns for a new novel that should be the result of an apocalyptic process that would embrace all the different possibilities of the form and mold them into an innovative product that may instigate readers to work towards the creation of a better world. In order to create this new type of novel, Vonnegut rehashed

[29] The grueling aesthetic debate over the so-called "death of the novel" in the sixties is analyzed in detail in epigraph 3.8 of this dissertation.

the themes and forms of all his previous novels, returning to the danger of dehumanizing technology of *Player Piano*, the indictment of ends above means and the cosmic scope of *The Sirens of Titan*, the moral relativism of *Mother Night*, the dehumanizing potential of unchecked, fundamentalist narratives of *Cat's Cradle,* and the need for a new humanitarian creed based on the recognition of human dignity of *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*. Stylistically, *Slaughterhouse-Five,* was the epitome of the author's idiosyncratic multiplicity, highlighting his characteristic ability to effortlessly sketch memorable characters and move them through a succession of social vignettes that snatched laughter from the edge of tears at an unrelenting pace while also inviting to deep philosophical enquiry.

At heart, *Slaughterhouse-Five* is a work of science fiction, "a novel somewhat in the telegraphic schizophrenic manner of tales of the planet Tralfamadore, where the flying saucers come from" (*SH5* i), as its title page reads, which follows the exploits of Billy Pilgrim, a man "unstuck in time" (23) who randomly and uncontrollably moves from one moment of his life to another without control. However, *Slaughterhouse-Five* is far removed from the dystopian fantasies and what-if scenarios of Vonnegut's previous novels and is instead rooted in a very real now; in an America so traumatically shaken by its violent unreality that motifs such as time travel and trips to the planet Tralfamadore no longer seem childish diversions and instead provide a viable path towards the "psychological examination of *inner space*" (Luckhurst 142) through their juxtaposition with current events such as the assassination of Robert Kennedy and counts of "corpses created by military science in Vietnam" (*SH5* 210).[30] The way Vonnegut manages to tie all these disparaging elements together into a combination that works is through the creation of a very personal authorial voice. The novel, after all, is a means for the author to tell *his* story, to recount his wartime experience during the destruction of the German city of Dresden, and Vonnegut openly discards any illusion of omniscience, bookending the novel with chapters in which he speaks in the first person, explaining details of his own life as well as the process of writing the novel, and then introducing himself into the main narrative as a secondary character: "That was I. That was me. That was the author

[30] Jess Ritter likens the discontinuous narrative structure of *Slaughterhouse-Five* and its unannounced shifts between space and time as well as between autobiographical realism and science fiction fantasy to the techniques of TV montage (43). In his radical transgression of realism and linearity, thus, Vonnegut is offering a new, perhaps purer image of what life feels like to a generation bred on television's trademark disruptions between scripted programs, commercial breaks, and the numbing violence of newsreels from President Kennedy's assassination or Vietnam.

of this book" (*SH5* 125). Through these techniques, the author manages to create a very personal voice that delivers the narration with the warmth of a close friend who, with sensitivity and humor, gently guides the reader through its shocking depiction of the most destructive aspects of human nature.

Jerome Klinkowitz claims that "[t]he truth is that America was not ready for a novel such as *Slaughterhouse-Five* any earlier than it finally did appear" (*America* 41), referencing the book's perfect timing not only in matters of its literary unconventionality but, especially, of its main subject matter. As a novel concerned with a massacre perpetrated by the Allies during World War II—the firebombing of the open city of Dresden, that killed an estimated 135,000 people (*FWD* 101)[31] on February 13–15, 1945—its demystification of "'Good War' and victory culture fantasies of national innocence" (Sumner 4) probably would not have been accepted by a wide audience before the harsh realities of the American involvement in Vietnam had been exposed by the news media in the late sixties. World War II, Vonnegut once said, was "a war against pure evil," and "[n]othing was too horribly to do to an enemy that vile" (*WFG* 104), but still, the author could not escape the moral dilemma raised by the senseless slaughter he witnessed at Dresden. For years, Vonnegut faced a "conspiracy of silence" (Sumner 18) about the events he had survived, and struggled to shape his war experience into a novel that would help him to come to terms with the question of whether the ends could be said to justify the means in atrocities such as Dresden, Hiroshima, and Nagasaki. By the time he finished writing *Slaughterhouse-Five,* he was certain that the sacredness of human life must be above any other concern; that a city full of corpses is not right, whichever side of a war they belong to, and that it is not wrong to mourn the "enemy" and expose the horrors perpetrated by your own country if, by shedding light on them, you try to assure that they will not be repeated.

Slaughterhouse-Five, thus, functions as an "exercise in catharsis" for Vonnegut (Sumner 144), finally able to purge the almost half-century-long burden of having

[31] Throughout the decades, there has been a strong disagreement over the exact number of people killed during the firebombing Dresden, with different sources reporting estimates that range from 35,000 to up to half a million (Taylor, "How Many"). In 2004, the Dresden Commission of Historians for the Ascertainment of the Number of Victims of the Air Raids on the City of Dresden on 13/14 February 1945 published an official report reducing the likely death-toll to "around 18,000 and definitely no more than 25,000" (Taylor, "How Many"). These figures are significantly lower than the ones considered at the time Vonnegut wrote *Slaughterhouse-Five*, which still does not undermine the fact that, as the writer probably would have argued, a single death would already have been one too many.

witnessed the massacre of Dresden, but also as an "act of political engagement" in which the author's "endeavor was patriotic in the highest sense of that word" (144). Laudable means don't justify dehumanizing ends, and to say that the United States should not enforce "freedom" through technological warfare did not amount to being "un-American" but the exact opposite, as violence, cruelty and inhumanity should be incompatible concepts with a nation cemented on "Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness." *Slaughterhouse-Five,* then, functions as a grave indictment of war and its tragic apocalyptic rhetoric of good against evil. Jeffrey Walsh explains that war is one of the great symbolic themes of American literature, used by writers of all eras to act out "the great tragic vision" of their time (3) and "demonstrate the worst fears Americans have of their culture" (5). In the process, however, *Slaughterhouse-Five* becomes a war novel unlike any other, not only for its satirical spirit and science fiction and metafictional overtones, but for the way in which it "[r]everses almost all of the generic traditions of the Hemingway-Mailer combat-centered line of war fiction" (196). In its first chapter, the real-life character of Mary O'Hare reproaches Vonnegut that war novels make war look "glamorous" and "wonderful" (*SH* 14) and only serve to perpetuate a vicious circle of destruction, to which the author replies by assuring that "there won't be a part for Frank Sinatra or John Wayne" in his new book (15). Keeping to his promise, Vonnegut crudely presents the dehumanizing consequences of war, one of whose main effects, he writes, is that "people are discouraged from being characters" and become instead "the listless playthings of enormous forces" (164). There are no fight scenes in *Slaughterhouse-Five,* whose "image of war is not the epic sweep of battle but the devastation of a beautiful, undefended city and the mass death of its innocent citizens" (Walsh 196), and whose climax is the senseless execution of Edgar Derby, the novel's "quaint symbol of decency, fair play, and moderation" (Sumner 4), for stealing a tea pot while "around him Dresden's ruins testify one of mankind's greatest crimes" (Walsh 197). There definitely is no room for John Wayne to save the day amid the desolation and meaningless of the ruins of Dresden.

Furthermore, the novel strives to highlight how the war does not end when the dust settles among the ruins. Thanks to the motif of time travel, Vonnegut is able to investigate the "aftereffects that follow the veteran home," with the character of Billy Pilgrim becoming an enactment of "the particular manner in which those left behind are nonetheless infected by war" (Abele 68). Billy's "anomic alienation" (Brown 107) is

representative of a post-World War II society which denied any kind of discussion of the horrors of war in its pursue of a Good War narrative crucial to the New American Myth of purity and incorruptibility. Although Post-traumatic stress disorder would not be recognized as a mental disorder until 1980 (Lingel 164), by the late sixties Vietnam veterans were starting to openly discuss the psychological impact of their traumatic experiences. Like Billy Pilgrim, these soldiers had "found life meaningless . . . because of what they'd seen in the war" (*SH5* 101) and Vietnam is very present throughout *Slaughterhouse-Five,* again thanks to the device of time travel, which allows Vonnegut to contemporize the protagonist's World War II experiences with his son's tenure as a marine. Through the simultaneity of the two conflicts in the novel, the author dramatizes "the uninterrupted rhythms of war" (Walsh 199) and condemns history as a tragic narrative doomed to repeat itself in a deadly cycle of human violence. As Bokonon writes in *Cat's Cradle,* "History! Read it and weep!" (252).

Vonnegut's indictment of history as a meaningful narrative, his recognition of human beings' impotence against the violent, meaningless nature of life and their own condition is expressed in a simple phrase which, would become the author's most famous quote: "So it goes" (*SH5* 27). Taught to Billy Pilgrim by his Tralfamadorian captors, whose superior perception allows them to see time as an ever-existing whole that "does not change," "does not lend itself to warnings and explanations," and instead "simply *is*" (86), the phrase is repeated up to 106 times in the novel, following any reference to death as a recognition of our meaninglessness in the cosmic order of the universe, never allowing us to forget that "[a]mong the things Billy Pilgrim could not change were the past, the present, and the future" (60). As a kind of apocalyptic theodicy, that is a "legitimation of and explanation for the phenomena of suffering, evil, and death" (O'Leary 34), the phrase has sometimes been interpreted as a cynical rejection of social activism, and much has been speculated on whether the author embraces or rejects the "so it goes" morality.[32] Considering the themes of Vonnegut's previous works, however,

[32] Martin Coleman explains that "[a] typical reading of Vonnegut's novel *Slaughterhouse-Five* holds that the author advocates a passive acceptance of overwhelming circumstances that do unspeakable—unnarratable and unaccountable—harm to human beings" (681), and the author has often been portrayed as "one of America's greatest cynics" (Tally 113).
However, John Tilton claims that the widespread view of Vonnegut as "a conscienceless escapist" is "deplorable" (25), and scholars such as Coleman reason that the author opposes the unquestioning acceptance of tragedy embraced by Billy Pilgrim in *Slaughterhouse-Five.* Coleman argues that the constant repetition of "so it goes" throughout the novel actually works as "an increasingly conspicuous indicator of the loss of human connection" (694) and the need to break from the state of benumbed indifference

my belief is that the very simple yet crucial premise behind "so it goes" is that one cannot put an end to violence—after all, as Scholes writes, "It is as human as man" (*Fabulation* 204)—but it is in the hand of every individual to refrain from it and condemn it. In the first chapter of *Slaughterhouse-Five,* Vonnegut says that he tells his sons that "they are not under any circumstances to take part in massacres, and that the news of massacres of enemies is not to fill them with satisfaction or glee" (19), and that is precisely his message. Hold on to life, be kind, the self-described "pillar of salt" (22) seems to be telling us, conceding how "Death is coming for all of us anyway, and it is better to be Lot's wife looking back through salty eyes than the Deity that destroyed those cities in the plain in order to save them" (Scholes, *Fabulation* 204).

There is not much more that people can do, but for Vonnegut that is more than enough. Karen and Charles Wood write that, for the author, "[i]rresolution needs no resolution, but should rather be appreciated as the ultimate reality" (148), and the acceptance of reality as it is the first step towards a comic apocalyptic construction of a better world. In his altruistic impulse to prescribe "corrective lenses for earthling souls" (*SH5* 29) by comforting people with the Tralfamadorian truth about the nature of time, which implies that "when a person dies he only *appears* to die," as he is "still very much alive in the past" (26), Billy Pilgrim is embracing this irresolution, the apocalyptic duality of life that renders it equally terrible and beautiful. If, by holding on to this vision, by choosing to "[i]gnore the awful times, and concentrate on the good ones" (117) he is incurring on an illusion, at least it is a harmless one; a *foma*, in Bokononist terms. In a universe that is not governed by human rules, we unavoidable live by narratives: history is a made-up narrative to create an illusion of direction and meaning, as are the news, novels and political discourses. Forced to choose between them, Vonnegut says, at least we should pick the most harmless untruths, the ones that reject death, destruction, moral absolutes, and instead embrace decency, kindness, and humanity.

With *Slaughterhouse-Five,* Vonnegut managed to capture the zeitgeist of the late nineteen sixties in a novel like no other, which basked in contradiction and paradox. It is a call for hope among hopelessness articulated in a form equally transgressive and accessible, hysterically funny and terribly sad, grounded in realism but dressed up in science fiction, apparently simple but built on layer upon layer of studied complexity,

exemplified by Billy Pilgrim. This is a view that I myself subscribe to, as will be explained in epigraph 3.7 of this dissertation.

smacking of cynicism but concealing boundless humane depths. As such, the novel ultimately stands as a postmodernist meditation on what Vonnegut himself describes as "the heartbreaking necessity of lying about reality, and the heartbreaking impossibility of lying about it" (*CC* 284); a book that manages to articulate "the fears of a generation determined to change America's course" (Martín Párraga, "Medio Siglo" 89). Countercultural youths and academic critics alike embraced *Slaughterhouse-Five*'s "radical use of the imagination to build a new freedom and dignity for man" (Klinkowitz, *Disruptions* 53), and, in the wake of its success, Vonnegut became "the most talked-about American novelist since Ernest Hemingway" (33), celebrated on *Newsweek* magazine as "A Campus Orwell" (Shields 247) and enshrined as an embodiment of messianic wisdom. Joe David Bellamy went as far as to claim "This man should be president" ("President" 77).

Nevertheless, by the time *Slaughterhouse-Five* turned Kurt Vonnegut into the most talked-about novelist in America, Richard Nixon had become President in an election that symbolized the "collapse of the New Deal coalition" (146) that had held the United States together since Vonnegut's childhood in the Great Depression, and the start of a conservative backlash that would completely alter the course of US history. In the summer of 1969, the Manson murders would give Americans a grim symbol of "just what the counterculture could ultimately boil down to" (T. Miller 346), exposing the dark underside of hippie idealism, and as the seventies dawned, the spirit of the counterculture would fall prey to that most unconquerable trait of the American Way of Life: the means by which it can use "symptoms of cultural dissent—high Modernist abstraction, rock and roll, Beatniks—as signs of a Free Society, thus incorporating 'deviancy' within the norm" (Luckhurst 109). For a short time, the sixties "provided a small window when a significant chunk of humanity briefly realized its potential" to create "a better world" (McNab 298). Ironically, it was conservatives who seemed most confident of the counterculture's significance and sought to align against it through a new apocalyptic rhetoric whereby the liberation movements of the sixties were presented as "the cloven-footed Beast of prophecy whose reign must somehow be endured until the Second Coming" (Doyle 152). Aiming to incite a comic apocalypse, the counterculture's ultimate legacy was "a pervasive division between liberal and conservative approaches to both public issues and the life of faith" (Noll 126) that intensified the tragic apocalyptic rhetoric in America and

ultimately unleashed the forces that would land Ronald Reagan in the White House a decade after the publication of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. So it goes.

2.9 The 'Me' decade: The 1970s

Will Hermes writes that the nineteen seventies "had an identity crisis from the get-go" (4). Coming after the momentous sixties, the new decade could not avoid feeling like "the sickly, neglected, disappointing stepsister to that brush, bruising blockbuster" (Schulman 1) and some analysts go as far as denying it a proper identity as a whole decade altogether, allowing it only a minor role as "five or so transitional years between 1973 and 1979" (Luckhurst 169). The fact is that, for Americans, the seventies were probably their "strangest decade," a period of "incoherent impulses, contradictory desires" (Borstelmann 351), highlighted by "a peculiar aimlessness" and whose "specificity seemed most of the time to consist in having no specificity" (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 296). If there was a unifying theme to the seventies it certainly was crisis, "as much global as it was personal" (Ferguson 3), and extending into the economic, political, social and cultural realms. The decade presented a world which, in Stevick's words, was "now so complicated that anything one says about it is true" (186) and as such demanded changes and adjustments that have "shaped the contours of US history and global history ever since" (Borstelmann 352). As the United States struggled to find its role in a changing world made ever smaller by forces it had unleashed itself, "the shock of the global" (Ferguson 18) permeated every aspect of society and planted "the seeds of future crises" (18).

One of the first casualties of the seventies was the spirit of the counterculture. The assassination of four students by the National Guard during an anti-war demonstration in Kent State University, Ohio on May 4th, 1970 proved that change was not coming any time soon. In ensuing opinion polls, 58 percent blamed the demonstrators for the killings, while 50 percent supported President Nixon's expansion of the Vietnam War into Cambodia which had motivated the protests (Levine and Papasotiriou 153). When Nixon was re-elected in 1972, any remainder of hope seemed to vanish completely, and the counterculture was absorbed "into the mainstream consumer economy" (128), as the majority of yesterday's hippies naturally became tomorrow's consumers, "moving on

from tie-dyed t-shirts to marriage, home mortgages, and consumer durables" (Buhle 405). Victims of "the shattering stress and disorientation" (Toffler 4) induced by the experience of "too much change in too short a time" (4) that Alvin Toffler termed "Future Shock," the citizens of the seventies lost any semblance of the moral certainties and historic optimism of the sixties, which were replaced by "a sense of betrayal and bitter disappointment" (Buhle 406). This "loss of faith in the very idea of progress" (Reynolds 410) manifested itself in a growing tendency to look to the past instead of the future for comfort, leading contemporary commentators to describe the seventies as "the most nostalgia-obsessed decade of the century" (410). Still, the most prevalent impulse became to look not backward but inward: as "group-centered idealism gave way to materialism and selfishness among the young" (T. Miller 348). Tom Wolfe named the era "The 'Me' Decade," pointing to the "Culture of Narcissism" that Christopher Lasch had identified as a direct consequence of a corporate America in which workers did not have to sell only their labor, but also their appearance, which lead to an excessive self-scrutiny and obsession with physical aspect (*Narcissism* 52). With the spiritual aspirations of the sixties left behind, Wolfe teased that one could finally focus his attention and energies "on the most fascinating subject on earth: *Me*" ("Me" 34).

Perhaps no other factor contributed to the detached nihilism of the nineteen seventies as the defeat of the United States in the Vietnam War which, in spite of Nixon's 1969 "Vietnamization" policy of progressively withdrawing American troops, would not be over until 1975. For the rest of the decade, Americans would try to rationalize the nature of their involvement in a war that showed how a technologically advanced superpower could be defeated by a small, post-colonial country, and proved that, contrary to century-old assumptions, the United States was not "exempt from the exigencies of history" (Levine and Papasotiriou 183). This new paradigm was also felt in the American economy, with 1971 marking the first year with a US trade deficit since 1893 (Sargent 56) as the country became "an importer of foreign capital, no longer a net exporter" (61). Barely twenty five years prior, at the end of World War II, the United States had manufactured half of the world's goods, now, the nation's production system was being traded for an increasingly import-based economy (Oliveiro 144). The unexpected influence of so called Third World countries in America's national affairs was most apparent in the nation's newfangled energy dependence on oil imports from the Middle East, due to the country's increasingly wasteful energy consumption paired with the

depletion of domestic oil wells (Levine and Papasotiriou 151). This scenario proved to have dramatic consequences when the Arab oil embargo that followed the Yom Kippur War of 1973 motivated a quadrupling of oil prices, shifting the balance of power in the world economy "away from the importing nation and toward oil exporters" (Sargent 49). As the formerly isolationist USA discovered to its dismay that, however powerful it may be, its activity could be disrupted by decisions taken in distant Third World nations, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger could only lament, "We are now living in a never-never land in which tiny, poor, and weak nations can hold up for ransom some of the industrialized world" (qtd. in Sargent 49). Borstelmann sums up the intense feeling of crisis: "If the United States did not win all its wars, . . . if its oil wells did not provide enough fuel for its drivers, and if its jobs no longer paid rising real wages, what was the nation's future?" (352).

The Arab oil crisis exposed not only how "vulnerable to external economic shocks the United States had become" (Sargent 51) but also how advanced transports, means of communication and international economic structures were making the world a much smaller place. The new reality of interdependence, National Security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski explained in 1973, blurred "the distinctions between foreign and domestic policy and even between economics and politics" (qtd. in Sargent 51), and meant that the old patterns of world order were crumbling. In a new scenario in which "the status and prestige accorded to war were now granted to economic success" (Gavin 200), and the ideas, innovation technology and culture that Joseph Nye termed "soft power" (11) were "more likely to shape world politics than arms control agreements or the nuclear balance between the superpowers" (Gavin 201), Kissinger understood that the United States' best strategy to maintain its position of power in a post-Vietnam world was "to use economics to build a world political structure" (qtd. in Sargent 50). Therefore, the US and the world entered the era of globalization, defined in 1983 by Theodore Levitt as a technology-driven force that integrates markets, thus pushing the world toward "converging commonality," creating a common desire among humankind "for modernity's allure" (93). Globalization launched "a 'second wind' for the United States in its career as a superpower" (Sargent 63), transforming it into the cultural behemoth it is today. However, as much as it "reinvigorated the republic's influence and affluence" in many respects, it also proved to be "a discombobulating experience" (61), as the country would pay "for its reinvigorated primacy with new kinds of vulnerability" (63). For better or for

worse, the doctrine of American isolationism promoted in 1796 by George Washington in his intent for the country to have "as little political connection as possible" (Quinn 50) with other countries, was over for good.

Parallel to the developments in international politics, the seventies was a time when "journalists and historians and novelists and filmmakers, began to record American reality in new ways" (Levine and Papasotiriou 170), aware that their creations were as valid a document of their times as official historical records. Even if the relaxation of the avant-garde tendencies of the sixties translated into a "decline in published experimental fiction after 1970" (Scholes, *Fabulation* 124), now writers started to investigate the mechanisms of history and its nature as a narrative, engaging in a conversation between America's past and present that traversed the often obscure boundaries between fact and fiction. "Historiographic metafiction," as Linda Hutcheon termed this new kind of novel, originated from a "theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs," and became "the grounds for its rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past" (Hutcheon 5). One of the pioneers of this trend was Kurt Vonnegut, for whom the start of the new decade coincided with a radical personal disruption. After two decades writing practically in anonymity, the massive success of *Slaughterhouse-Five* meant that "The writer of stories," to cite a *Time* magazine report on the author from June 29, 1970, "had become a story himself" (qtd. in Klinkowitz, *Disruptions* 55).

Suddenly the subject of constant media attention, the soon-to-be-fifty Kurt Vonnegut found himself "front and center everywhere" (Klinkowitz, *America* 63), asked to do interviews for all sorts of mediums, in constant demand to deliver speeches and commencement addresses and subject to a growing critical scrutiny that soon amounted to the establishment of "a true Vonnegut industry" (R. Merrill 7). Jorge Luis Borges once said that "[f]ame is a form of incomprehension, perhaps the worse" (qtd. in Scholes, *Fabulation* 9); and as Vonnegut started to be hounded by worshipping admirers who revered him as "he who must be obeyed" (Leonard 50) and expected him "to go ZAP or something and tell them the secrets of the universe" (Wakefield, "*Karass*" 72), the author who, by his own admission, after *Slaughterhouse-Five* felt like he had reached "the end of some sort of career" and "didn't have to write at all anymore if I didn't want to (qtd. in Shields 254), ran the risk of becoming a "cultural institution" and succumbing to what Saul Bellow called "the disease of those who live by the image created of them in the press" (Fresán 16). For the first time, Vonnegut, was writing from the position of a famous

novelist as well as a widely regarded public spokesman, which, he feared, made his fiction "much more likely to be seized upon and lived as the truth" (Klinkowitz, *Kurt Vonnegut* 76), the exact opposite of the message he had been trying to transmit in his novels all along. Thus, in his first novel of the decade, Vonnegut decided to be meticulously explicit about the relationship between "fact and imagination, official record and invented fiction, public sign and private symbol" (Bradbury, *Modern* 201), and crafted a book that is as much a deadpan report on American history and reality as an examination of the nature of history and reality themselves.

2.10 "You know what truth is?": *Breakfast of Champions* (1973)

Published in 1973, *Breakfast of Champions* is Kurt Vonnegut's "clearest vision of raped, polluted, junk-dominated contemporary America" (Bradbury, *Modern* 217), a country "cracking up due to racism, poverty, and what might come under the heading of general low-mindedness" (Shields 310). Essentially, it is "a tale of a meeting of two lonesome, skinny, fairly old white men on a planet which was dying fast" (*BOC* 7), a pretext that Vonnegut uses to construct a severe commentary on "a country alienated from its own history, without a center of gravity, without a sense of its culture" (Sumner 150). In the process, the author himself finds a renewed desire to live, write and believe in a better world. For all intents, then, *Breakfast of Champions* is a deeply apocalyptic novel.

In a dark twist on the traditional American road novel, science fiction author Kilgore Trout embarks on a "tour through the wasteland of early-1970s America" (Sumner 1) that takes him to Midland City, "the asshole of the universe" (*BOC* 201), for a fateful encounter with downcast car dealer Dwayne Hoover. Midland City, which will become a recurrent setting in many of Vonnegut's subsequent novels, is a metaphor of the average, anodyne Midwestern town in an era of mindless consumption in which "Americans have substituted material goods and the commercial myths behind them for a meaningful culture (Schatt 102). Consolidating the worst omens of fifties conformist consumerism, *Breakfast of Champions* presents a completely superficial society in which "[o]ne's identity increasingly became the sun of one's inventory" as getting and spending ceased to be "activities performed primarily to sustain life" and became instead "synonymous with social life itself, its raison d'etre" (Braunstein and Doyle 10). The title

of the novel itself, as well as its original cover, which emulated a box of cereals (Schatt 101), represent a satire of the plastic myths that have become the leading values of a country where almost all the conversations between people "had to do with selling or buying some damn thing" (*BOC* 53), and "consisted of lines from television shows" (236).

When he looks under the comforting illusions of materialism, Vonnegut encounters only chaos; a world in which people have lost any sense of historical grounding, as the accelerated rhythms of consumption push them towards "the immediate future, the next instant of gratification" (Luckhurst 198), denying them any notion of future improvement as consumers (not citizens any more) are locked in the vicious cycle of what Jameson terms the eternal present of late capitalism (*Postmodernism* 419). The inevitable corollary, Christopher Lasch argues, is that dissatisfaction becomes an inescapable catch-22, as "the propaganda of consumption turns alienation itself into a commodity," promising to palliate the "spiritual desolation of modern life" by proposing buying as the cure, but in the process creating or exacerbating "new forms of unhappiness" to perpetuate an eternal loop of endless consumption in which happiness is always apparently one commodity away (*Narcissism* 73). The autocratic myths of late capitalism are fed through TV and the movies, which "constitute a privileged source for the sort of conceits that threaten to overwhelm the primary, literal reality" (McHale 128), to a population that has turned "sullen" after the dislocating events of the last decade. Shocked by Vietnam and economic crisis, US citizens find themselves lost amid a fog of meaninglessness, hoping "not so much to prosper as simply to survive" (Lasch, *Narcissism* 107) as they find it ever harder to relate meaningfully to one another, with ideas losing their content to become mere "badges of friendship" (*BOC* 27) and "truth" turning into just "some crazy thing my neighbor believes" (214).

These injurious effects of contemporary society are not only echoed in people, but also on the environment, as Vonnegut paints the picture of a planet "being destroyed by manufacturing processes" (*BOC* 86) until it seems that "the only kind of job an American can get these days is committing suicide in some way" (88). In *Late Capitalism* (1972), Ernest Mandel argues that in technology-driven capitalist societies in which "all branches of the economy are fully industrialized," the only means to maintain profit is by "squandering the forces of production by turning them into forces of destruction" (214), inciting arms build-up, hunger in Third World countries, and disruption of the ecology in

order to keep the proverbial ball rolling. Pollution became one of the pressing issues of the seventies, as citizens all over the world gained conscience of how "[e]xuberant growth and the forms it took, quickened the metabolism of the world economy" (McNeill 267).[33] In a world that had almost doubled its population between 1950 and 1970, the amount of energy and materials required to maintain human life increased daily, inevitably leading to resource depletion and alarming levels of waste which contaminated the atmosphere and waters, seriously threatening the planet's equilibrium. The seventies saw the emergence of global-scale environmental awareness, as increasing voices were raised to accuse human society of "hubris and crimes against the biosphere" (McNeill 266). Vonnegut joined the cry by addressing "green themes" (Bradbury, *Modern* 217) in his novels, which pointed to a new, very real apocalyptic threat.

In *Breakfast of Champions*, the decaying state of the planet is locked in a symbiotic relationship with the frail psychology of the main characters, both presented as casualties of the American capitalist machine. Eberhard Brüning explains that the pressing circumstances of the seventies aggravated "the uncertainty, the frustration, the confusion particularly of those writers who care about the future of mankind and who believe in the good of man" (385), and that concern is evident throughout Vonnegut's novel. In it, the sense of paranoia that seemed to imbue the country, that neurotic upshot of the 'Me' Decade in a burst of "narcissism turned apocalyptic" (Reynolds 508) which would find its clearest expression in President Nixon's "self-destructive paranoia" at the heart of the Watergate scandal (Ferguson 3), is embodied in the figure of Dwayne Hoover. Billboards with the face of the "fabulously-well-to-do" (*BOC* 13) Pontiac dealer read "Ask anybody—you can trust Dwayne" (100) all across the Midwest, but still his psyche seems to be falling apart as he faces the contradictory nature of "a life not worth living" and "an iron will to live," which Vonnegut calls "a common combination on the planet Earth" (72), where "[a] lot of citizens were so ignored and cheated and insulted that they thought they might be in the wrong country, or even the wrong planet, that some terrible mistake had been made" (9). In spite of his fortune and success, Dwayne is burdened by his wife's suicide and an inexistent relationship with his son, and finds it increasingly hard to hold on to a seemingly pointless reality. Like many Americans of the era, the character is desperate to find something to believe in, something meaningful that will give

[33] J. R. McNeill signals the paradoxical role of technological advances in this concern, as their application was the cause of many environmental problems but at the same time "helped to reveal, measure, and study some as well" (264).

meaning to the chaos of existence. It is this desperation that leads Dwayne to believe every word of Kilgore Trout's short story "Now It Can Be Told," written as a letter from the Creator of the Universe to the only creature with free will in a universe otherwise populated by machines. Upon reading the story, Dwayne vents his anger at a world whose purposelessness finally seems to make sense, launching on a violent spree that injures several people and ends with him being locked in a mental institution.

Dwayne's outburst is yet another manifestation of the totalitarian mind outlined in *Mother Night*, of a world "with so many human beings so reluctant to laugh, so incapable of thought, so eager to believe and snarl and hate" (*MN* 160) made even worse by the dismaying un-reality of the early seventies. Vonnegut feels that the nature of this existential quandary, of the aimlessness that afflicts rich and poor alike in America, is ultimately social, as, in Nadeau's words, "the major problem of Americans is that they lack the communal ethos necessary to sense that they fully belong to and participate in a culture" (129). It is no coincidence that the first adjective that the author uses to describe the novel's two protagonists, the bankrupt artist Kilgore Trout and the successful business man Dwayne Hoover is "lonesome," as the lack of meaningful human connections was to Vonnegut the principal cause for the "shapeless discontent in the midst of such prosperity" (*PS* 188) in a modern America where people lack the sense of belonging to a community and being part of a culture. "The American experience has been an unhappy experience, generally, and part of it, as I say, is living without a culture," he says, "When you came over here on a boat or whatever, you abandoned your culture" (*WFG* 285), and the material goods and commercial myths proposed as the emblem of the post-World War II American Way of Life simply do not work as a substitute, as much as Americans try to "construct a life that made sense from things . . . found in gift shops" (*SH5* 39).

The sense that happiness does not depend on affluence but on a feeling of belonging to a solid, meaningful community, would become the main idea behind Vonnegut's novels for the rest of his career through the recurring concept of "extended families," the seeds of which first appear in *Breakfast of Champions* in the characters of Nigerians Cyprian Ukwende and Edie Key. The author himself had visited Biafra in 1970 and written a report about the last days of the war against Nigeria for *McCall's* magazine in which he praised the Biafrans' endurance in the face of a situation which he described as "a free trip to Auschwitz when the ovens were still going full blast" (*WFG* 144). The key to Biafrans' ability to "endure so much without bitterness," according to Vonnegut,

lay in the fact that they all had "the emotional and spiritual strength that an enormous family can give" (149). The same is true of Ukwende, who "had six hundred relatives he knew by name" (*BOC* 95) and Key, whose "familiarity with a teeming past made life much more interesting to him than it was to Dwayne, for instance, or to me, or to Trout" (279). For both of them, a common culture and history built upon a network of deep, meaningful human connections, institute a sense of joyful purpose and meaningfulness in life that simply is not available to American citizens fed on television and the "frenzied pursuit of consumerist pleasures" (Wilentz 26). Vonnegut writes that "Edie Key was afloat in a river of people who were flowing from here to there in time," whereas "Dwayne and Trout and I were pebbles at rest" (*BOC* 279). Consequently, *Breakfast of Champions* proposes that, if the richest country on Earth wants to heal its spiritual condition and discover a sense of joy and meaning in life, it should refrain from its vain fixation on itself to take a moral lesson from some of the nations in what it deridingly refers to as the Third World. The Arab oil crisis had proven they could dramatically influence America's economy, but Vonnegut's novel demonstrates that they may also hold the key to America's salvation.

Breakfast of Champions has often been labelled as the first instalment in Vonnegut's "second major phase as a novelist" (Shields 310), during which the author would mostly relegate the science fiction trappings of space travel, alien races and the like to his Kilgore Trout stories-within-the-story in order to write about a very real present. Nevertheless, Vonnegut certainly maintains a science fictional *tone* in that tendency to "gaze down at humanity as if from another world" that Martin Amis hailed as his "most crucial imaginative habit" ("After the Slaughterhouse"). Consolidating a trend first introduced in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, throughout *Breakfast of Champions* Vonnegut engages on a deadpan account of the American history that suggests the view of an alien creature discovering it for the first time, which allows the author to discard all the canonical interpretations and symbolic associations embedded in the grand metanarratives of American culture, and revealing "much of the absurdity that our more knowing eyes screen out" (198). The year 1492, then, becomes "simply the year in which sea pirates began to cheat and rob and kill" the former inhabitants of the continent (*BOC* 10), and Vietnam is described as "a country where America was trying to make people stop being communists by dropping things on them from airplanes" (87–88). This "decidedly impolite history of the United States" (Sumner 153) is a means by

the writer to "clear my head of all the junk in there" (*BOC* 5), of the symbols of American culture which "were not the harmless *foma* of *Cat's Cradle,*" but instead "concealed great crimes" (Sumner 153). As if to reinforce this concept, Vonnegut fills the novel with Pop Art-like felt-tip pen drawings of many of the concepts introduced in the narration which further distance the physical nature of the objects depicted from the countless symbolic associations we unconsciously place upon them. If Pop Art bred a "blithe superficiality, in the literal sense of being happy to stay at the level of surfaces" (Reynolds 345), Vonnegut twists the concept upon itself, arguing that the only true essence is in the surface, with everything else being a fictional fabrication.

Vonnegut's understanding of history as a fiction, a human construct conditioned by textuality just as any other narrative, and which therefore cannot make an absolute claim to truth, clearly aligns *Breakfast of Champions* with Linda Hutcheon's concept of "historiographic metafiction" (5). The ultimate concern of Vonnegut's novel is his ever-present examination of the nature of fiction vis-à-vis reality and of how human narrative systems are the foundations of our inescapably biased construction of the world. Timothy Parrish writes that "American history has generally been a dangerous fiction . . . bent on disenfranchising the vulnerable in the name of a spurious equality" (37–38), a power tool to shape "the narratives of what Americans understand reality (political and social) to be" (23), and thus Vonnegut's narrative voice in *Breakfast of Champions* complains that "[t]he things other people have put into *my* head . . . do not fit together nicely . . . are out of proportion with life as it really is outside my head" (*BOC* 5), and acknowledges how American myths respond to a deliberate narrative of manipulation. Still, if history-making is a fictional process with "unavoidable ideological consequences" (Hutcheon 194), the other side of the coin exposes "the dangers and the comforting temptation of evasion, of seeing fiction as a withdrawal from history" (194).

Dwayne Hoover's literal reading of Kilgore Trout's short story reveals the dangerous potential of fictional narrative and illustrates Vonnegut's view of the writer as a being "on pair with the Creator of the Universe" (*BOC* 205), touched with a potential to create and destroy entire worlds beyond the wildest dreams of science fiction. As he had countlessly expressed in his previous novels, Vonnegut utterly resents the use of fictions disguised as truth of any nature to institute a fundamentalist vision of reality, but at the same time he sees his work as "hopelessly implicated in the same networks" (Parrish 39) that he wishes to oppose. In order to avoid a fundamentalist reading of his

own texts, he resorts to a deliberate exposition of his authorial presence that foregrounds the fictional nature of his work. If history is a narrative, so is fiction, and Vonnegut's metafictional strategies, just as his science fictional tropes, seek "to disenfranchise audiences who naïvely continue to believe that realism is a viable narrative form in a postmodern world" (Parrish 24). In *Breakfast of Champions,* Vonnegut expresses his resent for "the inherent morality of the conventional plot which unrealistically meted out rewards for the good and punishments for the wicked" (Schatt 99), arguing that not only is it unreal but it also has fateful consequences, making 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" (*BOC* 215) and leading to the violence and anxiety inevitably encountered by people who insisted on "doing their best to live like people invented in story books" (215). As a postmodernist writer, Vonnegut's desire is not to imagine a harmonious world governed by dramatic justice, but to hold "the mirror up to everyday life" (McHale 128), challenging, but not denying, the violently absurd nature of the world and the "increasing uniformization of mass culture" (Hutcheon 6) as a first step in order to change it for the better. Undergoing a sort of apocalyptic epiphany, Kurt Vonnegut, disguised among the fictional characters of his own making in what is perhaps the towering scene of *Breakfast of Champions* and a telling manifesto of his own literary aesthetic, claims:

> Once I understood what was making America such a dangerous, unhappy nation of people who had nothing to do with real life, I resolved to shun storytelling. I would write about life. Every person would be exactly as important as any other. All facts would also be given equal weightiness. Nothing would be left out. Let other bring order to chaos. I would bring chaos to order, instead, which I think I have done. (215)

2.11 A crisis of confidence": the late 1970s

Chaos definitely seemed to ensue in mid-seventies America. "This New Year's Day, symbolized by dimmed lights, chilly rooms, and empty gas tanks, ushers in a new era," *Time* magazine announced at the dawn of 1974 (Hermes 57), as oil prices increased more than fivefold in a matter of months, inflation rose to 12.4 percent, unemployment

neared 7.5 percent and average hourly wages dipped for the first time since World War II (Wilentz 36). Still, the crisis was far from solely economic, as in the summer of 1974 the Watergate scandal revealed the illegal methods that President Nixon had resorted to during his 1972 re-election campaign and the overall paranoid mindset of the President. Nixon, who Vonnegut described as "the first president to hate the American people and all they stand for" (*WFG* xxi) resigned on August 9, 1974, and was instantly pardoned for any crimes committed during his presidency by his successor, Gerald Ford. Allegedly, Ford's pardon intended to end the "long national nightmare" (Wilentz 32) of Watergate, but instead it had the effect of deepening the prevailing cynicism of the 'Me' Decade, aggravating the crisis of confidence in US public institutions that had begun with the Vietnam war and lastingly upsetting the "deference that Americans had earlier shown to their leaders" (Levine and Papasotiriou 157). As President Ford conceded in 1975 that "the state of our Union is not good" (qtd. in Borstelmann 351), it seemed no coincidence that the best-selling nonfiction book of the seventies was Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1970), which argued that current events were indeed "portents of the impending Apocalypse" (Connelly 341).

Kurt Vonnegut's novels of the period, such as *Slapstick* (1976) and *Jailbird* (1979) echo the malaise of the times, as the author embraces "more public, even socio-political themes" that reflect his "new role as an expounder of practical ideas" (Klinkowitz, *America* 68), abandoning the more experimental impulses of his previous works in favor of a "self-consciously moral stance" (205). *Breakfast of Champions* signaled the end of literary critics' brief period of infatuation with Vonnegut, as Christopher Lehmann-Haupt titled his review *New York Times* review of the novel "Is Vonnegut Kidding Us?" (Martín Párraga, "Medio Siglo" 28), and Peter S. Prescott labelled it "[p]retentious, hypocritical manure" (29), a trend that continued with the general reception of the majority of his subsequent novels. Nevertheless, however much critics insisted on denying it, at the dawn of the eighties Vonnegut remained one of the most insightful voices in American letters, to the extent that President Jimmy Carter's famous July 5, 1979 speech, in which he assured that the nation's problems were far deeper than the economic crisis and instead amounted to a "crisis of confidence" over the "meaning of our own lives" which was striking "at the very heart and soul and spirit of our national will" (qtd. in Wilentz 97) seemed lifted straight out of *Breakfast of Champions.*

Carter had been elected in 1976, after defeating Ford with 51 percent of the vote in an election clearly marked by Watergate (Levine and Papasotiriou 157). His victory illustrated how, in Wilentz's words, "the electorate had become deeply disaffected with traditional party politics," a malaise that made them yearn for a new kind of leader, an anti-politician "who eschewed the old-fashioned party trappings, valued expertise over ideology, spoke candidly, and won voters over by earning their trust" (Wilentz 77). Carter seemed the perfect embodiment of this ideal but, nevertheless, the Democrats were misled by their "false sense of assurance" following Nixon's downfall (4) as the developments of the immediate post-Watergate years "obscured only temporarily the underlying conservative trends in American society that had been evident since 1968 (Levine and Papasotiriou 158). It would eventually be Ronald Reagan who, capitalizing on the economic discontent and identity crisis of the seventies as well as the moral backlash generated by the sixties, would agglutinate a New Right coalition that would defeat the liberal New Deal coalition that had governed the United States since the Great Depression. Far from Kurt Vonnegut's ideal of a new American social humanism, the Reagan Revolution would fulfil Attorney General Mitchell's 1970 prediction: "This country is going so far to the right, you are not even going to recognize it" (qtd. in Wilentz 20).

Already in 1972, in an article covering the Republican National Convention for *Harper's* magazine, Vonnegut had perceived the rise of a new Religious Right within the party, as he shockingly reported a discourse that seemed to defend the "Divine Right of Presidents" (*WFG* 194) and argue that "the sovereignty exercised by the American politicians came directly from God" (193). This new right would soon become one of the most important pillars of the Reagan revolution: a politicized Christianity that refused to compromise with what it deemed "the irreligious and immoral forces of modernism" (Preston 312) and was best embodied in the figure of Jerry Falwell, a "pioneer in using television to spread his preaching about biblical inerrancy and the nation's moral chaos" through his television show *Old Time Gospel Hour* (93). Angered by the so-called "culture war" issues such as feminism, gay rights and abortion that emerged in the sixties and seemed to challenge traditional morals as much as by the 1978 abolition of evangelical churches' tax exemptions (ironically under Carter, a born-again evangelical himself), in 1979 Falwell founded the Moral Majority, arguing that "the day of the silent church is passed" (qtd. in Levine and Papasotiriou 197) and sentencing, "We believe our

nation must come back to God or else" (qtd. in Preston 308). Capitalizing on the multiple strains of apocalyptic thought emanating from the moral outrage at the developments of the sixties as well as a new embrace of the "Holy Land" of Israel as the fulfilment of biblical prophecy, the Moral Majority preached that "the era of Christian Zionism had dawned in America" (316) and became a key instrument for Reagan's conservative revolution, responsible for the fact that by the end of the seventies, "[a] fledging army of politicized right-wing Christians now fervently believed that Jimmy Carter and the entire Democratic Party were Satan's lieutenants" (Wilentz 74).

Still, Reagan did not solely feed off religious fundamentalism. With stagflation (simultaneous inflation and unemployment) on the rise, a large portion of the white working class felt victimized by what was called "reverse discrimination" (Wilentz 86). As rising tax burdens coincided with increases in welfare programs and affirmative action policies, many considered that "federal growth was directly linked to a civil rights agenda" and "a significant portion of their paychecks was going to fund free money, free food, and free housing for African Americans" (Roche 160), which attracted them to Reagan's ethic of limited government and his challenge of what they viewed as a corrupt liberal establishment. Public discontent was only furthered when supporters of Ayatollah Khomeini's Islamic regime, which had deposed the US-supported Shah regime in early 1979, broke into the US Embassy in Tehran and took 52 American diplomats hostage in November. A military raid to rescue the hostages was aborted in 1980 after an accidental collision that only deepened the international image of the United States as a "paper tiger" (Levine and Papasotiriou 166). As ABC news aired a nightly update on the hostage crisis with the humiliating title "America Held Hostage" (Wilentz 118) and President Carter appeared ever more powerless, a growing mass of unease voters demanded a return to the status quo of the nineteen fifties, before the authority of the United States was contested by Third World nations.

In his presidential campaign, Reagan nourished the "powerful mix of pride and resentment" (Preston 309) of an US wounded by Vietnam, Watergate, the culture wars and the Iran crisis. The Carter presidency, he claimed, had constituted "an American tragedy" (qtd. in Wilentz 122), and the only way out of it was through a "resurgent exceptionalism" (Preston 318) that would "reawaken this industrial giant" (qtd. in Levine and Papasotiriou 198). In his rhetoric, Reagan appealed to the Cold War spirit of American righteousness, discarding Carter's global politics of human rights and their

refusal to view all global issues through a Cold War lens, but also Nixon and Kissinger's détente, which he presented as an appeasement to communism that had betrayed America's moral "responsibility to expand freedom and fight tyranny" (Gavin 195). The Carter administration, Reagan claimed, suffered a "Vietnam Syndrome" in which the painful, repressed memories of the lost war paralyzed American military actions at the same time as they "dishonored the memory of those who were killed in the war by viewing the nation's cause in Vietnam as anything but noble" (Nguyen 163). The United States, Regan claimed, could not yield to a decline in its leading role in international affairs in the aftermath of Vietnam: "If we are forced to fight," he declared, "we must have the means and determination to prevail or we will not have what it takes to secure peace" (qtd. in Nguyen 162).

Resorting to a triumphalist rhetoric that promised to recover and expand the nation's greatness through military resolution and an optimistic recovery of the frontier spirit, Reagan managed to instill a new spirit of patriotism. Through its apocalyptic litany of hope amidst chaos, the new right coalition concealed the retrograde nature of its ideology and instead presented Reagan's Republicans as a modernized party that symbolized hope, newness, and risk, while projecting the image of the New Deal Democratic liberals as "the exhausted, clueless, corrupt defenders of an outmoded era" (Wilentz 92). Even if President Carter spoke from the heart when he appealed to the "crisis of confidence" among Americans, he also "appeared to be abdicating his role as a leader and blaming the people, himself included, for their own afflictions" (98). Amid the general discontent and unease about the nature of American identity in the crisis-filled seventies, the public sought inspiration, a means to understand the disorienting trends of the decade. Far from Carter's philosophical jeremiad, Reagan's answer explained the crisis not as the people's fault but as a consequence of bad leadership that he promised to right, leading the country to a brighter future embodied in his own status as an all-America self-made and remade man. Wilentz writes that "[w]hereas Carter projected honesty, Reagan projected adventure" (125), and in an election which was described as an "unforeseen tidal wave" (125), the electorate fell for a new type of Hollywood politician who recast the foundational American rhetoric for a new era of hope, promising the people that "You and I have a rendezvous with destiny"[34] (132). As the disquieting

[34] Ironically Reagan, having been a New Deal supporter in the fifties, lifted that phrase directly from President Roosevelt (Wilentz 125), which proves how his rhetoric managed to morph many strains of seemingly contradictory sources into a highly personal doctrine that transcended mere Republicanism.

seventies gave way to a new decade, the United States finally close the chapter of New Deal liberalism to enter the Age of Reagan.

2.12 "It's morning again in America": The 1980s

In comparison with the contradictory nature of the seventies, it is relatively simple to typify the eighties. Reagan's rise coincided with the triumph of Margaret Thatcher in Great Britain to signal a clear rightward shift in Western politics that substituted the liberal policies prevailing since the end of World War II for the "neo-liberal doctrine that deregulated markets would find their own equilibrium and create their new social order" (Luckhurst 196). In the United States, the Reagan administration instituted what Samuel Cohen calls a "triumph-restoring amnesia" (132) by demonizing the revolts and reforms of the sixties and "preaching a return to a mythical version of the values of the nineteen fifties, the time before what was seen as the corruption of American social life" (11). Throughout the decade, the Reagan administration sought to combine a restoration of traditional mores with the creation of new prospects and opportunities in a manner that echoes the time paradigms of science fiction and which, according to Wilentz, could have borrowed its slogan from one of the hit films of the day: *Back to the Future* (134).

The economics of Reaganism were based on a rejection of the New Deal faith in federal activism, returning instead to a "traditional distrust of big government and a renewed faith in free enterprise" (Levine and Papasotiriou 200). Freedom of enterprise had been a key component of the American Dream ever since the American Revolution, but the eighties witnessed the creation of a vast commercial infrastructure dedicated to "persuading Americans to understand the Declaration of Independence in such terms" (Cullen 58), as the frenzied accumulation of money became synonymous with the American Way of Life. It was a new reading of the American Dream that did not "celebrate the idea of hard work, instead enshrining effortless attainment as the essence of its appeal" (160), presenting the United States as "a world built on gambling" (161) in which rules, regulations, and even morality became "irrelevant at best and a thinly veiled

Wilentz writes that "Reaganism was its own distinctive blend of dogma, pragmatism, and, above all, mythology" (129), as the President discarded traditional partisan divisions to appeal to a purely American core philosophy, taking his rhetoric "straight from Jefferson, Lincoln, and, especially, Franklin Delano Roosevelt" (132)

attempt to take control at worst" (163). The President himself declared: "What I want to see above all is that this country remains a country where someone can always get rich" (qtd. in Levine and Papasotiriou 220), as Jerry Falwell gave the new mindset a biblical justification, arguing that "[t]he free enterprise system is clearly outlined in the Book of Proverbs" (219) and commentators noted how "Not in decades, perhaps not in the century, had acquisition and flaunting of wealth been celebrated so publicly by so many" (H. Johnson 194). Under the economic dogma of Reaganism, "corporate raiders and junk bond dealers became cultural heroes" (Wilentz 203), as the new standard of fantasy and aspiration translated into dreams of "getting something for nothing" (Levine and Papasotiriou 217).

Accumulation was the catchword of the decade and, even as a spectacular economic recovery starting in 1983 allowed the United States to reclaim its former worldwide lead, beginning what Wilentz labels "the longest continual period of peacetime economic expansion ever recorded to that point in American history" (170), the fact is that the federal Government accumulated more debt during Reagan's administration than in the entire previous two centuries of US history (Levine and Papasotiriou 198). This phenomenon was echoed in the private finances of Americans which exhibited a combination of "private affluence and public squalor" (Berkowitz 101), as the average wages stagnated or fell, and a growing inequality was reflected in the fact, in 1989, 1 percent of the population held 39 percent of the country's wealth—compared to 22 percent in 1979 (Wilentz 275). Far from the golden age of middle-class prosperity of the fifties which Reagan so intently tried to recreate, the rise of middle-class standards during the eighties was sustained on credit, as citizens unconsciously buried themselves and their families under a mountain of debt, while at the upper echelons "a considerable portion of the new wealth was built on insubstantial paper transactions" (203) that paved the way for future economic crisis.

Still, a strong patriotic fervor swept the nation as Reagan's apocalyptic promise of "morning again in America" (Wilentz 174) seemed to heal the disquieting malaise of the seventies. As such, the President transcended politics to become a cultural symbol of "renewed American optimism" (217). Reagan embodied the spirit of a decade characterized by "false prosperity, indulgence, and speculation" (217), which leads Frances FitzGerald to claim that "it could be argued that what Americans really wanted in the nineteen eighties was an actor for President" (*40*). The former Hollywood

performer had declared in 1966 that "[p]olitics is just like show business" (qtd. in Wilentz 127), and in a sense his presidency can be read as a zenith of postmodernism, whereby reality seemed to imitate art and "[t]he larger-than-life had become life itself" (Buhle 407). If the postmodern condition is marked by "the collapse of all the great meta-narratives . . . that presumed to truth, and their replacement by essentially provisional and indeterminate forms of narrative" (Bradbury, *Modern* 207), then the United States of the eighties, ever tilted towards the next instant of gratification in an orgy of empty consumerism; and engaged in a constant endorsement of nothingness in which "the 'hero' who was famous for his actions is transformed into the 'celebrity' who is famous for being known" (Levine and Papasotiriou 223) can be seen as "the apotheosis of a strange new age of technological futility and simulated reality" (Bradbury, *Modern* 207); the epitome of postmodernism. In essence, as Jacques Derrida states, "America *is* deconstruction" ("The Time" 16), a nation moved by "infotainment" in which "[o]ur politics, religion, news, athletics, education and commerce have been transformed into congenial adjuncts of show business" and the people are "on the verge of amusing ourselves to death" (Postman 4). In Kurt Vonnegut's words, it was "a national tragedy" that Americans had "changed from a society to an audience" (*WFG* 275).

One of the main inputs fed on that audience perpetually glued to their television sets during the eighties was violence and war,[35] a clear reflection of the Reagan administration's heating up of Cold War tensions. Before being elected, Reagan had already expressed that his idea of American policy towards the Soviet Union was simple: "We win and they lose" (qtd. in Wilentz 151). The President held that the politics of détente had been "a one-way street the Soviet Union has used to pursue its own aims" (152) and were creating a "window of vulnerability" (Connelly 347) that left the United States exposed to a fatal first nuclear strike. To revert this scenario, under Reagan the country undertook a massive defense build-up, almost doubling military expenses from $134 billion in 1980 to $253 billion in 1989 (Levine and Papasotiriou 202). Reagan embraced a newfangled tragic apocalyptic discourse unheard of since the Truman years, whereby Americans were presented as "the first" and "the best" "because we are free" (qtd. in Bigsby 19) while the nations it opposed like Iran, Cuba and Nicaragua were "outlaw states run by the strangest collections of misfits, Looney Tunes, and squalid

[35] In *Fates Worse than Death*, Vonnegut himself quotes a study conducted by the American Academy of Pediatrics in the late eighties that reveals that the average American child watches 18,000 TV murders before graduating from high school (*FWD* 162).

criminals since the advent of the Third Reich" (qtd. in Wilentz 217), all aligned under the shadow of the Soviet Union, which embodied "the focus of evil in the modern world" (qtd. in O'Leary 181).

Connelly states that "[f]or Reagan and his supporters, there was no negotiating with the Soviets as long as they planned to take over the world, even if that meant bringing on Armageddon" (349), and in some ways it seemed that the administration was precisely looking forward to said event. Exhibiting a fundamentalist apocalyptic rhetoric that seemed to borrow equally from the premillennialist zeal of the New Christian Right that had helped to enshrine him and the prophetic Zionism of Hal Lindsey's best-selling *The Late Great Planet Earth,* which sought to make sense of the nuclear age "by interpreting it as the literal fulfillment of the ancient epochal rhetoric of the Christian Apocalypse" (O'Leary 142),[36] Reagan often expressed his fascination with scriptural forecasts of Armageddon and sought to array the events of the Cold War into an apocalyptic "structure of cosmic significance" (Wilentz 83). During his presidential campaign, he even declared, "We may be the generation that sees Armageddon" (qtd. in Connelly 348), echoing his earlier proclamation that "everything is in place for the battle of Armageddon and the Second Coming of Christ" (344).

Still, Reagan's premillennial impulses and tragic rhetoric of an inevitable showdown between good and evil were contradictorily contrasted by utopian proclamations of his hope "to see the day when nuclear weapons will be vanished from the earth" (qtd. in Wilentz 166), as he sometimes mused aloud about how "the nations of the world might drop all their differences if the planet earth were to come under serious threat of attack by aliens from outer space" (Wilentz 138). They were not the sole instances of science fiction coalescing with the American politics of the nineteen eighties, as in 1983 the President announced his Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), a project to build an anti-missile shield in space originally proposed by a group of science fiction writers including Larry Niven, Jerry Purnelle and Greg Bear (Bould 2)[37] which was

[36] In the sequel to what had become the widest selling non-fiction book of the seventies, *The 1980s: Countdown to Armageddon* (1981), Lindsey replaced the hopelessness of humanity in the face of apocalypse preached in *The Late Great Planet Earth* with a partisan endorsement of Reagan's New Right policies, arguing that "We need people to see how important a strong military is to keeping peace for us and what remains of the free world" (157).

[37] Years later, these writers would form the so-called Sigma Group, which, under the motto "Science fiction is the national interest," became advisors of the Department of Homeland Security during the George W.

popularly referred to as "Star Wars" (Luckhurst 200). The project never came to fruition, but it invited the Soviet Union to a "redoubled arms race" (Wilentz 165) which, due to its own internal struggles, it was unable to undertake, further aggravating an economic crisis that would do much more to end the Cold War than any of Reagan's military policies.

The central aspect of the so-called "Reagan Doctrine," however, was a revival of the "pre-Vietnam global anticommunist crusade" (Levine and Papasotiriou 202) whereby the US government tried to challenge the expanse of communism by supporting anti-Soviet autocracies and aiding various military insurgencies in pro-Soviet nations. Leaving behind previous policies of containment as well as Jimmy Carter's standards of human rights, the Reagan administration flaunted its dubious ethics in "simultaneous demands for Soviet reform" and "support for brutal Latin American leaders" (Morgan 250), and took Eisenhower and Nixon's covert operations a step further by enlisting non-state actors in its struggle (M. A. Lawrence 218), such as the *mujahideen* "holy warriors," which the United States armed with anti-air missiles in the hope of transforming Afghanistan into "the Soviet Vietnam" (Levine and Papasotiriou 202), and the Nicaraguan Contras, right-wing militias that opposed the legitimate Sandinista government of President Daniel Ortega, and which Reagan publicly hailed as "freedom fighters" and "the moral equivalent of our Founding Fathers and the brave men of the French Resistance" (qtd. in Wilentz 176). In most cases, these activities involved severe lawlessness, as was revealed in the Iran-Contra scandal of 1986, which proved that, unbeknownst to Congress, the administration had sold weapons to Ayatollah Khomeini's Iran hoping to use the sale proceeds to fund the Nicaraguan contras. The violence of the eighties, which included the deadliest attack on American military forces overseas since World War II in the October 23rd 1983 suicide bombing of the US Marine's barracks at Beirut airport, never escalated to a direct military confrontation, but for Vonnegut the difference was merely a matter of wording:

> As long as they killed the people with conventional rather than nuclear weapons, they were praised as humanitarian statesmen. As long as they did not use nuclear weapons, it appeared, nobody was going to give the right name to all the killing

Bush administration's War on Terror (Bould 2); a startling example of science fiction transcending its literary boundaries to directly influence American reality.

that had been going on since the end of the Second World War, which was surely "World War Three." (*GP* 156)

In his first novel of the nineteen eighties, 1982's *Deadeye Dick*, Vonnegut explored the violence distinctive of the decade not abroad but at home. book is a clear plea for gun control at a time when the percentage of American homes owning guns neared fifty percent and homicide rates were surging in cities all over the country; when the United States seemed to have become "a society of people who matter and who don't matter, and Americans have taken this to heart" (Vonnegut qtd. in Sumner 221). *Deadeye Dick* followed the pattern that had become a Vonnegut trademark since *Slapstick*, a "cycle of first-person reflections, weighing the merits of a messy life lived in a troubled, perhaps doomed, world," in which the protagonist struggles to find acceptance and forgiveness" amid "regret about dashed dreams and missed opportunities," encountering instead a sort of "world-weary gratitude" (Sumner 189). For many critics, the repetition of this formula tied to the author's characteristic recurrence of themes and characters meant that "Vonnegut had written himself into a cul-de-sac" (Freese, "Critical Reception" 5). However, in their commentary on "the atrophy of their culture" and the characters' "lack of words to cope with their experiences" (Levine and Papasotiriou 136) in a brain-damaging society in which, Vonnegut's novels of the seventies and early eighties are indeed a clear precedent of major turnabout which would again change the face of American literature.

In January of 1980, John Barth published an article entitled "The Literature of Replenishment" which condemns the conscious elitism of experimental fiction which had turned postmodernism into "something of an academic industry, a theoretical program for admitting writers to the club, or else clubbing them into submission" (Bradbury, *Modern* 247). Barth writes that "[t]he ideal postmodernist novel will somehow rise above the quarrel between realism and irrealism, formalism and 'contentism'" ("Replenishment" 70), and encourages novelists to shun experimenting for experimentation's sake and instead set out to write "the *best next thing*" (71). It was a far cry from his 1967 claims in "The Literature of Exhaustion," but one that was soon echoed by other authors such as Charles Newman, who in *The Post-Modern Aura* (1985) criticizes how avant-garde writing and literary criticism seemed locked in a vicious-circle symbiosis of ever-growing "inflation of discourse" (10) and empty sophistication. In his part, Tom Wolfe closed the decade with an article entitled "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast: A Literary Manifesto

for the New Social Novel" (1989), in which he argues that the avant-garde novelists of the last twenty years had ignored the great subject of their age in favor of establishing "an avant-garde position way out beyond realism" ("Stalking" 49) and instead demanded a new, social novel that would document modern American life. It seemed, as Ihab Hassan lamented, that postmodernism would fade "from awkward neologism to derelict cliché without ever attaining the dignity of concept" ("Culture" 119).

The fact, nevertheless, is that before Wolfe and even Barth's manifestos, novelists such as Kurt Vonnegut had already started to undermine some of their most experimental impulses, taking on less flamboyant tones and realizing that realism and experiment, which had previously been considered "flags raised in camps at war," could engage in "peaceful intercourse" (Bradbury, *Modern* 257). Undoubtedly moved by the experience of the end of the Vietnam War, which "did much to shake Americans into a sobered realism and a sense of human impotence in a mechanical and military age" (270), American writers turned to a new recording of what Richard Ford deems "the normal applauseless life of us all" (10). Experimental tendencies were not abandoned completely, but were redirected to highlight the grotesque aspects of everyday "normality" in a fiction that explored "a world of ritual life-styles, forms, and conventions, in which, however, the forms are often imprisoning patterns of a life pre-plotted and fictionalized by social powers elsewhere" (Bradbury, *Modern* 271). Vonnegut's eighties novels like *Deadeye Dick* and *Bluebeard* (1987) paint a social tableau that perfectly fits what Jerome Klinkowitz labels "the new American novel of a manners" (*New* 3); one in which the "prevailing note is often that of bitter irony, an expression of a dismay about the emptiness, random violence, mechanism, and delusion of many American lives" (Bradbury, *Modern* 271–272): Vonnegut even has the main character of *Bluebeard,* Rabo Karabekian declare that "[a]lmost everything about the modern world wearies me" (*BB* 58). However, between his two neo-realist works of the decade, Vonnegut published a novel in which he returned to science fiction and apocalyptic speculation over the end of human life on Earth, and which the author himself regarded as "[t]he best book I ever wrote" (*FWD* 131).

2.13 "You'll learn, you'll learn, you'll learn": *Galápagos* (1985)

Given the Reagan administration's heating up of the Cold War, it is no wonder that many commentators have described the politics of the eighties as apocalyptic. Stephen D. O'Leary explains that "arguments on both the left and right seemed to appeal to ultimates," with politicians and preachers invoking "the spectre of a world Communist dictatorship that would threaten America with either enslavement or apocalyptic destruction if we did not invest in new weapons systems" while, on the opposite side, "the nuclear freeze movement blanketed the cultural landscape with images of the nuclear devastation that would result if those purchases were not halted" (173). This duality was reflected in American literature, which not only reveled in the "deepened sense of skepticism" of the new experimental realism, but also "sounded an apocalyptic note," with many authors projecting "the imagination of disaster" (Levine and Papasotiriou 231). One of these writers, of course, was Kurt Vonnegut, who throughout his career had become "increasingly worried about humans destroying the natural world" (Morse, "Thinking" 293) and in his 1985 novel *Galápagos* turned the traditional literary trope of the catastrophic end of the world inside out.

The book projects a near future in which a virus renders humans unable to reproduce, thus causing the extinction of the whole human race save for a few survivors on board a cruise ship, aptly named "Bahía de Darwin," who through a series of chance occurrences are stranded on the Galápagos islands, where the British naturalist made some of his most important discoveries. Over thousands of years, the descendants of these "last humans" evolve into simpler lifeforms that have little in common with their hominid forbearers and purport no threat to their natural environment. *Galápagos*, thus, is an apocalyptic novel in the purest sense of the term. Adela Yarbro Collins writes that "[i]n Revelation the magnitude of the disorder can be righted only by the destruction of the world as it had been known" (116), and in a similar way, Vonnegut's book presents a scenario in which the only way humanity can avoid its own self-annihilation and that of its habitat is through its own destruction, by ceasing to be human entirely. *Galápagos*, however, is not a dire warning of the devastation to come, but instead represents human extinction as "an antidote to a world that produces the fears we seek to escape" (Nilges 24). Accepting the apocalyptic credo that chaos is a requisite for new creation, the destruction of the human race and its world as we know it in Vonnegut's novel becomes

desirable, even beautiful, in the portrayal of the harmony it can create, of an existence "represented as more enjoyable since simpler . . . than our chaotic present" (26).

Further evidence of the apocalyptic ambiance in eighties US were the so-called "culture wars," whereby the normalization of issues of gender, sexuality, and race which had first been raised during the sixties was faced with severe opposition from the New Right, which claimed that the formerly Christian America had been degraded by the "secular humanist cultural vandals" of the sixties (Wilentz 186), and was desperately in need of a complete moral restoration. In 1986, James Davison Hunter described the two opposing camps as "orthodox" versus "progressives" (12) and, in a description that calls to mind O'Leary's distinction between tragic and comic interpretations of apocalypse, Roof and Caron explain that the difference between both lays primarily in their "views of moral authority":

> The orthodox see authority as arising out of transcendent sources and emphasize the centrality of biblical text and divine revelation as opposed generally to scientific and evolutionary explanations. Progressives, on the other hand, see authority as resting within society and underscore the arbitrary character of text, teachings, and moral codes. (Roof and Caron 124)

The scenario extended Umberto Eco's 1964 division between "apocalyptic" and "integrated" attitudes towards mass culture among intellectuals and academics (*Apocalypse* 17) into a wider divide that split the whole of society in its vision of what is morally acceptable and culturally canonical. In academic and university circles, the "culture wars" would result in the embracing of an integrationist credo of "multiculturalism," understood as "the celebration of distinct ethnic, gender, and sexual identities in order to offset . . . the Anglocentrism and conventional white male domination of American life" (Wilentz 186). Yet, the divide would also spawn fundamentalist violence at street level, as violent members of the orthodox camp would even resort to bombing abortion clinics (187). This violent cultural divide is still pervasive nowadays, as evidenced by the assault of the Capitol by supporters of Donald Trump in January 2021, after Trump's defeat in the 2020 presidential election.

Himself a target of attacks from orthodox neoconservatives, Kurt Vonnegut had seen his books banned and even burned under indictments of being "depraved, immoral, psychotic, vulgar, and anti-Christian" (Morais, "Neverending") and, in a December 1985

appearance on William F. Buckley, Jr.'s TV show *Firing Line,* was accused of being "anti-American" by the famed conservative commentator. The author, who described himself as a "Christ-worshipping agnostic" (*PS* 298), declared: "I listen to the ethical pronouncements of the leaders of the so-called religious revival going on in this country, including those of our President, and am able to distill only two firm commandments from them . . . 'Stop thinking' and 'Obey'" (*FWD* 158). In several occasions, Vonnegut would condemn the hypocrisy of the New Right's fundamentalist exaltation of certain biblical passages while completely ignoring others, hence decrying that the Ten Commandments "be posted in public buildings" (*AMWAC* 158) while outright disregarding Christ's exhortations in the Sermon on the Mount: "Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God. Blessed *are* the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God" (Matthew 5:7–9). A novel like *Galápagos,* in which evolution becomes the central protagonist and the solution to mankind's destructive tendencies, can be read as an indictment of the pro-Creationism religious fundamentalism in vogue during Reagan's administration. The fact that, at the novel's end, all of the future human race is descended from a Third World tribe, the Kanka-Bonos, is a clear statement of cultural relativism aimed at contesting the sense of superiority of white Anglo-Saxon protestants. However, in *Galápagos,* Vonnegut decides to take multiculturalism even further and reach its logical extreme. Thus, the novel depicts a world in which all human cultures are not only equally meaningful, but also equally meaningless, undermining "the perceived superiority of humans in the biosphere" (Tally 123). It is a sort of cosmic relativism that seeks to "put human life and culture in its proper anthropological context," that is, as "egotistic, narcissistic tiny links of a much longer historical chain of historical evolution" (Rosen 53). Human culture and knowledge cannot stake a higher artistic claim than the courtship dance of the Blue-footed Booby bird, and proves to be forlornly useless to challenge the microscopic bacteria that cause worldwide sterility and essentially destroy humanity as we know it.

Galápagos examines "the misuse of human reason and invention as the principal danger to life on the planet" (Morse, "Thinking" 297), arguing that "our big brains have been attempting to usurp God's role and are preventing us from accepting our rightful place in nature" (Rosen 62). About these "big brains," Vonnegut writes that "[t]here was no end to the evil schemes that a thought machine that oversized couldn't imagine and execute," and from his vantage point a million years into the future, the novel's narrator

can positively declare that they were indeed "nearly fatal defects in the evolution of the human race" (*GP* 9). Humanity, therefore, is presented as an evolutionary mistake, and Vonnegut argues that the only means to prevent the destruction of the world is to devolve to a simpler state: "not to think ever better thoughts but to give up thinking all together" (Tally 123). Still, in its treatment of evolution theory, *Galápagos* is much more than a mere regressive fantasy and instead becomes a profound exponent of science fiction with the emphasis on *science*. While embracing Darwin's theories, Vonnegut also condemns how his theory of evolution has done "more to stabilize people's volatile opinions of how to identify success or failure than any other tome" (*GP* 14), condemning the social Darwinism that had historically attempted to rationalize European societies' biological authority over 'inferior' cultures and whose doctrine of "survival of the fittest" had become the basis for the aggressive capitalism Vonnegut had so severely indicted in novels such as *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* and *Breakfast of Champions.*

In order to embrace Darwinist science while rejecting its historical deployment as a narrative to justify intolerance and inequality, Vonnegut incorporates then recent theories which introduced the role of random mutations and sudden chance into the equation of biological evolution, thus undermining the notion of "survival of the fittest." In 1998, Philip Johnson would declare that any "materialistic theory of evolution . . . must be based on chance" (22), echoing Jacques Monod's 1971 dictum that "Chance *alone* is at the source of every innovation, of all creation in the biosphere" (112). Vonnegut, who, in novels such as *The Sirens of Titan* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* had already examined the arbitrary and disconnected nature of experience, presents all life in the biosphere as nature's experiments with "pure, gambling casino luck" (*GP* 89), to which it is impossible to attach a coherent human narrative. One simply cannot bring "order to chaos" (*BOC* 215) in a universe in which "Chance is God" (Boodin 82), and so Vonnegut depicts a world in which "nature does not differentiate between people, iguanas, and seaweed" (Rosen 53) and humanity's status as the dominant species can be altered at any given moment, thus discarding any notion of a meaningful narrative behind human existence, which is revealed to be as arbitrary as that of all other organisms.

Galápagos is an apocalyptic novel in the purest essence. In contrast to the philosophical apocalypse of *The Sirens of Titan* or the neo-apocalyptic despair of *Cat's Cradle*, *Galápagos* clearly fulfills the traditional apocalyptic imperative of a New Jerusalem, even if it translates the "messianic kingdom from a new-age heaven to a

second-chance earth" (Martin and Ostwalt 62). Just as the new, sustainable form of future humans symbolizes the promise of a New Jerusalem, the old "big brains" that had found ensuring the survival of the human race a total bore" (*GP* 81) act as an "Antichrist figure" (Rosen 55), and the narrative perspective of over a million years is afforded by the figure of Leon Trout's ghost, the novel's narrator who, according to Rosen, "occupies a narrative position much like John of Patmos [in Revelation] in that he is simultaneously in the future looking back, and in the present describing what he observes" (59). David Ketterer writes that "the scope and grandeur of the Apocalypse necessitate a diminution of the human element" (7), a decentering that Vonnegut achieves not only through the broad scope of narrative time, but also in his conscious exposition of how "mankind's sense of its own importance is hopelessly overblown" (Rosen 62), a fact best exemplified in the dismissal of Mandarax, a technological device that compiles centuries of human knowledge and proves to be of no use whatsoever in the face of the protagonists' tribulations, to the point that it is finally cast to sea as if dismissing a "metaphorical 'Apple of Knowledge'" (52). As Leon Trout acquiesces to at the end of the novel, "my words will be as enduring as anything my father wrote, or Shakespeare wrote, or Beethoven wrote, or Darwin wrote," accepting the unavoidably ephemeral nature of human culture by claiming that "they all wrote with air on air" (*GP* 319).

Thus, *Galápagos* stands as perhaps its author's ultimate apocalypse, "the apotheosis of Vonnegut's earlier works" (Tally 118) in their view that "the world ends when it is fundamentally changed" (Jowett 136) but that said end inevitably signifies a new beginning, too. As such, the novel becomes a repository for the contradictions which I have explained are a key to apocalyptic thought as much as to Vonnegut's philosophy. Leonard Mustazza argues that the novel's narrative is "bi-directional": progressive in how it "applies a Darwinian solution to the problem of moral error," and retrogressive insofar as "the state of innocence that is ultimately achieved is allusively linked to primal mythic innocence" ("Darwinian Eden" 55). Thus, it echoes the paradox at the heart of the ever-present American impulse to open the frontier to a new world that nevertheless stands as a return to an Eden of primal innocence, a craving which is palpable in Vonnegut as much as in Reagan's "Back to the future" rhetoric. *Galápagos* depicts an endless cycle of contradiction in which "the ones who suffer from the life without meaning are the same ones who will create the conditions for that meaningless life" (Tally 119), and yet the

alternative it proposes to said suffering is the paradox of "a new humanism without the human" (114).[38]

However, the furry creatures with bleaks and flippers into which humanity evolves in Galápagos, with their merry unawareness of their own mortality and the struggles of their forebears, are far from nightmarish fin-de-siècle visions of regression. Instead, Vonnegut's post-humans, who, by the author's account, form "a perfectly cohesive human family" (*GP* 299), actually manage to what the author considers the main essence of what makes us human: their sense of humor, honesty, and compassion. Thus, by expressing "dismay at violence and humorlessness" and celebrating "compassion and tenderness," which Vonnegut himself described as the essence of his work (Wakefield, *Letters* 323) *Galápagos* ultimately becomes not a resigned acceptance of humanity's inevitable descent into devolution, but a hopeful yearn for evolution. Mustazza argues that the main concern of the novel is not with the future but with the present; that *Galápagos* "is not predictive but cautionary, is not about science or religion but about the way we treat one another here and now" ("Darwinian Eden" 64). Highlighting the qualities that make the hypothetical future humans happy and sustainable, Vonnegut places his trust in humanity's ability to change, to enact a comic apocalypse that will deem the events in his novel unnecessary. Asked about the recurring tropes of destruction in his works, the author explained that they are "a way of saying God doesn't care what becomes of us, and neither does Nature, so we'd better care," as "We're all there is to care" (Reed and Leeds 25), and so, disguised as a science fiction fantasy of a million years, *Galápagos* is actually an eager invitation for humanity in the nineteen eighties to care, to persevere, in hope that, as Leon Trout says in the closing lines of the novel, "You'll learn, you'll learn, you'll learn" (*GP* 324).

Once again, however, Vonnegut's hopeful yearning for a comic apocalyptic transformation in American society did not materialize. By the time Ronald Reagan left

[38] Even though its literary motifs could not be further removed, in a sense *Galápagos'* speculation with a post-human future links it to the latest development in science fiction at the time: the Cyberpunk movement. Described by Bruce Sterling as "the definitive product" of the "eighties milieu," Cyberpunk was a sub-genre created by a generation raised "not only within the literary tradition of science fiction but in a truly classical science fiction world" (viii). Claire Sparler argues that Cyberpunk's "infatuation with boundary crossing" and transgression of the limits between "organic and inorganic, natural and artificial, human and machine," constitutes a "decentering of the human subject" which epitomizes the "hallmark of the postmodern condition" (631); a notion which, although dressed in another guise, is clearly also identifiable in *Galápagos,* proving that, well beyond he ceased to write about alien planets, Vonnegut remained attuned to the sensibilities of the science fiction vanguard.

office in 1989, his administration had "overlooked and sometimes indulged negligence and permissiveness on a grand scale" (Wilentz 177), leaving behind "a record of official corruption unsurpassed" (177) as well as a "ruinous regulatory legacy" (199). Through its naming of new judges for the Supreme Court, the administration sought to "institutionalize the Reagan revolution so it can't be set aside no matter what happens in future presidential elections" (Edwards 237), a tragic apocalyptic reordering of American politics that was also evident in the demonization of Democrats as anti-American liberals, exposed in a Republican campaign memo for the 1984 election, which instigated campaigners to "Paint Reagan as the personification of all that is right with or heroized by America," leaving his opponents in a position where "an attack on Reagan is tantamount to an attack on America's idealized image of itself" (173). Nowhere was this fundamentalist narrative of the new Republican right as the one real America as in the handling of the Iran-Contra affair, which created a strong precedent in the subordination of law to politics, as instead of arguing for its innocence in the scandal, the administration chose to rationalize its lawlessness under the moral imperative that "because they knew they were doing good, they could possibly do no wrong; because their hearts were pure, their hands must be clean" (Wilentz 241).

However, an unexpected development did profoundly alter the course of history at the end of the nineteen eighties, as the Soviet Empire collapsed under the disastrous economic consequences of a military spending that surpassed 20 percent of the USSR's annual gross domestic product (Wilentz 248). At the start of his second term, Reagan had claimed that his central mission was "to challenge the Soviet Union's military expansion on all fronts" (qtd. in Wilentz 211), and even if the massive American military buildup probably did little to influence Premier Mikhail Gorbachev's twin policies of *glasnost* (openness) and *perestroika* (restructuring), the fact is that the rapport between him and Reagan was the key to a process whereby "together, the two unlikely costars seized the opportunity to complete one of the most dramatic turnabouts in modern history" (Wilentz 246). It would be Reagan's successor, George H. W. Bush, who would witness the fall of the Berlin Wall from the Oval Office on November 9, 1989, but still Reagan had somehow succeeded in an undertaking that only five years before had seemed too improbable to even imagine: the United States had, for lack of a better word, won the Cold War. And yet, as Connelly writes, "what neither side realized was that, even if the Soviet Union self-destructed, their conflicts would continue" (350). The following decade would

demonstrate that the effects of the Reagan Doctrine would soon return in the form of unexpected, new threats, and that, as environmentalists continuously warned, the nuclear nightmares of the Cold War had been a mere distraction from the real, "continued threat to life on earth" (350) posed by human mismanagement of the planet's ecology.

2.14 The end of history: The 1990s

The nineties have been described as an "interwar decade" (Cohen 4), an almost "non-historical," transitional space between the end of the Cold War and the new beginning signaled by 9/11 (Wegner 149), during which two contradictory narratives, "the triumphalist and the traumatic" (Cohen 124), coincided in a period of uncertain, "sublime openness" (Wegner 150) wherein "history might move in a number of very different directions" (149). Frank Kermode argues that humanity's "deep need for intelligible ends" results in the projection of "our existential anxieties on to history" (97), and the inescapable symbolic connotations of the approaching turn of the century and millennium were perhaps best encapsulated in Francis Fukuyama's influential theory of "The end of history," which argued that the prevalence of liberalism as the seemingly sole viable socioeconomic model for the future meant that "we have trouble imagining a world that is radically better than our own, or a future that is not essentially democratic and capitalist" (Fukuyama 46). If utopian desires for improvement are replaced by the "animal contentment of the consumer society" (Levine and Papasotiriou 218) in an unquestioned assurance that capitalism is, in Slavoj Žižek's words, "the finally found 'natural' social regime" (10), to the extent that its demise is rendered "more unthinkable than some universal conflagration that swallows up the entirety of civilization" (Paik 124), Fukuyama convincingly argues that humanity may well have reached the final stage of its evolutionary journey.

In the United States, the jeremiad over the "end of history" seemed even more convincing as the unexpected collapse of the USSR left American foreign policy without a clear mission, and its citizens devoid of the narrative that had structured their lives for almost half a century. The rhetoric of the Cold War had been apocalyptic in the purest sense of the word, a situation that exposed the world to a very real eschatological threat but nevertheless provided a narrative through which to understand and make sense of

history. Now, with the fall of the Soviet Empire, the interpretive narrative seemed to vanish, depriving citizens of "a clear and credible hermeneutic strategy" (Rosen xviii) by which to function. Don DeLillo spoke of a "curious loss of a sense of measurable certainty," identifying a feeling of nostalgia for the Cold War's certainties and clearly defined "biblical sense of awesome confrontation," which had "provided a measure for our feelings" and the lack of which now led Americans into an unreal "period of drift" (DeCurtis 48–49). In his 1990 novel *Rabbit at Rest,* John Updike voiced this feeling of existential uncertainty asking, "If there's no Cold War, what's the point of being an American?" (442–443).

Seemingly as a reaction to "This new age of anxiety" (Levine and Papasotiriou 235), a view emerged that, as the "victor" in the Cold War, the US had "the obligation to 'lead' the world" (Wegner 150). In 1991, President Bush proposed his almost utopian projection of a "new world order" in which "freedom and respect for human rights find a home among all nations" (qtd. in Wilentz 303). However, it was soon clear that the President conceived said order as one dictated by American military hegemony, as he discarded any notion of disarmament in the aftermath of the Cold War, arguing that "new sources of instability" such as terrorism and "renegade regimes" required "a strong and engaged America" (qtd. in Wilentz 294). The first enactment of this renewed American militarism would be the December 1989 invasion of Panama which, under the code name Operation Just Cause, would, in the words of Secretary of State James Baker, change "the mindset of the American people about the use of force in the post-Vietnam era" (qtd. in Wilentz 294). Less than two years later, the Gulf War would become "simultaneously a major military action and a staged media event" (Birkenstein 69), delivering scenes of spectacular air raids live from the Persian Gulf to television sets in living rooms all across America that would feed "the mystique of technological warfare" (Wilentz 301). Kurt Vonnegut scolded what he labelled "the show business attacks on little countries staged by Reagan and Bush to take our minds off the crimes of their closest friends and biggest campaign contributors" (*FWD* 97), but as the invasion of Kuwait became "the most impressive US military display since 1945" (Wilentz 289), Bush's approval ratings approached 90 percent (the highest figure recorded since the advent of presidential opinion polling fifty years earlier) and the President could fairly claim, "By God, we've kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all" (qtd. in K. O'Brien 250).

Willing to establish a parallel between the Gulf War and World War II, Bush emphasized how both conflicts had bought Americans together and made them rejoice, "Fifty years had passed," he claimed, "but let me tell you – the American spirit is as young and fresh as ever" (qtd. in Cohen 129). Already in a 1990 speech at the National Air and Space Museum in Washington D. C., Vonnegut had warned of how "[a]ttacking a civilian population from the air, with or without warning, with or without declaration of war, has become for most of us simply one more symbol . . . of national pride" (*FWD* 103), and the President's words seemed to echo this sentiment by appealing to war as a rhetoric of national unity and purpose. In the advent of a new, post-Cold War era, neoconservative Republicans found that a renewed American militarism could become a new apocalyptic narrative to make sense of history. As Andrew Bacevich outlines in *The New American Militarism*, their hope was that "through war the United States might yet save the world, and in doing so might also save itself" (96). By the turn of the century, the American military budget would surpass that of the next fifteen nations combined (K. O'Brien 250), whereas it would contribute "a smaller amount of aid as a proportion of its gross national product than any other developed country" (Bigsby 22).

In the field of literature, Samuel Cohen argues that the early nineties witnessed an "explosion of historical novels" by major American writers which were as much a reflection of the retrospective quality of the decade as a reaction to the "triumphalist reception of the end of the Cold War" (3). Facing the end of the century and the shift in cultural and political paradigms after the fall of the Berlin Wall, novelists returned to the theme of "[w]hat America was, what it was supposed to be" (12), and concluded that it is impossible "to think about American identity without looking at the past out of which that identity is formed – and the way Americans have written the history of that past" (15). Kurt Vonnegut's contribution to this looking-back trend, 1990's *Hocus Pocus* chose to center on one of the darkest chapters of modern American history: the Vietnam War. Nonetheless, as all Vonnegut novels that delve into the past and future of the United States, *Hocus Pocus* is mostly a reflection of the present state of the nation as it faces a post-Cold War world. The author conceded that "[t]he biggest character in *Hocus Pocus* is imperialism" (*FWD* 130), and the novel stands as "a piece of rhetoric about the decline of the United States" (Shields 383) at a time when academics were arguing that the "American Century" as decreed by Henry Luce in 1941 had unceremoniously ended sometime in the seventies, when "America crossed the midway point on its sad journey

from being the world's largest creditor nation to being its largest debtor nation" (Barber 50). As the Cold War had become the dominant hermeneutic interpretation of world dynamics for decades, the US and the Soviet Union had effectively been "arms-racing themselves right out of the leadership" (Barber 53) and, by the time the USSR collapsed under its own economic debacle in 1989, the American debt was $2.8 trillion, triple its size in 1980, and cost the government $200 billion a year (Wilentz 306). The massive debt meant that "a significant proportion of the national economy is effectively owned by other countries" (Bigsby 18) as the national debt was financed by foreign banks, augmenting the everlasting question of what America is with new queries over "who owns America" (18) and "how long foreign holders of the dollar will be content to hold dollar assets" (Hodgson 49).

The United States portrayed in *Hocus Pocus* is a "thoroughly looted, bankrupt nation whose assets had been sold off to foreigners, a nation swamped by unchecked plagues and superstition and illiteracy and hypnotic TV, with virtually no health services for the poor" (*HP* 88). Still, the decline of the American economic hegemony documented by Vonnegut coincided with the consolidation of a new kind of American empire at the dawn of the nineties. In 1988 the first McDonald's restaurant had opened in Budapest; a metaphor of the infiltration of American capitalism into the heart of the communist empire and of how, in a sense, the end of the Cold War would signify "the triumph of consumer culture over socialist realism" (Levine and Papasotiriou 218). The US may no longer be the great economic creditor that emerged as the leader of the so-called "free world" at the end of World War II, but it had found a way to assert a new kind of cultural hegemony in the globalized world of the late twentieth century. Globalization had become "Americanization" (Levine and Papasotiriou 226), as the country exercised a new kind of "soft imperialism" in which "those who are colonized are said to 'choose' their commercial indenture" (Barber xxi). Reinhold Wagnleitner termed the process "Coca-Colonization" (ii), whereas Benjamin Barber famously named the new cultural and economic juggernaut "McWorld," and defined it as a "product of popular culture driven by expansionist commerce" that presents "culture as commodity, apparel as ideology" (Barber 17), and for which "selling American products means selling America . . . its very soul," commercializing "not life's necessities but life's styles" (60) until "the image has overtaken the product as the key to earned income" (67).

Globalization, Hardt and Negri claim, is the new form of empire: an abstract power in the form of "a very high tech machine" which "devours cultural difference" (39) in a myopic search for profit whereby environmental preservation, citizenship, ethnicity and identity, working conditions and human rights become "at best irrelevant, at worst, obstacles to be overcome" (Barber 31). Thus, even as it enriched many developing countries, McWorld created greater inequalities between and within nations (Levine and Papasotiriou 219), and so, as American pop culture became a "global lingua franca" (225) and people all over the world drank Coca Cola, wore Nike shoes and watched the latest Hollywood blockbusters, its predominance inevitably became a double-edged sword, turning the US into "the nemesis that hundreds of millions . . . of people love, and love to hate" (Levine and Papasotiriou 225). Globalization holds up a "one way mirror" in which "[t]he East sees the West" but "[t]he West, however, does not see the East" (Gray 87), and as the peoples of the Third World became "unwilling witnesses to their own disadvantages," finding themselves "obliged to gaze at a consumer paradise, a world of surfeit that is determinately not theirs" (87), the US remained "scarcely aware" of the "overwhelming feeling of humiliation that is experienced by most of the world's population" (Pamuk qtd. in Gray 87). This proverbial elephant in the room would finally make its presence felt with traumatic consequences in the morning of September 11th, 2001.

After decades during which the insistence on interpreting the world through the tragic apocalyptic rhetoric of the US-Soviet confrontation had "distorted our understanding of the rest of the world" and its increasingly globalized nature (Connelly 337), Samuel Huntington famously put forth his theory of the "clash of civilizations," which reasoned that the conflicts of the new century would not be motivated by the old ideological binaries of the Cold War but by cultural and civilizational "cleavages" (Huntington 54) aroused by questions of ethnicity or religion. Barber, on the other hand, argued that the new tensions are not "a clash of civilizations but a dialectical expression built into a single global civilization" (xvi), as the "politics of inadvertence and unintended consequences" (81) set in motion by the United States since the Vietnam War had created a new, interconnected world of economic and cultural interdependence in which frontiers and boundaries had become "permeable not just for the good but for the bad" (49). In his influential 1995 study of this new global scenario, *Jihad vs. McWorld*, Barber argued that "[h]istory is not over" (3), as he described a renewed tragic apocalyptic

polarity between McWorld's "bloodless economy of profit" and a reactionary Jihad's "bloody politics of identity" (8), two equally destructive forces which fought for their conception of the world as Disneyland or Babel. In McWorld, "everyone is a consumer," whereas in Jihad "everyone belongs to some tribe" (8), but none of the two opposing fundamentalist credos appeals to the notion of citizenship, and, as Barber asks: "Without citizens, how can there be democracy?" (8).

Basking in the "misleading sense of security of the 'unipolar moment'" (Levine and Papasotiriou 195), American citizens and politicians seemed to remain oblivious to the growing signs of this new reality as they rejoiced in the economic boom of the Clinton era. Still, tension was building as the post-Gulf War American military presence in Saudi Arabia became a principal recruiting device for anti-American Muslim terrorists (Wilentz 302), which culminated with Osama Bin Laden, who had been militarily trained by the American government to fight against the Soviets during their war in Afghanistan, issuing a public call for Jihad in February 1998, a decree whereby "every true Muslim had a duty to kill Americans everywhere in the world" (Wilentz 376). Nevertheless, in his 2000 State of the Union address, President Clinton would decry that "[n]ever before has our nation enjoyed, at once, so much prosperity and social progress with so little internal crisis and so few external threats" (qtd. in Wilentz 407), completely oblivious to the fact that, in a matter of months, the mounting tensions between Jihad and McWorld would culminate in the unprecedented terrorist attack on the continental US of 9/11, inaugurating a new era of terror and anxiety which seemed to support Jonathan Schell's 1998 proclamation that "The Cold War, instead of being the high point of danger in a waning nuclear age, will prove to have been a mere bipolar rehearsal for a multipolar second nuclear age" (10).

For the time being, however, the nineties witnessed the intensification of another process of fundamentalist polarization within American politics. In 1988, President George W. Bush had been elected after a campaign in which he issued statements attacking gun control and abortion, and fervently supporting capital punishment (Wilentz 289). Four years later, his re-election campaign rhetoric suggested that "Democrats were un-American" (Wilentz 270), as Republicans purported to be the sole torchbearers of the "true" American spirit and noted conservative commentator Pat Buchanan claimed that there was "a religious war going on in our country for the soul of America" (qtd. in Cohen

8). The campaign would result in the election of Democrat Bill Clinton,[39] who had proposed a move towards a more moderate center in order to distance the party from the liberal legacy of the Great Society (Levine and Papasotiriou 208). Kurt Vonnegut declared that "[t]he Clintons are shallow, opportunist Yuppies, but they are the only game in town" (Wakefield, *Letters* 369), echoing the sentiments of many Americans who growingly faced elections as a choice between the lesser of two evils. As Bill Clinton tried to "salvage his presidency by moving as far to the right as any Democrat dared" (Wilentz 357), the gap between the two parties seemed to narrow in the economic and political terrain at the same times as their differences increased in matters of morality and religion, further deepening the manichean cleavage opened in the sixties. At the start of the following decade, David Brooks would propose his theory that the US is divided into two "red" and "blue" camps which have less to do with the economic and class issues that traditionally split the two parties in the past but are rather determined by "moral issues and cultural preferences" (R. King 69). "Red" America, Brooks claims, is "traditional, religious, self-disciplined and patriotic," whereas "blue" America is "modern, secular, self-expressive, and discomfited by blatant displays of patriotism" ("One Nation"), a further tragic apocalyptic binary to understand a country seemingly intent on emphasizing what divides it than what holds it together.

The morality schism between the two parties was perhaps best encapsulated in Clinton's 1998 impeachment process under charges of high crimes and misdemeanors derived from the President's sexual scandals involving his former Arkansas state employee Paula Jones and White House intern Monica Lewinsky. The process revealed much about the accentuating fundamentalism in American culture, as lead House representative Tom Delay declared that the President lacked the correct "biblical world view" in politics (qtd. in Wilentz 396), and author Philip Roth rightly declared that "In 1998 you had the illusion that you were suddenly able to know this huge, unknowable country, to catch a glimpse of its moral core" (qtd. in Levine and Papasotiriou 232). In February 1999, Clinton was finally acquitted from the charges, but his impeachment

[39] An unexpected third actor in the election, independent Ross Perot, earned an impressive 19 percent of the total vote, the largest percentage for a third-party candidate since Theodore Roosevelt in 1912. Wilentz explains that the Perot phenomenon indicated that "in the aftermath of Reagan's presidency, the public alienation from politics that had begun in the Vietnam and Watergate eras deepened – and that a sizeable portion of the electorate was willing to vote for anyone who seemed to be an anti-politician in the angry populist vein" (321). In the light of today's politics, it does not seem an overstatement to trace a line from Perot's electoral results in 1992 and the presidential election of Donald Trump in 2016.

process “exposed a fundamental breach over the Constitution and, more broadly, over authority and accountability in American politics” (Wilentz 401) which highlighted the irreconcilable differences between Democrats and Republicans at the gates of a new century.

From an economic standpoint, the Clinton era surpassed the prosperity of even the Reagan years, with the gross domestic product on the rise as unemployment and inflation rates dropped significantly (Wilentz 371). Nevertheless, inequality remained a growing problem, as the buoyant stock market of the nineties paved the way for the corporate scandals of the early two-thousands and, ultimately, the 2008 collapse of the global economy. In *The Revolt of the Elites* (1997), Christopher Lasch documents how the privileged classes of America had made themselves “independent not only of crumbling industrial cities but of public services in general,” ultimately dropping out of “the common life” (45) while, in the meantime, the lower classes and racial minorities were afflicted by rising crime rates and a public education system in crisis. Kurt Vonnegut could only lament the decaying state of a country marked by “sky-high rates of murder and suicide and drug addiction and infant mortality, low rate of literacy, higher percentage of its citizens in prison than any other country except for Haiti and South Africa” (*HP* 287).

Just as Vonnegut had identified loneliness, alienation, and depression as perhaps the most pressing issues leading to America’s cultural decline in *Breakfast of Champions*, Robert D. Putnam’s influential study *Bowling Alone* (2000) examines the decrease in organized community life in the United States since the seventies, and argues that the decline in civic participation is marked by a similar decline in mental health (326). By replacing the communal ethos on which the country had been founded with a solitary life of suburban confinement, Americans were losing touch with their sense of purpose and belonging, and the main culprit, according to Putnam, was the power of television which, over the last decades had progressively become the focus of American households; a force that made family life turn inward and “away from whatever occurs beyond its four walls” until “the outside world has become an abstraction” (Kunstler 167). Todd Gitlin argues that movies, television and the Internet have become the example through which people measure their social reality and structure their emotional life, as “To an unprecedented degree, the torrent of images, songs, and stories streaming has become our familiar, our felt world” (*Media Unlimited* 32), thus withdrawing citizens from real experience in a

way akin to the shadows in the walls the cavern in Plato's myth. For Kurt Vonnegut, TV is "an *eraser*" (*TQ* 193), responsible for the proud ignorance that had become one of the great stereotypes used to mock Americans around the globe: "Thanks to our great educational system and TV," the author writes, "half of them couldn't even find their own country on a map of the world" (*HP* 271).

In the "brave new synergistic world of media conglomerates" (Levine and Papasotiriou 225), television was more than a mere alienating entertainment, and had instead become the main instrument used by McWorld to enforce a "postmodern capitalist economy in which needs are manufactured to meet the supply of producers who make their unmediated products marketable through promotion, spin, packaging, and advertising" (Barber 59). As the system generated "virtual need factories" that manipulated the public's emotions to "forge new wants" (69), the notion of citizenship was replaced by people's status as consumers who could never be satisfied, numbed by the illusion of their freedom of choice, a choice which, nevertheless, "is always about which items to buy and consume, never about *whether* to buy and consume anything at all" (98). Brian McHale explains how "[i]n a world where commodification is all, it follows that human beings become interchangeable commodities" (199), and as the unshakable resilience that Slavoj Žižek had identified in capitalism seemed to grow stronger, Francis Fukuyama's prediction of a certain loss of humanity conceded by the exchange of an utopian vision of a better life for the animal-like contentment of the consumer society (311) appeared ever more likely. In a country founded on a Dream of improvement, of devoting one's efforts to achieve a better life for the individual and his society, this growing contentment and cynicism seemed a threat to the very fabric that held the nation together. Jennifer Hochschild concludes that "If a substantial number of Americans lose faith in any foundational precept or the whole gestalt, the American Dream can collapse upon itself as thoroughly as any savings and loan bank" (258); perhaps the final, irreversible step for the US to ultimately become the landscape of "surface intensity and pure meaninglessness" described by Jean Baudrillard (*America* 28).

2.15 "There's work to do": *Timequake* (1997)

In a January 1992 letter to Marc Leeds, Kurt Vonnegut explained that he was in the process of finishing a new novel called *Timequake*. "Like this country, it should be completely finished in another year," he wrote (Wakefield, *Letters* 348), but just as the United States did not disappear in 1993, *Timequake*, which would become his final novel, would not appear until September of 1997. After years struggling with writer's block, Vonnegut decided to transform his inability to complete a full novel into the subject of the novel itself, which became what he referred to as a "stew" (*TQ* xii) made up of fragments from the original, unfinished novel, referred to as *Timequake One* throughout the text, mixed with personal thoughts and autobiographical details that read like a quasi-diary of his failed attempt at writing one last great novel. Ironically, in the process, *Timequake* becomes one of its author's most innovative and unique works. Valerie Sayers notes how Vonnegut turns his "unworkable novel into a highly entertaining consideration of the relationship between the writer's life and the writer's imagination," resulting in "the neatest trick yet played on a publishing world consumed with the furor over novel versus novel" ("Vonnegut Stew"). At the age of seventy-five, Kurt Vonnegut was still breaking new ground in American literature, and if Samuel Cohen purports that writers such as Thomas Pynchon and Philip Roth responded to the correspondence of the "national retrospective moment" in the nineties and the tendency towards introspection motivated by their own aging process by looking back into history, Vonnegut's response was to examine his own story. *Timequake* thus becomes punctuated by a cast of recurring characters, trademark themes and an unmistakable narratorial voice that is pure Vonnegut, which lead the writer himself to declare: "I don't see it as a freestanding novel, but as the last chapter in one long book" (qtd. in Sumner 312).

In its most conventional, plot-oriented aspect, the novel is set in the bankrupt and culturally dissolute America of 2001, in which the American Academy of Arts and Letters has become merely a relic of a derelict past, as computer technology has deemed novelists "as quaint . . . as contemporary makers in New England tourist towns of the toy windmills known since colonial times as whirligigs'" (*TQ* 30). Vonnegut explains that the setting of the novel has to do with "the disappearance of the America I tried to write for," and labels the book "a diary of elegiac personal reflections, laments about a fin de siècle culture of mindless speed and forgetting" (qtd. in Sumner 312), a culture which he thought

threatened to make the craft of writing itself obsolete. As if vindicating the role of writers in society, Vonnegut revives his most beloved character for *Timequake*: science fiction author Kilgore Trout, now living in misery among the homeless and shopping bag ladies that roam the streets of a desolate Manhattan. The novel also signals a return to science fictional techniques, as the main plot device is the titular "timequake," an anomaly in the expanding process of the universe that makes time go back ten years on the 13th of February**,** 2001, forcing people to relive the past ten years of their lives without the possibility to effect the slightest change, "making everybody and everything a robot of their own past, and demonstrating, incidentally, that the past was unmalleable and indestructible" (*TQ* 97). The pretext stands as a further examination of Vonnegut's favored theme of free will as a human illusion in the midst of a predetermined universe, but it can also be read as an exhausted literary activist's acquiescence to the old adage that history, indeed, repeats itself. As a privileged spectator and chronicler of the United States' shortfalls throughout the Cold War era, Kurt Vonnegut could not help but witness the social, economic and political developments of the nineteen nineties with a bitter impression that he had seen it all happen before.

Nevertheless, the main theme of *Timequake* might as well be technology. Neatly closing the circle opened with his first novel, *Player Piano*, forty-five years earlier, prior to its publication Vonnegut described *Timequake* as "a tragicomedy . . . about the externalization in the form of compact, reasonably priced, and readily available electronic devices of all that is amusing or economically valuable about the nervous systems of human beings" (Leeds vii). In 1952, the author had fantasized with the notion of machines replacing human beings, but by the end of the twentieth century the advent of the Internet had made such dystopian scenario more plausible than ever. Heralded as the coming of a third industrial revolution by Alvin Toffler in his 1980 book *The Third Wave*, information technology effectively "reshaped the American economy and society at an incredible pace" (Kirk 373), which leads Paul Buhle to claim that even the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent end of the Cold War "scarcely seemed as significant as the reinvention of American private lives through electronic culture" (408). The new paradigm inaugurated by the World Wide Web, however, presented two contradictory paths, as it could either "mark the vast democratization of the culture with new technological possibilities at the fingertips of millions of ordinary consumers," or else instigate "a further loss of community contact" (408).

Advocates of the first contingency argued that the Internet could break "the tyranny of geography – the stranglehold of location, access and transportation that has governed human societies from their inception" (Levine and Papasotiriou 287), thus positively transforming lives, societies, and economies, and signifying the apocalyptic opening of a new frontier. It is no coincidence that Internet activist John Perry Barlow appealed to foundational American rhetoric in his 1996 essay "A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace, which asserted his and his collaborators' intention to "create a civilization of the Mind in Cyberspace" ("Declaration"). On the opposing side, critics such as Theodore Roszak condemned computers as "low-grade mechanical counterfeits" (*Cult* xiii) of the human mind propagated by the "most questionable" elements of society (xv). Vonnegut, who declared "I have been called a luddite. I welcome it" (*AMWAC* 55), sided with this view of information technology as a new form of dehumanization. In one of the essays collected in his last book, *A Man without a Country*, the author criticizes Bill Gates for proclaiming "Wait till you can see what your computer can become," when, in his view, "it's you who should be doing the becoming, not the damn fool computer" (56). Defending the humanist principles he had upheld since he first laid a word on paper, the author concluded that "[w]hat you can become is the miracle you were born to be through the work that you do" (56).

Timequake presents a society in which everything that Vonnegut deems valuable is being erased "by garish virtual realities and the simple passage of time" (Sumner 318), as the author mourns community contact, now replaced by electronic communities that "build nothing" (*AMWAC* 61). In a passage that mourns the disappearance of the book as a physical object of intangible spiritual qualities which, twenty years later, reads as a foresighted prophecy of eBooks and tablets and books themselves, Vonnegut explains how his grandchildren "are already doing much of their reading from words projected on the face of a video screen" (*TQ* 157). In an echo of what Kermode terms the "disadvantage of too easy access" (99), Vonnegut prophesizes that the age of instant information might well result in the consolidation of the general tendency towards a lack of cultural inquisitiveness. In a contemporary letter to Loree Rackstraw, the author expresses cynicism at the notion of the democratization of information, forecasting that the "Information Superhighway . . . will almost certainly turn out to be a narrow thoroughfare with lots of cops and tollgates" (Wakefield, *Letters* 343). In *The Rise of the Network Society* (1996), Manuel Castells explains that the Internet's Space of Flows has made

experience "globally connected and locally disconnected" (436), creating a new paradigm of spatial incoherence in which elements are "functionally inter-related beyond physical contiguity" (433) that removes individuals from meaningful community contact even further than television according to Putnam's *Bowling Alone.* Even more so, Castells examines how the "Information Age" is defined by the opposition between the "instant time of computerized networks versus the clock time of everyday life" (506), which inescapably leads to the science-fictionalization of reality in the twenty-first century, a time when, due to the "tension between human rhythms and capital's globalized space-time" (10), it could be argued that we inhabit a very plausible Timequake.

Kurt Vonnegut's antidote to the dehumanizing forces of technology is, as always, to rejoice in the fallible qualities that make humanity unique. As such, against his wife's laments that he should open an email account, the author portrays himself "farting around" the streets of New York City (*TQ* 191) to send an envelope from the Postal Convenience Station and rejoicing at the sights of life and unexpected human encounters he finds along the way. Even if *Timequake* seems to resign to the repetition of the worst human impulses in an ongoing cycle of socio-political entropy and the inevitable disappearance of the culture Vonnegut belongs to, its author nevertheless cannot help but marvel at the "very new and beautiful" quality of human awareness, a "*soul*" that is "a million times the speed of light" and integral in "pondering the secrets of the cosmos" (*TQ* 213–214). Even after five decades of finding his advice disregarded by a nation embarked on a seemingly unstoppable pathway towards a tragic apocalypse, Vonnegut still concedes a glimmer of hope in that apocalypse turning into a comic revelation of a better world, if only the United States and the whole of humanity would heed Kilgore Trout's advice: "You were ill, but now you're well, and there's work to do" (167). Crisis, Trout's creator maintains until the very end, can still lead to a new creation. But first, one must be willing to face the inherent chaos of existence.

3. CHAOS

3.1 From chaos to cosmos, from crisis to chaos, from chaos to creation

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines chaos as "the ultimate abyss, infinite darkness" ("Chaos, n."). However, chaos is also the origin of everything we know, as it is "[t]he formless void believed to have existed before the creation of the universe" ("Chaos, n."). As such, in the opening verses of Genesis, the Bible narrates how God created the earth, which was previously "without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep" (Gen 1:2), and how He gave form to this primordial oblivion of immeasurable space, to chaos understood as the formless elementary state of the universe, in order to create life. The word originates from the Greek form *khaos*, which Ovid employed in his *Metamorphoses* to recount his own creation myth, opposing it to *kosmos,* understood as the ordered universe:

> Before the ocean and the earth appeared—
> before the skies had overspread them all—
> the face of Nature in a vast expanse
> was naught but Chaos uniformly waste.
> It was a rude and undeveloped mass,
> that nothing made except a ponderous weight;
> and all discordant elements confused,
> were there congested in a shapeless heap. (Ovid 1:5–12)

In modern times, the term has popularly come to connote any given state of orderless confusion in human affairs, commonly used to invoke the opposite of form and harmony in all kinds of contexts. Nevertheless, it still retains its symbolic power as a universal metaphor to describe social and historical processes that engender a generalized feeling of anxiety, as if in fear that our world order may collapse into the primeval formlessness from which it originally emerged according to myth.

Early human civilizations such as the Egyptians and Mesopotamians, however, did not consider chaos as the diametrical opposite of creation. Norman Cohn recalls that "Fantasies of cosmos without chaos were not for them" (56), as he explains how these cultures conceived of a world in a constant state of tension, locked in an endless cycle whereby the ordered cosmos collapsed into formless chaos only to resurge again. For the primitive peoples studied by Mircea Eliade in *Myth and Reality* (1963), these cosmic cataclysms were a natural stage in the eternal development of the universe. Commonly, the cataclysm was accepted to have occurred sometime in the past of the race but, taking a larger view of history, they did not discard its recurrence in a distant future (Eliade, *Myth* 54–55), as they understood that, in May's words, "There is no chaos without a new creation" (6).

It was not until the advent of Zoroastrianism in the fifth century BC, that the notion of a stable universe completely devoid of the forces of chaos first developed.[40] The "making wonderful" of Zoroastrianism posits a final triumph of the forces of order whereby "The world will be cleansed of every destructive power, human and demonic, it will be for ever [sic] healed and at peace" (Cohn 185). This concept was later adapted into Christian eschatology and its notion of apocalypse as a final purge in which the degenerative process of the world will finally be reversed by God, and the elect will lead an eternal existence outside of time and free of care in the promised realm of New Jerusalem. The ultimate goal of apocalypse, therefore, is to signal an end point for human history; a final moment in which chaos will be forever rendered obsolete and only cosmos will remain.

As I explained in the previous chapter, the second half of the twentieth century, the time of the Cold War, was a period of constant crisis. The dawning of the atomic age, when humanity for once developed the capacity to literally destroy the whole world, added, in the words of May, "a cutting edge to the anxiety spawned by the literary, artistic, and even religious imagination of contemporary man" (4), which did much to alter the popular notion of apocalypse from a hopeful triumph of order over chaos to an inexorable expectation of senseless and ultimately fateful destruction. No longer solely in the hands of a merciful God, the end of history brought forth by human actions promised no

[40] The main tenets of Zoroastrianism and its role in the development of the apocalyptic myth are explained in epigraph 1.7 of this dissertation.

salvation and no lessons to be learned; no truths to be revealed other than the gaping void at the heart of the human condition itself.

As the events of the Cold War unfolded, the American public experienced the existential anxiety of living under the constant threat of the atomic bomb, and witnessed as events seemed to call to question the very concepts by which they measured reality. From President Kennedy's assassination, which in the words of novelist Don DeLillo led Americans to lose "their sense of coherent reality" and enter "the world of randomness and ambiguity" ("American Blood" 22), to the traumatic experience of the Vietnam War, which "represented not merely the loss of a war but the loss of a culture" (Levine and Papasotiriou 184), the Cold War years threatened common sense notions of what was real and what was not. Even when it finally came to an unexpectedly peaceful end in the early nineties, the conclusion of the Cold War resulted in the loss of a stable narrative according to which millions had understood life for almost half a century, leaving them "lost in a defamiliarized world" (Levine and Papasotiriou 238).

Kurt Vonnegut once said that the villains in his books are not individuals but the forces of "culture, society, and history" (*FWD* 31). As the pace of these forces accelerated beyond human measure in the eschatological context of the second half of the twentieth century, the inhabitants of a postindustrial, information-driven, and media-saturated world discovered that they had "become alienated from those aspects of life we may consider authentic or *real*" (Nicol 4). As the decades progressed, a "universal descent into unreality" (Roth 35) meant that reality became "but another name for chaos" (Hassan, *Radical* 116), creating a sense of dislocation so deep that it seemed to offer no hope of divine apocalyptic redemption in the traditional sense. Thus, the popular concept of apocalypse came to disregard the most crucial component of the term, namely the expectation of a final triumph of order over chaos that will deem history meaningful and open the doors to an eternal realm of bliss, and instead became a mere synonym for disaster. From a doctrine of hope, apocalypse transformed into the expectation of a violent and meaningless return to the original void that predated creation motivated by the blind fanaticism of humanity. David Ketterer writes that "The ultimate critical negative extension of the word apocalyptic connotes chaos or non-meaning" (10), and only the world that had lived through Auschwitz and Hiroshima and was locked in the deadly stalemate of the arms race between the two superpowers could have caused a myth based on the triumph of cosmos over chaos to become a synonym for chaos itself.

Accordingly, American literature of the period reflected the cultural dislocation, eschatological fear and nihilistic fatalism of the times. Levine and Papasotiriou explain that, especially between the late fifties and the mid-seventies, US novels are "filled with apocalyptic images" of "social breakdown and scenes of terrifying violence" (127), as the American writer becomes, in the words of Ihab Hassan, "a connoisseur of chaos" (*Contemporary* 26). Faced with the dehumanizing destruction of World War II and the startling pace of traumatic events of the decades after it, Raymond Olderman argues that "The contemporary writer is spurred by his reaction to a waste land world rather than inspired by his memory of a lost Eden, his expectation of a new Utopia, or his disillusionment by the betrayal of both" (8). Olderman claims that the classic American metaphor of the promised land has "lost all its creative potential" (9), replaced instead by various visions of destruction, of an ever-more plausible end of the world that sometimes can act as a "a solution to the problems posed by a complex and anxiety-inducing present" (Nilges 24) by offering a fresh new start, but more often functions as a gloomy projection of the direst fears of the present into a fatal fate that teaches no lessons, reveals no meanings, and offers no salvation.

Elizabeth K. Rosen terms these narratives focused on an impending cataclysm neo-apocalyptic, a form which "sees the apocalyptic genre's message of hope largely subsumed by its emphasis on destruction, even though the main intent of the traditional story of apocalypse was to provide its audience with hope of a better world" (xv). Neo-apocalyptic stories, which Rosen claims were the dominant mode of apocalyptic literature during the Cold War era, are therefore pessimistic cautionary tales which propose "potential means of extinction" and predict "the gloomy possibilities of such ends" (xv). If they do exhibit any kind of moral dimension or judgment, it is "of the sort that assumes that no one deserves saving and that everyone should be punished" (xv). Discussing Kurt Vonnegut, Rosen declares that "no contemporary American writer has done more to bring the end of the world to the attention of his readership" (45), and argues that "most of his apocalyptic novels have fallen into the neo-apocalyptic category in which no New Jerusalem is imagined" (46).

This chapter will discuss the facet of Vonnegut as a neo-apocalyptic novelist of despair, and examine how his science fiction novels channel the sociohistorical context of crisis detailed in the previous chapter into various fictional forecasts of destruction. As such, it corresponds to what John R. May considers the second constitutive element of

traditional apocalypse after judgment: catastrophe (*Toward* 33), and it also conforms to what David Ketterer terms the second and third phases of the standard plot of science fiction, which after dealing with "a steadily worsening state of affairs" in its first, Dystopian phase, naturally develop into a second phase "accounting for fictions in which the world is either threatened with destruction or variously done away with," and a third one which "focuses on the postcatastrophe scene" (123).

In novels such as *Player Piano, Cat's Cradle* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut projects the eschatological anxiety of his times into visions of chaos which concern the end of humanity both in a very literal sense, through the destruction of life on planet Earth, and also on the psychological level of the disorienting consequences of crisis on the human psyche. However, as I will explain, Vonnegut's visions of destruction aim to move beyond despair, as his apocalyptic scenarios pretend to propose "a popular way of working through . . . psychological contradictions produced by moments of severe crisis" (Nilges 24), and illuminate an ultimate path towards a new creation. Furthermore, in Vonnegut's literature, crisis leads to chaos not only thematically but also in the formal aspect. This chapter also seeks to analyze how Vonnegut's novels interrogate the very nature of finality in fiction, and how the author integrates the intrinsically chaotic nature of life into the form and style of his writing, constantly interrogating the value of his literature and its potential to really reflect the fragmented and open-ended experience of living in the postmodern reality of the second half of the twentieth century.

B. S. Johnson declares that "life does not tell stories," as it is "chaotic, fluid, random," and "leaves myriads of ends untied, untidily" (153) in a way that cannot be grasped through conventional, realistic storytelling. Using this notion as a starting point and aiming for a higher form of realism, Vonnegut and other writers undertook a "serious aesthetic shift" that inaugurated "a distinctive new era of style" in American literature (Bradbury, *The Novel* 8) during the Cold War. Amidst fatalistic jeremiads on the impending "death of the novel," while John Barth's school of thought declared that the novel had exhausted its possibilities (Barth, "Exhaustion" 70) as a field of artistic innovation and Tom Wolfe's New Journalism manifesto called for a return to social realism (*New* 11), Vonnegut's novels open a third path that pretend to achieve a purer form of realism through "non-realist modes" (Nicol 72). In a world were reality seemed to outrun fiction on a daily basis, Vonnegut chooses not only to accept the fragmentation and lack of coherence which is "a source of anxiety or gloom for some" (Rosen xx), but

also to celebrate it as a major part of life, in hope that "the displacement of traditional ideas might permit new ways of dealing with the human situation" (Hendin 240). Thus, Vonnegut embraces chaos and demolishes the barriers between the fictional and the real to characterize "reality as science fiction and science fiction as reality" (Ketterer 206), seeking to not only to report the world but also to enact an "imaginative transformation of it" (Klinkowitz, *Disruptions* 32) in order to "illuminate contemporary life for us in a variety of nonrealistic ways" (Scholes, *The Fabulators* 320).

Vonnegut once declared that "There is no order in the world around us, we must adapt ourselves to the requirements of chaos instead" (*Conversations* 155), and in order to do so, he creates "the deliberately chaotic antinovel to mirror the lack of meaning which he perceives in the universe" (Myers 55). Instead of lapsing into neo-apocalyptic despair, Vonnegut embraces disorder, fragmentation, paradox and non-linearity as crucial components of life, recognizing the principles of chaos theory, which studies "[u]npredictable, apparently random behaviour exhibited by a dynamical system governed by deterministic laws" ("Chaos, n.") to conclude that "order and chaos are not in opposition, they are collaborative" (Boon 47). Introducing these notions into the form as well as the plot of his novels, Vonnegut embraces chaos as a necessary step towards a new creation, as a requisite for the comic apocalypse that is always the final goal of his writing. Lois Parkinson Zamora reminds us that apocalyptic texts "dramatize the decisive moment when an old world discovers a believable new world and either reacts against the old system or incorporates it into its new design," and elucidates that, in fiction, "that new design may be the literary work itself" (177). Vonnegut's destruction of the world and deconstruction of the novel itself, therefore, becomes a cathartic promise of a better world and of a new novel that is more suited to capturing life's purest essence. Instead of dying, the novel is renewed—"imagination dies as a caterpillar, to be reborn with wings," in Robert Scholes' beautiful words (218)—and even though crisis opens the gates to chaos, Vonnegut never slips into not being able to see the forest for the trees, and the cosmic perspective of science fiction combined with his training in physics and anthropology allows him to understand that apocalypses must be destructive before they can be creative, and that "the fulfillment of the apocalyptic imagination demands that the destructive chaos give way finally to a new order" (Ketterer 14).

3.2 The end of humanity: The threat of a neo-apocalyptic resolution to history

In a 1970 speech at Benington College, Vonnegut recalls how the atomic bomb dropped over Hiroshima led him to abandon his original youthful optimism and become a "consistent pessimist" (*WFG* 163). He says, "I predicted that everything would become worse, and everything has become worse" (161), shedding light on one of the main thematic tropes of his writing career, namely the extrapolation of contemporary crisis into hypothetical future scenarios of destruction. Writing for the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* in 1958, David Riesman assured that "serious discussion of the future is just what is missing in the United States . . . we live now, think later" (139); Vonnegut's novels, however, seem to do nothing but discuss the future, repeatedly commenting on how the fundamentalism of the military-industrial complex combined with a reckless attitude towards environmental preservation and an ever-growing sense of loneliness and isolation among Americans seem to push the world towards the brink of a very plausible self-destruction. Vonnegut relies on science fiction techniques to argue that, unless a significant change is enacted, the course towards the kind of dystopian futures he describes will be irreversible. "Chinese maniacs and Russian maniacs and American maniacs and French maniacs and British maniacs have turned this lovely, moist, nourishing blue-green ball into a doomsday device," he writes (*HBWJ* 10), and claims that "The next holocaust will leave this planet uninhabitable, and the Moon is no Switzerland" (*WFG* 117).

Fatal destruction motivated by human carelessness is perhaps the most prominent plot device in Vonnegut's whole oeuvre. It is manifest since *Player Piano*'s vision of labor-saving machines robbing humanity of their uniqueness and subtly condemning them to what Henry David Thoreau famously labelled "lives of quiet desperation" (5), in which "Their whole culture's been shot to hell" (*PP* 90), and it remains present in his final collection of non-fiction writings published over fifty years later, *A Man without a Country*, in which he assures, "Don't spoil the party: but here's the truth: We have squandered our planet's resources, including air and water, as though there were no tomorrow, so now there isn't going to be one" (45). Vonnegut has been referred to as the contemporary US writer most preoccupied with bringing the end of the world to the attention of his readers (Rosen 45), and it is often argued that the author takes a predominantly neo-apocalyptic stance, which presumes that "mankind is beyond

renovation, that this degeneracy is so complete that the Ending can only be so, too" (Rosen xv). Far from his contemporary Walker Percy, who in his 1961 novel *The Moviegoer* made an optimistic projection of a post-apocalyptic scenario in which "only after the end could the few who survive creep out of their holes and discover themselves to be themselves and live merrily among the viny ruins" (231), Vonnegut's prophetic visions of the end seem to offer no hope of salvation or renewal, suggesting instead that "There is nothing beyond this Ending, no hope of a New Heaven on Earth, precisely because there is nothing worth saving" (Rosen xv).

Perhaps Vonnegut's most eminent depiction of a neo-apocalyptic end of the world appears in 1963's *Cat's Cradle*, which, as I explained in the previous chapter, follows a narrator who sets out to write a book about the bombing of Hiroshima to be entitled *The Day the World Ended*, and ends up fulfilling his promise that "The book was to be factual" (*CC* 1) as he witnesses how all the water in the planet is accidentally frozen through the careless handling of *ice-nine*, a chemical devised by Dr. Felix Hoenikker under instructions from a military establishment who "looked upon him as a sort of magician who could make American invincible with a wave of his hand" (42).[41] However, almost every Vonnegut novel contains descriptions of or at least allusions to fatal acts of irresponsible destruction. This includes even those that do not entirely fit under the science fiction label, such as *Slapstick,* in which the author seems to use "practically every existing trope of ending" (Rosen 47), *Deadeye Dick,* in which the accidental explosion of a H-bomb accidentally devastates Midland City, or *Hocus Pocus,* which contains Vonnegut's often-quoted epitaph for planet Earth, which "should be carved in big letters

[41] It seems significant that Kurt Vonnegut's most flagrant vision of a fatal cataclysm is directly linked to water, which, as Norman Cohn explains, is recurrently used in the Bible as a "symbol of chaos, hostile to God and for ever threatening the ordered world" (169). From the second verse of Genesis, which describes how, prior to Creation, "the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters" (Gen 1:2), clearly juxtaposing the constructive powers of God and the chaotic nature of water, to the visionary dream of Daniel in which "four great beasts came up from the sea, diverse one from another" (Daniel 7:3), Cohn argues that "The waters symbolize the destructive forces . . . which, if they triumphed, would reduce that world into the primordial chaos from which it came" (126).
Extrapolating this biblical trope to contemporary visions of the apocalypse in popular culture and adding a scientific dimension, David Ketterer alludes to what he calls, borrowing J.G. Ballard's title, the "terminal beach" myth: "the notion that, just as in Darwin's view, the transposition of life from the sea to the land allowed for the genesis of humanity, so the end of man might appropriately be envisaged as taking place 'on the beach'" (76). *On the Beach,* of course, is the title of one of the most popular apocalyptic novels of the late fifties, written by British author Nevil Shute and published in 1957, and this whole notion seems again intrinsically linked to another of Vonnegut's allegories for the end of humanity: *Galápagos,* in which, as I explained in the previous chapter and will allude to again, human beings return to the sea as they evolve into more simple, peaceful organisms after a million-year biological process.

in a wall of the Grand Canyon for the flying-saucer people to find" (143), and reads "We could have saved it / But we were too doggone cheap" (143).

Nevertheless, Vonnegut does not necessarily need to openly appeal to apocalyptic cataclysms in order to maintain his persistent theme of humankind's degeneration, which is equally present in the cosmic anxieties of *The Sirens of Titan,* the endemic absence of meaningful communication in *Breakfast of Champions,* or the horrific absurdity of humans' destructive tendencies in war novels like *Mother Night* and *Slaughterhouse-Five.* Inherent to all of Vonnegut's work is a sense of the paradox that the powers endowed by science and technology to fulfill humanity's needs and desires actually multiply and compound them, so that increasing power can only lead to diminishing satisfaction. Benjamin Barber refers to "modern man's conundrum" as the fact that, "If happiness is a function of needs in harmony with our capacity to satisfy them, 'progress' will always mean that power, however fast it grows, will be outstripped by needs, which grow faster" (40). Hence, humankind appears locked in an existential cul-de-sac in which the more powerful it becomes, the more miserable it inevitably feels. Progress conceived from this perspective thus becomes a subtler but, in the long run, also more fatal agent for destruction than violent cataclysm in Vonnegut's novels. "You can't fight progress," he writes in *Bagombo Snuff Box,* "The best you can do is ignore it, until it finally takes your livelihood and self-respect away" (8).

The contentment and false sense of fulfilment that progress seems to afford is presented by Francis Fukuyama as one of the agents of his thesis for "The end of history." Fukuyama claims that, just as "a dog is content to sleep in the sun all day provided he is fed," and "does not worry that other dogs are doing better than him, or that his career as a dog has stagnated, or that dogs are being oppressed in a distant part of the world" (311), the inhabitants of modern capitalist societies, too, are prone to lose their ability to imagine any kind of social or economic improvement amidst their constant supply of entertainment and consumer goods, thus exchanging the historical utopian desire for social and economic improvement for a new, detached sense of contentment. Predating Fukuyama's hypothesis, in 1977's *Jailbird,* Vonnegut declares that "what is finally going to kill this planet" is "a total lack of seriousness," arguing that "Nobody gives a damn anymore about what's really going on, what's going to happen next, or how we ever got into such a mess in the first place" (304), as people focus only on their own instant gratification amid the heights of the "Me Decade." Furthermore, Bran Nicol takes this

contented lack of seriousness to a further dehumanizing extreme, identifying in it the potential of reinstating humankind to the primordial chaos of a pre-cultural, animal condition Nicol alludes to the "perverse counter-effect" of rationality and progress (186) as forces that threaten to encourage and even produce contrary, irrational desires which could return humanity to a sort of infantile state of instant gratification where, in the words of J. G. Ballard, "any demand, any possibility, whether for life-styles, travel, sexual roles and identities, can be satisfied immediately" (*Crash* i). This condition seems not too far removed from the moral misery among material plenty envisioned by Vonnegut in *Player Piano* or *Breakfast of Champions.*

This notion of progress as a paradoxical agent for cultural regression continues on into the present, as it is intrinsically linked to the hypothesis of what Luckhurst calls a "post-human" (213) condition. In the early twenty-first century, not only are mankind's darkest instincts and desires massaged by the instant-gratification machine of a postmodern economy in which "needs are manufactured to meet the supply of producers" (Barber 59), but as humanity moves "from the real to the virtual worlds, from the enacted to the represented body" (213) in a context in which information technology infiltrates every aspect of our daily lives, some authors even argue that physical bodies themselves are "fast vanishing into information, discourse and systems of medical or corporate surveillance" (Luckhurst 213). Modern science fiction writers have hypothesized with what has come to be known as "The Singularity," a term coined by mathematician and novelist Vernor Vinge in 1993 to envisage a moment of change in the near future which he claims will be "comparable to the rise of human life on earth" (8); namely "the imminent creation by technology of entities with greater-than-human intelligence" (8). Steven Shaviro defines the Singularity as the supposed "moment when the human race crosses a technological threshold, and definitively becomes posthuman" (Shaviro 103), as technological growth reaches a point of no return in which humanity will either be "replaced by sentient machines, or (more likely) merge their brains and bodies with such machines" (103). Scientist Ray Kurzweil has gone as far as to estimate that this transformation will take place no longer than the year 2049, declaring in clearly apocalyptic terms that the changes motivated by technology in the near future will "appear to rupture the fabric of human history" (9).

Whereas Kurzweil envisages this Singularity as an intrinsically positive next stage in the evolution of mankind, Vonnegut uses his science fiction novels to warn against the

empty complacency and dehumanizing potential of unchecked technological progress. From the projection of computers taking over human roles in *Player Piano* to the actual integration of the computer into the human condition as forewarned in *Timequake*'s rejection of virtual communities and the ubiquity of the Internet as dehumanizing tools, Vonnegut warns of the palpable threat whereby the very essence of human uniqueness is in danger of dissolving into a neo-apocalyptic chaos. Vonnegut projects a dark future in which all the moral qualities which he values as the essence of the human spirit, such as kindness, respect, community and individuality, may be deemed dispensable in pursuit of an ideal of profit, productivity and technology for technology's own sake which will make "acting for the benefit of future generations seem one of many arbitrary games which might be played by narrow enthusiasts" (*GP* 81). Resigned to a neo-apocalyptic acquiescence that mankind's descent into chaos was beyond renovation, Vonnegut is left to comment through his writing on how the latest technological craze is fatally destined to "sweep the middle classes of the world as the planet dies—as the planet is surely dying—of poisoned air and water" (*WFG* 34).

3.3 Humanity's tragic flaw: Destruction as the inevitable fate of humankind

Whether humanity be substituted by machines of its own device, destroyed amid the blinding blast of a nuclear explosion, or condemned to die among the ruins of a planet deemed uninhabitable by its own carelessness, Vonnegut's novels seem to leave no room to discuss the fact that our race is doomed to self-destruction. It is an underlying subtext throughout all of his work that dates back to *Player Piano,* in which Stanley Schatt identifies "the germ of an idea that later becomes a major theme in Vonnegut's fiction—the possibility that man has a tragic flaw that relentlessly moves him in the direction of self-annihilation" (28). Throughout the novel, Vonnegut condemns the dystopian state which has led the common citizen to a supposed "Eden of eternal peace" in a technologically sublime post-scarcity leisure society "only to discover that everything he looked forward to enjoying there, pride, dignity, self-respect, work worth doing, has been condemned as unfit for human consumption" (*PP* 301). Nevertheless, the Ghost Shirt Society that stages a revolt against this totalitarian super-state is portrayed as falling prey to "the same oversimplifications, the same concern for symbols" (Schatt 26) as their nemesis. The revolutionaries prove to be no less fanatical as they mercilessly use the

protagonist Paul Proteus as a mere tool for their ends, subjecting him to the same degree of dehumanization that they claim to oppose in the machine system.

The final image of the novel is that of the post-revolution scene when, after the insurrectionists have been captured, the inhabitants of Ilium start to reassemble the machines that they had destroyed mere hours before, innocently restarting the process that will render them useless once again. Vonnegut describes one of the characters as "proud and smiling because his hands were busy doing what he liked to do best—replacing men like himself with machines" (*PP* 338). Thus, the book closes with an unresolved suspense in which, according to Max F. Schulz, "Even in this simple antithesis between the human and the mechanical . . . Vonnegut's praise of man is disturbingly unconfirmed" (57). Even if machines finally triumph over humans, Stanley Schatt points at how the recurring images of broken machinery throughout the novel indicate that "mankind has replaced himself [*sic*] with machinery that reflects human fallibility" (28), thus perpetuating its worst flaws into its supposedly more functional and faultless successors.

In *Player Piano* and all of his subsequent novels, Vonnegut is "examining the question of man's worth" and also "illustrating man's historically negative answer, which has produced centuries of war, oppression, poverty, and the final debasement of the individual in modern society" (Goldsmith 10). Karl Marx once wrote that "The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living" (*Eighteenth Brumaire*), a burden that was accentuated during the thermonuclear age of the Cold War and its very real sense of impending cataclysm, which also created the feeling of "modern history as a nightmare from which its participants are trying to awake" (Levine and Papasotiriou 182). In *Cat's Cradle*, Vonnegut writes, "History! Read it and weep!" (252), illustrating his sense that humanity is doomed to blindly repeat its past mistakes over and over again until reaching a final, fatal end, because if there is one apparent lesson to learn from history, it is that "human beings are vicious enough to commit every imaginable atrocity" (*FWD* 145). In novels like *The Sirens of Titan* and *Cat's Cradle,* the author identifies a moral flaw in our propensity to put limits on the unknown and insist on understanding forces that are well beyond our reach, which leads to fundamentalism and a tragic apocalyptic vision of life in which narratives such as religion or science, and arbitrary divisions like nationalities and class boundaries, become "badges of friendship or enmity" (*BOC* 27) that can start wars and cause the death and suffering of millions.

"This is a hard world to be ludicrous in, with so many human beings so reluctant to laugh, so incapable of thought, so eager to believe and snarl and hate," the character of Howard W. Campbell laments in *Mother Night* (160), a feeling echoed by Newt Hoenikker in an often quoted line from *Cat's Cradle* in which he describes the game that gives the novel its title as a metaphor of how older generations transmit the fundamentalist metaphors through which they make sense of life to younger ones, thus perpetuating an endless cycle of senseless violence:

> For maybe a hundred thousand years or more, grownups have been waving tangles of string in their children's faces . . . No wonder kids grow up crazy. A Cat's Cradle is nothing but a bunch of X's between somebody's hands, and little kids look and look and look at all those X's . . . *No damn cat, and no damn cradle.* (165–166)

Throughout his work, Vonnegut always seeks to address this fundamental fault in humanity; the seemingly endless proclivity for evil and destruction which lies at the heart of the human condition. In a 1978 interview, the author conceded that "It is a tragedy . . . that human beings can get so much energy and enthusiasm for hate," which, "in the long run, is about as nourishing as cyanide" (*WFG* 164–165), but he seemed resigned to a neo-apocalyptic acquiescence that "Modern man, romantically placed at the center of the universe and hence responsible for his own salvation, cannot flee from evil, even into himself; for in himself he will find only evil's deepest source" (Klinkowitz, *Disruptions* 47). The title of Vonnegut's third novel, *Mother Night,* is a metaphor of this dark, regressive instinct that resides in the depths of all people. The term is taken from a speech by Mephistopheles in Goethe's *Faust* (1808–1832) which alludes to the primordial chaos that preceded creation, the darkness that existed before God created light and still resides in the depths of our condition, posing a constant threat to the forces of order: "I am part of the part that at first was all, part of the darkness that gave birth to light, that supercilious light which now disputes with Mother Night her ancient rank and space, and yet cannot succeed; no matter how it struggles, it sticks to matter and can't be free (xi)" (41). Although it is one of its author's less science fictional novels, *Mother Night* is significant in how it grapples to recognize that the defiance of sanity and morality enacted by the Third Reich, the "Banality of Evil" identified by Hannah Arendt in Adolf Eichmann (who actually has a role as a secondary character in Vonnegut's novel) is an intrinsic part of human nature, acknowledging how, as William Golding once claimed, "Man produces

evil as a bee produces honey" (87). Jerome Klinkowitz asks, "How can such propensity for evil be understood, if our rhetoric invites us to treat such atrocities as something not human at all?" (*America* 43), and Vonnegut insists not only on recognizing but also on plunging head-first into what Peter Paik terms "that moral abyss above which the residents of utopia must levitate if they are disprove of the fact of their survival as a miracle" (36). Whereas Vonnegut once argued that the campaign motto for Nixon's Republican Party in the 1972 presidential election should have been "ignore agony" (*WFG* 206), based on the administration's insistence on disregarding the suffering experienced by millions of Americans, in the first chapter of *Slaughterhouse-Five* the author pledges to be like the biblical figure of Lot's wife and look directly at the mindless destruction caused by humanity; to acknowledge our chaotic nature and delve into the heart of "mother night," even if that means that his books will be "written by a pillar of salt" (*SH5* 22).

Throughout his oeuvre, Vonnegut struggles to understand the fanaticism at the essence of the human condition, best symbolized by that "ethical wilderness" (Walsh 4) which is war, as he himself had endured during the destruction of Dresden, reasserting his need, and even his duty to report his experience although he firmly believes that wars are "as easy to stop as glaciers" (*SH5* 3). In *Galápagos,* Vonnegut blames mankind's behavioral patterns on biology, and argues that big brains are "nearly fatal defects in the evolution of the human race" (9), presenting this as the only rationale that could explain the fanatical violence that people exert on themselves and their environment, from which "a visitor from another planet might have assumed that the environment had gone haywire, and that the people were in such a frenzy because Nature was about to kill them all" (25). Be it as it may, all along his novelistic career, the author seems constantly disturbed by the traumatizing understanding of what has been called "the great irony of life," namely "that man can envision an ideal of good . . . and yet fails to achieve it" (Hassan, *Radical* 120) and seeks to report on it, to try to understand and rationalize the chaos that forms the basis our very essence. By the final stages of his career, as the sense of impending crisis only seemed to accentuate in an industrial world fatally hooked to "the most abused, addictive, and destructive drugs of all: fossil fuels" (*AMWAC* 42) and in which "just about our only solvent industry is the merchandising of death, bankrolled by our grandchildren" (*BB* 71), Vonnegut could simply lament that "the more you learn about people, the more disgusted you'll become" (*GP* 277), and concluded that "the

human condition can be summed up in just one word, and this is the word: *Embarrassment*" (*BB* 14).

3.4 The cosmic joke: Black humor and science fiction as responses to a chaotic world

For all of Vonnegut's grim fatalism, however, one of the defining aspects of his literary style is his sense of humor; the fact that, in the author's own words, he is "funnier on paper than most people" (*PS* 157). Hassan explains that "At the root of both comedy and tragedy . . . lies the perception that man is deficient in the knowledge of human limitations" (*Radical* 120) and Vonnegut always opts for comedy and maintains that "laughs are exactly as honorable as tears," as they are both responses to "frustration and exhaustion, to the futility of thinking and striving anymore," and claims that he himself prefers to laugh, "since there is less cleaning to do afterward—and since I can start thinking and striving again that much sooner" (*PS* 298). 'Hebephrenia' is a technical psychoanalytic term which may explain why people are sometimes prone to laugh at tragic events that supposedly should make them cry, as it describes "that extreme habit which alters one's inner feeling to express its opposite" (Giannone 9). During the sixties, this condition was seemingly championed by a whole new "lively school of frivolity and disrespect" (M. Wood 209) that emerged among US writers; an attitude born out of a context of crisis and based on recognizing how the world had become "fractured and chaotic to the extent that disorder is the rule" so that "the traditional comic resolution of the wayward individual and the ordered society" is no longer attainable (Greiner 42). The sense of chaos that had to some extent always been present in comedy had now become "the dominant factor rather than the mere illustration of a deviation from the stable norm" (42), and the only appropriate response that these novelists could offer to incite their readers to go on living in such a fractured reality was "to smile through their tears at the absurdities of the world" (Schatt 54). These novelists were categorized under the label "black humor," and Kurt Vonnegut was one of them.[42]

[42] Javier Martín Párraga examines the historically problematic designation of Vonnegut as a black humorist ("Kurt Vonnegut y el Humor Negro"). He claims that the unexpected success of *Slaughterhouse-Five* posed a difficulty for critics, who felt the need to file the author under some generic label. Hence, after years of being dismissed as a science fiction writer, Vonnegut suddenly found himself described as a black humorist. "The company was a little more reputable," Crichton writes, alluding to how Thomas Pynchon and John Barth were among the distinguished novelists of the time who also received the same label, "but the category remained" ("Review of *Slaughterhouse-Five"*). This infuriated Vonnegut, who, as I have

Max F. Schulz explains that "The absurdity of man's blind compulsion to put boundaries on the illimitable unknown . . . provides us with the wry context of Black Humor" (x–xi), a term first coined by American novelist Bruce Jay Friedman in a 1965 anthology entitled, precisely, *Black Humor* which compiled authors as diverse as Joseph Heller, Terry Southern, Vladimir Nabokov, and Louis-Ferdinand Céline. The disparateness of these writers, which encompasses different styles, epochs and nationalities (and does not include Kurt Vonnegut), is so broad as to make it apparent that black humor was "less a school than a sensibility and more protean than both" (Pinsker 11). Already in the introduction to the anthology, Friedman himself recognizes that "I think I would have more luck defining an elbow or a corned-beef sandwich," conceding how "I am not, for one thing, even sure it is black" (vii).

Like apocalypse or science fiction, black humor—an indisputably "vague" term to begin with, as Schulz says (4)—is one of those concepts whose academic definition has been further obscured by their assimilation into the quotidian, everyday vocabulary of millions of people (Martín Párraga, "Humor Negro" 2). Still, Friedman attempts to narrow it down to a kind of existentialist attitude which "has probably been around, always will be around, under some name or other, as long as there are disguises to be peeled back, as long as there are thoughts no one else cares to think" (x–xi). Characterized by "a nervousness, a tempo, a near-hysterical new beat" (viii), black humor narratives blur the distinction between fantasy and reality as a reflection of the daily existence of what Friedman labels "the surprise-proof generation" (ix). It is a reaction to a world beyond the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Kennedy assassination, in which peace is maintained "through a balance of power based on fear" (Strand 37), feeding the notion that "a new . . . chord of absurdity has been struck in the land, that there is a new mutative style of behavior afoot, one that can only be dealt with by a new, one-foot-in-the-asylum

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explained, was always resistant to having his work categorized, and the situation only worsened as the question "Are you a black humorist?" became the most recurrent in interviews throughout his entire career (Allen, *Conversations* xv).

Vonnegut himself dismissed the term black humor as "a sales-promotion label" (Scholes, "A Talk" 99), and considered it a mere rephrasing of Jewish "gallows humor," which he described as "little people saying very wry, very funny things on the point of death" (Bellamy, *The New Fiction* 156). His friend the novelist Vance Bourjaily maintains that it is safer to describe Vonnegut's comic attitude as "gallows humor," and claims that "Gallows humor is nothing like black humor because its intention is pure kindness," explaining that while black humor "twists the knife," gallows humor "makes it stop hurting" (3).

Whatever the right label might be, Vonnegut remains associated to the term black humor to this day (Martín Párraga "Humor Negro" 7) and, as I will explain, baring specific details, in general terms his writing fits and even defines the essential attitude of the genre. Whether or not he can be defined as a strict practitioner of the genre, John Somer concludes that "Vonnegut has written passages that satisfy any definition of black humor" (*Rite* 7).

style of fiction" (ix). Emerging from a context of undeniable crisis, thus, black humor seeks to recognize the chaos of postmodern life and celebrate its apparent nonsense as the only form of emotional release available to the ordinary human being.

Schulz claims that "Black humor condemns man to a dying world" (8), ringing an existentialist chord that establishes a clear connection between Friedman's term and Rosen's definition of a neo-apocalyptic literature of hopeless despair, which is seemingly confirmed by Vonnegut himself in his assertion that "Black humorists' holy wanderers find nothing but junk and lies and idiocy wherever they go" (*WFG* 110). Nevertheless, unlike the gloomy scorn and resignation at an absurd universe expressed by existentialism and best exemplified by Albert Camus' Sisyphus, black humor understands that progress is not "a conspiracy but a joke" (Scholes 147), and recognizes "all the moving forces of life which converge collectively upon the individual" (Schulz 7) to conclude that the world is "ridiculous—a joke" (Scholes 147), for which laughter is the only appropriate response. Scholes explains that "The black humorist is concerned not with what to do about life but with how to take it" (147), therefore choosing not to despair but to remain disassociated, "hanging loose . . . , cooly presenting individual efforts to realize oneself in relation to the outer world" (Schulz 7), even if openly acknowledging those efforts as futile. Masked beneath the patina of absurd comedy lies an almost therapeutic aim at catharsis, a determined endeavor to "diminish the seriousness of mortality and the need to confront it" (LeClair 38) by striving to find reasons to laugh in the face of agony and horror; to combat "the despair that leads to self-annihilation" (Davis, *Crusade* 56) through the recognition of the cosmic joke at the heart of a universe ruled by chaos.

In Vonnegut's novels, humor, whichever color it may be, is presented as the only antidote to survive in a world governed by forces above human understanding that often coalesce into random events of detached cruelty and destruction. Laughter is the only way to endure life under the heavy burden of the acknowledgement that the corrupt forces of "mother night" are as essential a component of human nature as kindness or love, an attitude of comic defiance in the face of tragedy which finds its clearest fictional expression in *Cat's Cradle.* Described by Jerome Klinkowitz as "a mock apocalyptic novel" (*Kurt Vonnegut* 52), Vonnegut's fourth novel encompasses its author's comic resistance to offer definitive answers other than the relief of laughing on judgment day. Schatt argues that the novel stands as "a comic investigation of epistemology" (67) which avoids the concept of finality even as it proposes the definitive end of humanity. Fulfilling

a common Vonnegut trope that dates back to his first novel's assertion that "This isn't the end, you know. . . . Nothing ever is, nothing ever will be—not even Judgment Day" (*PP* 341) and culminates in *Slaughterhouse-Five*'s famed structure of revolving time, *Cat's Cradle* denies the notion of apocalypse itself, the idea that the end of history will invest humanity with meaning, positing instead that "In such an absurd universe the very moment of history which once gave the end of the world philosophical and theological meaning now becomes meaningless" (Schatt 204). There are no lessons to be learned, no fresh starts to be made, as history is proven to be "a useless tool to explain, to predict, or to justify human behavior because it reveals that man has not learned anything which could help him survive" (204). The detached, happy-go-lucky attitude of the novel's characters after surviving the end of the world, merrily nicknaming themselves "the Swiss family Robinson" (*CC* 276) and painting American flags all over the ruins of a post-apocalyptic world, seemingly proves that, if able to get the cycle of human life on Earth going again by blindly clinging to their will to live, their descendants will eventually wind up repeating the same mistakes over again, consolidating an unbreakable vicious circle of mindless destruction. This fatalist notion echoes throughout Vonnegut's career into his final speech, which was set to have been delivered some weeks after his death in 2007, and in which he claims that "If Jesus were alive today, we would kill him with lethal injection. . . . I call that progress" (*AIR* 22).

In *Jailbird,* the author declares how he is "compelled to wonder if wisdom has ever existed or can ever exist," and asks himself, "Might wisdom be as impossible in this particular universe as a perpetual-motion machine?" (238) But if wisdom is an illusion, humanity is fatally flawed, and no answers are available from an indifferent cosmos or a lukewarm God who will "just smile and nod" (*CC* 270) upon the scold of His own creations, Vonnegut settles for the fact that we can still afford the release of laughing in the face of meaninglessness and thus turn back the cosmic joke that the universe has played on us. It is a "healthy" form of humor, Robert Short writes (159), as even though it "clearly exposes the evil and suffering and meaninglessness in life," it does so in an attempt to "assault the blackness with laughter" so that human courage will "have the last laugh" (159). Nowhere in Vonnegut's oeuvre is this attitude best expressed than in the ending of *Cat's Cradle,* in which the prophet Bokonon explains what he deems the most appropriate reaction to the absurdly neo-apocalyptic events of the novel, which have led to the destruction of the world through sheer human carelessness. The quote could well

stand as a manifesto for black humor's desire to laugh at the cosmic joke concealed at the heart of the existential chaos of postmodernity:

> If I were a younger man, I would write a history of human stupidity; and I would climb to the top of Mount McCabe and lie down on my back with my history for a pillow; and I would take from the ground some of the blue-white poison that makes statues of men; and I would make a statue of myself, lying on my back, grinning horribly, and thumbing my nose at You Know Who. (287)

Be it the mock apocalypse of *Cat's Cradle,* the spiraling time patterns of *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Timequake,* the cosmic revelations of *The Sirens of Titan,* or the evolution fantasy of *Galápagos,* Vonnegut's preferred tool to expose the cosmic joke at the heart of human existence is science fiction. In fact, Peter Reed argues that the most distinctive aspect of the author's method is precisely his combination of black humor and science fictional approaches (20). In all of his novels, Vonnegut explores the human compulsion to understand, the inevitably flawed desire to find meaning in a universe that is intrinsically chaotic in nature. His characters are constantly searching for clues to decipher "what life is all about" (*SOT* 39), constantly echoing "the question humanity had been asking for millenniums, men were seemingly born to ask" (*PP* 59), namely "What in hell are people *for*?" (*GBY* 22). The answer, of course, is *nothing,* as Vonnegut repeatedly argues that the idea that humanity is progressing towards a brighter future is "a myth for children under 6 years old, like the Tooth Fairy and Easter Bunny and Santa Claus" (*HP* 206), and ironically concedes that "The wonder is that earthlings have made as much sense as they have" (*SOT* 304) out of a universe that is absolutely indifferent to their insignificant tribulations.

Just as the ending of *Cat's Cradle* deems history purposeless by denying any chance of a meaningful apocalypse and portraying how life simply goes on unaltered after the extinction of humanity, Vonnegut utilizes the perspective of science fiction to illustrate how human history is merely an insignificant drop amid the immeasurable ocean that is the universe. Like Bokonon, the author takes "the cosmic view," considering "such things as the shortness of life and the longness of eternity" (*CC* 135) to undermine humanity's inflated sense of its own importance. Thus, in *Slaughterhouse-Five* the inhabitants of Tralfamadore answer Billy Pilgrim's claim that humanity poses a great threat to life in the universe by explaining to him that they are perfectly aware of how the universe ends and that "Earth has nothing to do with it, except that it gets wiped out, too"

(*SH5* 116). When Billy asks them why, if they know that a Tralfamadorian pilot will eventually destroy the universe when testing new fuel for his flying saucer, they do not try to stop him, their detached answer is "He has *always* pressed it, and he always *will* . . . The moment is *structured* that way" (117), further solidifying the concept of history as meaningless, as a mere chain of events that lead to no final resolutions other than trivial death. Not even within the confines of the earth is human history given any privileged significance, as the million-year narrative perspective of *Galápagos* proves that the cycle of life on the planet continues its course well beyond the extinction of humanity, deeming our race to a significance comparable to that of dinosaurs within the whole arc of life on the planet. Explaining humanity and its unjustifiable ego to other alien civilizations in *Timequake,* Vonnegut writes:

> There is a planet in the Solar System where the people are so stupid they didn't catch on for a million years that there was another half to their planet. They didn't figure that out until five hundred years ago! Only five hundred years ago! And yet they are now calling themselves *Homo Sapiens.* (88)

Perhaps Vonnegut's deepest investigation of the contingency of human meaning through science fiction is *The Sirens of Titan.* Schatt argues that "History is the major subject of *The Sirens of Titan* since Vonnegut's focus is on whether or not human history is meaningful" (36), and the conclusion that the novelist seems to extract is that it clearly is not. As I detailed in the previous chapter, the book details how New England millionaire Winston Niles Rumfoord finds himself trapped in a "chrono-synclastic infundibulum" (*SOT* 20) time warp that diffuses his existence through space and time. Rumfoord then proceeds to attempt to alter the course of human history by staging a faux Martian invasion and introducing a new religion, "The Church of God the Utterly Indifferent," but, for all his efforts to change history, at the end of the novel he finds that he, too, is but "a small cog in a vast machine that is beyond his control" (Schatt 37). On Titan, Rumfoord befriends an eleven-million-year-old Tralfamadorian pilot named Salo, who is stranded on the largest moon of Saturn as he waits for a replacement part for his spaceship so that he can continue his errand of delivering an important message across the universe. Through one of Vonnegut's cleverest plot twists, it is revealed that, for thousands of years, Salo's compatriots have been reassuring him of the imminent arrival of the replacement part through a number of messages carved on the surface of the earth:

> The reply was written on Earth in huge stones on a plain in what is now England. The ruins of the reply still stand, and are known as Stonehenge. The meaning of Stonehenge in Tralfamadorian, when viewed from above, is: "*Replacement part being rushed with all possible speed*."
>
> Stonehenge wasn't the only message old Salo had received.
>
> There had been four others, all of them written on Earth.
>
> The Great Wall of China means in Tralfamadorian, when viewed from above: "*Be patient. We haven't forgotten about you*."
>
> The Golden House of the Roman Emperor Nero meant: "*We are doing the best we can*."
>
> The meaning of the Moscow Kremlin when it was first walled was: "*You will be on your way before you know it*."
>
> The meaning of the Palace of the League of Nations in Geneva, Switzerland, is: "*Pack up your things and be ready to leave on short notice*." (*SOT* 276–277)

Thus, the whole of human history is presented as a mere billboard upon which an alien civilization has been placing messages. Rumfoord's plan to alter the fate of the earth, it turns out, has allowed for the replacement part to finally arrive on Titan in the pocket of one of the main characters, thus revealing the futility of his grand plans. Such significant message, the reader finally discovers, is merely a single dot, which in Tralfamadorian means "*Greetings*" (*SOT* 306); completing a flawed apocalypse that reveals how humanity is but an anecdotal means to smooth out an unexpected bump in the process of saying hello across the universe.

Ketterer affirms that "There is no more startling manner of transforming reality than to suppose the existence of a previously unsuspected outside manipulator controlling or interfering with human affairs" (261), and at the stroke of a pen, Vonnegut not only exposes humanity as a mere tool of forces beyond its reach, but also revels in the ludicrous purpose human history has served to fulfill, therefore denying any notion of free will. The novel's protagonist, Malachi Constant, can only recognize how he was "a victim of a series of accidents, as are we all" (*SOT* 232).[43] Determinism and the existence of free will

[43] It is probably no coincidence that Constant's quote seems to echo a great American icon to whom Vonnegut attributed some of the "greatest words ever spoken in American history" (*BSB* 292): Abraham Lincoln. In a letter written in 1864, three years into leading the Union through the American Civil War, the Lincoln declared "I claim not to have controlled events, but confess plainly that events have controlled me" (qtd. in Cullen 98).

remained one of the main themes in Vonnegut's literature to his last novel, *Timequake*, in which an anomaly in the process of expansion of the universe results in time moving backwards from 2001 to 1991, thus forcing the whole of humanity to experience a rerun of the last ten years of their lives as on autopilot, doomed to repeat all the same mistakes they committed the first time around, with full awareness of the pitiful consequences that their actions will have: "betting on the wrong horse again, marrying the wrong person again, getting the clap again. You name it!" (*TQ* xiii). In *Slaughterhouse-Five* it is once again the inhabitants of Tralfamadore who explain to Billy Pilgrim how, of the over one hundred inhabited planets they have studied in the universe, "Only on Earth is there any talk of free will" (*SH5* 86). At the start of that novel, Vonnegut concedes that "There are almost no characters in this story, because most of the people in it are so sick and so much the listless playthings of enormous forces" (164), as he resolutely admits that "Among the things Billy Pilgrim could not change were the past, the present and the future" (60), and extends that lack of agency to himself, calling his own book "a failure" (22); an anti-war novel that rests on the assumption that wars cannot be stopped.

Some authors have argued that Vonnegut uses science fiction as a kind of shielding device that allows him to discuss what he perceives as the absurdity of the human condition in safely fantastical terms: "Comfortably surrounded by that fiction," Ellen Cronan Rose contends, "Vonnegut can approach the dangerous and painful truths he (and we) might not otherwise be able to bear" (70). I consider that Vonnegut uses science fiction not as a means to limit his readers' vision but rather to widen it. Just as his black humor reveals the cosmic joke that is ultimately the essence of human existence, so does his science fiction serve to acknowledge chaos and expose the fragile fabric that constitutes our concept of reality.

Ketterer argues that humanity is so fatally self-centered that it is potentially impossible for it to experience a new world, as "Wherever man goes, he will encounter only extensions of himself" (185). Vonnegut, however, seems to uphold Robert Plank's theory that contact with an alien civilization could prompt a radical change in human thought—why not, an apocalypse. In *The Emotional Significance of Imaginary Beings* (1968), Plank explains that this "fifth mental revolution" (39)[44] would culminate "an ego-jolting process . . . whereby the diminished importance of man's place in the order of the

[44] As explained in epigraph 1.12, the first four would be those heralded by the revelations of Copernicus, Darwin, Marx, and Freud (Plank 40–42).

universe is accurately gauged" (39). The plots of *The Sirens of Titan* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* move along these same lines, as only after receiving the painful but necessary Tralfamadorian revelations about free will and the cosmic significance of human history is humanity free to find happiness through the acceptance of its limitations; to find goodness, wisdom and meaning through "inwardness" instead of "outwardness" (*SOT* 2). Through science fiction, Vonnegut expounds on the need to acknowledge the universal lack of meaning and direction, to accept how "nothingness determines a transcendentally meaningless cosmos" (Abádi-Nagy 46), because the ability to recognize and even laugh at chaos is the essential first step towards a new creation.

3.5 A world without center: The chaotic revelations of modern science

It may be argued that by the mid-twentieth century there was no need for an alien civilization to apprise humanity of its anecdotal significance in an intrinsically chaotic universe, as modern science had already proven such a fact to be irrevocably true. From his background in chemistry and anthropology to the influence of his older brother, the eminent physicist Bernard Vonnegut,[45] Kurt Vonnegut always was a man of science as much as a man of letters. His technical knowledge went much deeper than that of the average science fiction writer—who, by Vonnegut's own account, "knew almost nothing about science, was bored stiff by technical details" (*BOC* 127)—which meant that he was able to balance his desire to discover how the universe operated with an acknowledgement of the need to "stand humbly before the counter-vailing, immutable power of sheer accident that could create art or destroy worlds" (Shields 395). Throughout his life, Vonnegut maintained a keen interest on the developments in the field of new physics and their recognition of the fundamental indeterminism of all quantum phenomena as explained by Heisenberg's uncertainty principle (Busch, et al. 175), and sought to include them in a brand of literature where the word *science* had as much weight as the word *fiction*.

Robert Nadeau appeals to remarkably apocalyptic terms when he explains how, in the second half of the twentieth century, developments in the field of new physics such

[45] The depths of the relationship between Kurt and Bernard Vonnegut, as well as the leverage that the latter's scientific research had on the former's fiction is surveyed to great detail in Ginger Strand's *The Brothers Vonnegut: Science and Fiction in the House of Magic* (2015).

as chaos theory and the theory of quarks came to displace features of Newtonian physics which essentially "mirrored common-sense assumptions about the real grounded in a metaphysic implicitly accepted and endorsed in the Western world for about 2,500 years" (42). The architects of these developments, Nadeau claims, "made their discoveries with an anguish and confusion not at all commensurate with the popular image of the coldly analytical man of science" (42), allegedly feeling how "the ground seemed to be pulled under them" as they effectively completed the process upon which modern science had been gradually "dethroning the human species from its delusion of 'centrality in the cosmos'" (Shaviro 104). These scientists were essentially forced to admit how, in a sense, the more we know, the less we can pretend to understand; or, expressed in Vonnegut's own terms through the character of Bokonon in *Cat's Cradle*, "She was a fool, and so am I, and so is anyone who thinks he sees what God is doing" (*CC* 5).[46]

Perhaps the most remarkable feature of new physics that is a permanent theme throughout Vonnegut's novels is the agency of chance, the power of what the author calls "pure, gambling casino luck" (*GP* 89) to shape events, as recognized by chaos theory in its observation of how seemingly insignificant changes in the conditions at any state of a deterministic, nonlinear system can prompt dramatic and widely diverging outcomes in a later state. This thesis was famously formulated as the "butterfly effect" in Edward Lorenz's 1972 dictum that "the flap of a butterfly's wings in Brazil might ultimately cause a tornado in Texas" (Dizikes, "When"). The recognition that chance and, therefore, absurdity, rule human actions is patent in Malachi Constant's acknowledgement of the "series of accidents" of which he was victim in *The Sirens of Titan* (218), in the accidental coalescing of characters on the petty island of San Lorenzo that ultimately leads to the end of human life in *Cat's Cradle,* and in the improbable survival of a small group of stranded castaways on the Galápagos Islands which affords humanity the chance to start over after the remainder of the race succumbs to a virus that renders them infertile in *Galápagos*. Examples like these reflect Vonnegut's conviction that chance had been a continuous force giving shape to his own life, allowing him to survive amidst the thousands of casualties of the destruction of Dresden and elevating him to the status of America's most popular novelist after two decades struggling to make a living with his

[46] It must be understood that, throughout his novels, Vonnegut appeals to the concept of "God" not so much from a religious perspective—he was a self-confessed atheist (*PS* 191)—but as a metaphor for ultimate metaphysical knowledge; for the intricate design that lies at the heart of the cosmos and is irrevocably inaccessible to human understanding.

writing. The author writes, "If I'd been born in Germany, I suppose I would have *been* a Nazi, bopping Jews and gypsies and Poles around" (*MN* vii), attesting to how all human lives are determined by forces beyond our control and set in motion way before we are born.

In his short story "Night-Sea Journey" (1966), Vonnegut's contemporary John Barth writes that "Chance drowns the worthy with the unworthy, bears up the unfit with the fit . . . and makes the night-sea journey essentially *haphazard* as well as murderous and unjustified" ("Night-Sea" 6). The titular journey is a metaphor for the voyage of a sperm seeking to fecund an egg, which underscores how our genetic condition itself is arbitrarily determined by luck, as only one out of millions of sperm gets to infiltrate an egg to create a new life. Expounding on the dramatic consequences of this notion, R. C. Sproul writes:

> If chance existed, it would destroy God's sovereignty. If God is not sovereign, he is not God. If he is not God, he simply *is* not. If chance is, God is not. If God is, chance is not. The two cannot coexist by reason of the impossibility of the contrary. (3)

John Elof Boodin summarizes Sproul's metaphysical diatribe in his assertion that "Chance is God" (82), concluding that when "chance rules supreme . . . there is no why" (77).

Galápagos is probably Vonnegut's most profound examination of the role of chance in human affairs, as it applies chaos theory to the Darwinian concept of evolution, which gained him praise from the evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould, who even assigned the novel to his science students at Harvard, and declared that, in *Galápagos,* "the pathways of history may be broadly constrained by such principles as natural selection, but contingency has so much maneuvering room within these boundaries that any particular outcome owes more to a quirky set of antecedent events than to channels set by nature's laws" (qtd. in Sumner 259). If evolutionary mythology already presents human beings as "mere cogs in a machine" (McInnis 385) simply devoted to the constant perfecting of the species, introducing chance into the equation denies this process of a set purpose, of an apocalyptic finality. History, thus, "runs on like an old man's tale without beginning, middle, or end, without any guiding plot . . . infinite and formless" (Boodin 77), devoid of a first or final cause that could imbue it with meaning. Gilbert McInnis

asserts that "if the myth of chance is allowed to govern our beliefs," then there is no meaning to life because we are "attributing instrumental power to nothing" (386), and thus Vonnegut's employment of concepts from the modern physics in *Galápagos* serves the same purpose as the Tralfamadorians in *The Sirens of Titan* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, as both act as a means to acknowledge the fundamental futility of life and the preponderance of chaos in a universe that can no longer be understood in anthropomorphic terms.

Nadeau reports on how "[t]here is the growing suspicion in the scientific community that knowledge in the sense of an absolute transcription of physical reality may be a necessary illusion for the symbol-making animal" (9), an assertion that is constantly implied by Vonnegut in science fictional narratives that reshape human history, destroy the world, imagine alien civilizations, and even call into question physical substance, "the basic stuff of reality, which ordinarily represents for us the last word in stability" (Schulz 56).[47] In all of them, the author toys with the notion that what we call reality may simply be "an unusually plausible form of fantasy" (Ketterer 321), resisting the temptation to formulate any kind of definitive answers and instead determining to "courageously rest with irresolvables" (Schulz 64). In a 1974 speech, Vonnegut declared that "No respecter of evidence has ever found the least clue as to what life is all about, and what people should do with it," arguing that all we have are mere "guesses" (*WFG* 178). Shedding light on how science has proved that many of the concepts that have upheld Western metaphysics for centuries were failed guesses, essentially illusions, the author seeks to unmask the chaos that lies at the heart of existence but also to propose that, when reality is proven to be a glorified form of fantasy, there is nothing that prevents us from creating a better, more humane reality from the raw materials of fantasy. After all, even the supposedly impartial discourse of science is colored by human subjectivity, as John Higgs reasons that "physics itself rests on the smaller-scale world of quantum physics, and in quantum physics the world is affected by an observer—or, in other words, consciousness" (82).

[47] Such is the case of *Cat's Cradle*, in which the concept of *ice-nine* "assumes that the molecular arrangement of matter, as we know it, is not pre-emptive of other possible arrangements" (Schulz 57). The physical implications of *ice-nine* go well beyond a mere science fiction fantasy, as explained by Charles A. Liberko, chemistry professor at the University of Cornell, in his article "Using Science Fiction to Teach Thermodynamics." In the paper, Liberko details how he utilizes Vonnegut's novel when covering thermodynamics in his classes, presenting the concept of *ice-nine* to his students of general chemistry as a practical means to "tie together the concepts of enthalpy, entropy, and spontaneity" (509).

Nevertheless, modern physics does propose one inescapable certainty: that "ultimate cosmic *memento mori*" (Zamora 53) which is the second law of thermodynamics, best known as entropy. With its formulation of a purely physical world irrevocably running out of energy as it relentlessly moves towards heat death, entropy is a postmodern form of eschatology premised by physicians and mathematicians, who have thus become "the real doomsayers of our time" (53) by denying humanity the expectation of a meaningful apocalypse. Zamora examines the relationship between entropy and apocalypse, explaining that, whereas both invest history with direction, the former denies it any kind of purpose, because as time increases entropy, the future inevitably promises a change for the worse, "destroying order and structure until a point is reached when time is conceived of as standing still" (59). Hence, unlike apocalyptic temporality, "the entropic vision admits no possibility that time may prove redemptive or regenerative" (55), rejecting the notion of a logical, causal link between the past, the present, and the future, and therefore invalidating the anthropocentric morality of traditional apocalypse and its implicit concept of a meaningful human history (52). As such, entropy becomes the ultimate neo-apocalyptic narrative by way of condemning humanity to a dying world with no hope for redemption.

In one of the most symbolically charged scenes of *Galápagos*, the captain of the *Bahía de Darwin* throws Mandarax, a technological device that compiles the most significant tidbits of human thought throughout the ages, to the ocean angered by "the uselessness of all its knowledge" (*GP* 63). As science tends "increasingly to answer our request for understanding of our world in terms untranslatable into words" (Schulz 51), relegating humans to the passive position of a "man-as-verbal-animal of silence" (52) while chaos theory and the law of entropy render intelligence "helpless in the face of the very powers it has released" (Bradbury, *Modern* 219), how fitting it is that, the captain's final act as "the new Adam, it might be said," is "to cast the Apple of Knowledge into the deep blue sea" (*GP* 63).

Humanity, however, is ultimately unable to escape the burden of its knowledge and exercise the philosophical tabula rasa of *Galápagos*. As the concepts from new physics challenge "everything we have thought and felt about ourselves from at least the time of classical Greek civilization" (Nadeau 12), the human race faces the traumatic shock whereby "the self as a verifiable, definable, even possible, entity has vanished in the ironic acceptance of a world without metaphysical center" (Schulz 51). It is a neo-

apocalyptic descent into chaos; a "death of ourselves" (Nadeau 13) that leaves us numbly confronting "a reality that is totally mysterious or devoid of meaning" (Greene 60), with no alternative other than to accept how, in the words of Alain Robbe-Grillet, "The world is neither significant nor absurd," and in its stead, "It *is*, quite simply" (92). In *Breakfast of Champions*, Vonnegut echoes the despair aroused by this fatal disclosure of futile meaninglessness asserting that "I had come to the conclusion that there was nothing sacred about myself or about any human being, that we were all machines, doomed to collide and collide and collide" (*BOC* 225). Still, the concept of ontological centrality, of a "privileged and transcendental signified" (Derrida, "Structure" 250) that will give purpose to existence, survives as "function and desire" in the human mind (Ickstadt 209), which constitutes a source of anxiety and despair for humanity, as its very nature condemns it to the longing for an ideal of order that has proven to be an unattainable illusion.

In the context of Vonnegut's writing career, the apocalyptic shock of knowledge extends well beyond physical principles, as the social upheavals, Cold War quandaries, and cultural shifts of an era shaped by a perpetual sense of crisis give way to "increasing doubts about the existence of God, authenticity, or reality itself" (Deloria 161). Shaken by nuclear threat, political assassinations and the Vietnam debacle, many Americans in the sixties and seventies started to question the meaning of meaning itself, as their daily experience increasingly came to be characterized by what Susan Sontag terms "meaningless mechanized situations of disrelation" (*Against* 270). Jean François Lyotard famously theorizes that the postmodern condition is marked by "incredulity toward metanarratives" (7), as the grand discourses that had universally been assumed to be true and shaped people's lives in the past are proven to be fictional constructs and give way to provisional narratives that do not offer any kind of absolute answers, thus denying humanity of a common fund of meaning by which to measure the facts of contemporary experience; facts that seem to constantly challenge the boundaries between fact and fiction and institute what Olderman labels "the experience of the fantastic within what should be the firm shape of everyday reality" (1). Vladimir Nabokov once wrote that "Men have learned to live with a black burden, a huge aching hump: the supposition that 'reality' may only be a 'dream'" (93); by the early years of the Cold War, atomic power seemed to have finally awoken them from that dream for good, as daily events filled them with "wonder and awe . . . sickness and despair" (Roth 35).

With this descent into unrealistic chaos came the skeptical, even paranoid sense that everyday reality is manufactured; yet another fictional form of narrative. Christopher Lasch comments on how the widespread use of electronic devices such as cameras and recording machines, which purport to offer a faithful transcription of reality, actually operates as a filter that distorts experience and withdraws it one step further into the realm of fantasy, "giving to much of modern life the character of an enormous echo chamber, a hall of mirrors" (*Narcissism* 47). Reality becomes mediated by electronic images as people become increasingly self-aware of their own public image and respond to others and even to themselves as if they were performing for an unseen audience that will scrutinize all their moves. To borrow Jean Baudrillard's term, in a postmodern society "the map . . . precedes the territory" (*Simulacra* 1), as reality comes to be essentially determined by its simulated version. The quintessence of this virtualization of reality stems from the ubiquitous TV set, which symbolizes "a world within the world [which] further destabilizes an already fluid and unstable fictional reality" (McHale 128); an ever-present source of conceits disguised as fact that has become the primary source of contact with the external world for millions, to the point that people come to measure life by how well it satisfies "the narrative expectations created by the movies" and television (Gabler 233).

Elizabeth Abele explains how, in most of his writing, "Vonnegut directly calls attention to the blurred line between fiction and reality, even in terms of his own personal 'reality'" (74), commenting on this universal descent into chaos and unreality not as an immaculate, sermonizing judge, but as one more citizen exposed to the same fragmentary bombardment of modern experience as his readers. Oftentimes, Vonnegut's answer is simply "So it goes" (*SH5* 27), a wry acknowledgement of "the apparent futility of human existence" (Bush 254) with which the author seems to echo the annoying patterns of repetition that enact an overwhelming sense of confusion and disorientation upon Americans in the late twentieth century. This disorientation and confusion can lead to dire psychological consequences; to a fragmented psyche that seems to be the inescapable corollary to a world without meaning and without a metaphysical center, in which all the previous assumptions which laid the foundation of our understanding have been destroyed by a knowledge that we cannot escape until the point in which the only thing one can do is laugh in hopelessness. And yet, if laughter is sometimes understood as a sign of madness, Vonnegut maintains the faith in those who dare to laugh, those who defy

the stable sense of "normality" and venture to think differently. Even if, in the process, they are deemed insane by their society, that very courage to look directly at the futility of experience confers them the ability to shape chaos into something new; to escape the traumatic burden of postmodern existence and use their imagination to engage in a new process of creation.

3.6 An exceedingly mad world: Insanity as a sensible reaction to a chaotic world

Saul Bellow once wrote that "in an age of madness, to expect to be untouched by madness is a form of madness" (*Henderson* 27). As the crisis of the Cold War years progressed and the American public felt an overwhelming sense of discrepancy between what could be and what was, which, as Charles Reich explains, especially for the young became "perhaps the greatest single fact of their existence" (220), the previously clear dichotomy between sane and insane seemed to progressively blur. What were the limits of sanity when the world itself could be destroyed at the touch of a button and dinner-time news reports showed murder in real time? Once accepted as an unquestionable token of social existence, the concept of sanity became problematic in an era marked by the stressful "future shock" (Toffler 1) of too much change in too short time, which triggered what Preston labels "the painful characteristics of *de*localization: dislocation, identity crisis, confusion, and so forth" (307). A running commentary on the crisis of their time, Kurt Vonnegut's works constantly purport that "To be schizoid in this world is . . . simply to be genuinely human, for the pressures of life are fragmentary" (Klinkowitz, *Kurt Vonnegut* 80).

One of Vonnegut's greatest literary influences, Mark Twain, writes In *The Mysterious Stranger* (1916) that "Every man is a suffering-machine and a happiness-machine combined" (211), conceding that either both feelings are equally divided or else suffering prevails, and goes on to hypothesize how "sanity and happiness are an impossible combination," reasoning that "Only the mad can be happy, and not many of those" (246). As "one of Twain's truest literary protégés of the twentieth century" (Bush 254), Vonnegut seems to agree with this neo-apocalyptic formulation of the futility of happiness, which becomes one of the recurring themes of his literature. In his novels, life is presented as a disease—"Watch out for life. I have caught life. I have come down with

life," starts the first chapter of *Deadeye Dick* (1)—as the author continuously expresses that "Most people find life so hard and disappointing . . . that they don't care if life goes on or not" (*FWD* 109), and "For practically everybody, the end of the world can't come soon enough" (*TQ* 2). His characters, however, find themselves forced to go on living, burdened by the "common combination on the planet Earth" of "a life not worth living" and "an iron will to survive" (*BOC* 72), leaving their creator to carry what he calls the main message of all great literature: "what a bummer it is to be a human being" (*AMWAC* 9).

Faced by the crude reality of a life marked by pain and confusion, Vonnegut's novels present schizophrenia as "a metaphor for the modern condition" (Sumner 61); as "that simple and widespread boon to modern mankind" (*MN* 179) that allows people to go on living and attempt to make sense among chaos. Mental disorder becomes the perfect trope to symbolize an era marked by the helpless search for meaning, the quest that "privileged and transcendental signified" alluded to by Derrida ("Structure" 250) that simply does not exist, and therefore results in dire existential anxiety amid general prosperity. Persistently enhancing this feeling is a certain, widespread sense of palpable conspiracy that Vonnegut describes as "the ever-growing ball of American paranoia, the ball of string one hundred miles in diameter, with the unsolved assassination of JFK at its core" (*DD* 263–264). The climate of confusion is such that the paranoid suspicion of the hidden motivations of the powerful and a distrustful presumption of history as being controlled by unseen hands and for unknown purposes even becomes a public sign of awareness in the midst of chaos. Conspiracy theories are narratives that offer coherence, and thus become "a necessary imaginative act of survival" (Levine and Papasotiriou 127) for some in their attempt to rationalize random acts that defy logical explanations. Conspiracy is, in essence, an apocalyptic impulse to understand our helpless position in a world that escapes human control.

An acute sense of paranoia thus becomes the lay of the land in Cold War America, as Ihab Hassan proposes that agony and outlawry are the only two means through which "man may affirm his deepest moral instincts" (*Radical* 94) amid the "institutionalized madness" (*Contemporary* 82) and warns that "the courage to choose always ends in pain" (95). Raymond Olderman adds that "We are in an age weaned on tension and silent despair" (8), in which the image of a promised land that had previously fueled American society and popular culture, has "lost its creative potential" (8) until the only optimism

the common citizen can afford is the hope to find a way to overcome the deadened feeling of living in the "insane asylum" of the postmodern American "waste land" (9). Faced by this despairing scenario, some of Vonnegut's characters reject reality altogether as a complete fiction, understanding that the last resort for any semblance of reality left to us is inside our own minds, and withdraw from the outside world into passive introspection. Thus, in *Mother Night*, Howard W. Campbell rationalizes that "it was my world rather than myself that was diseased" (257), and seeks to escape the consequences of his war crimes arguing that reality is a subjective experience that can simply be rejected. If, as Ronald Sukenick writes, "Reality doesn't exist, time doesn't exist, personality doesn't exist" (*Death* 41), then one can simply retreat into his own, inviolate self and ignore the chaos that surrounds him. However, as Schulz warns, the nature of postmodernity is so chaotic that even "the self as a verifiable, definable, even possible, entity has vanished" (51), and Campbell's experience in *Mother Night* demonstrates that, in this day and age, the attempt to escape to introspection, to our inner self as the romantic center of the universe, is no longer valid, because at the heart of the human condition lies the darkest confusion, the chaotic forces that inform our nature and are the only source of evil in a world that is simply indifferent to our suffering. Faced by this inescapable revelation, the only meaningful act left for Campbell is suicide because, as Klinkowitz acknowledges, "when the self collapses, all quite literally is lost" (*Disruptions* 44).

Vonnegut also presents the self-pitying introspection of what Ihab Hassan calls the "rebel victim"[48] as an invalid alternative to face an intrinsically chaotic reality by showing how it inevitably leads to isolation and loneliness, which he refers to as "the most pervasive American disease" (*BB* 54) and "the only cause of our shapeless discontent in the midst of such prosperity" (*PS* 188). Loneliness, Vonnegut claims, is the indirect corollary of the American experience, of people migrating to the New World and leaving behind their cultural and community ties, which results in a lonesome society with no real emotional connections to the land or the people; a "painful, unhuman agreement to make" which has proven to be "hideously expensive" (*PS* 164). Vonnegut argues that "the American experience has been an unhappy experience" (*WFG* 285), because it has forced people to live without the extended families that, through their shared culture and rituals and by providing care, affection and company, are the only real

[48] Hassan's outline of the "rebel-victim" as the archetypical protagonist of fifties US literature is discussed in epigraph 2.2 of this dissertation.

wellsprings of sanity in an otherwise confusing, even painful, life. Faced by this notion, the author makes the claim that "all the damaging excesses of Americans in the past were motivated by loneliness rather than a fondness for sin" (*JB* 183). To Vonnegut, this sense of anomic alienation only increases as the twentieth century progresses and technologies like television and the Internet curtail meaningful human connections even further by fomenting isolation, passivity, and silence, and immersing citizens in what Jean Baudrillard calls "perpetual simulation, . . . a perpetual present of signs" (*America* 63). In *Bowling Alone*, Robert D. Putnam outlines a thesis similar to Vonnegut's, and links the increasing rates of mental disorders diagnosed among Americans during the final decades of the twentieth century to collapsing community values and declining levels of civic participation (326).

Breakfast of Champions is perhaps Vonnegut's clearest depiction of this postmodern culture in which the constant pursuit of profit and commodification displace humane concerns to the point of insanity; a novel that, in Sumner's words "documents a society . . . in the process of a nervous breakdown" (150). As I explained in the previous chapter, the novel follows the exploits of Dwayne Hoover, admired by his fellow countrymen as the most successful businessman in Midland City, whose cheerful integrity is acknowledged by the ubiquitous billboards and television and radio advertisements with the motto "Ask anybody—you can trust Dwayne" (*BOC* 100). However, under his façade as the supposed embodiment of the American Dream, Dwayne actually suffers from severe depression, hopelessly looking for a meaning to hold on to after his wife's suicide and the estrangement from his son have made life seem unbearably meaningless and painful to him—"I couldn't help wondering if that was what God put me on Earth for—to find out how much a man could take without breaking" (*BOC* 170), the character confesses after reading a road sign with the legend "Destructive testing," attesting to his feeble mental state. Dwayne's search for any kind of meaning that will make his existence seem purposeful, of course, will culminate in his final orgy of violence upon reading (and believing) Kilgore Trout's science fiction story "Now It Can Be Told," but in the meantime, however, the most shocking realization of the novel is how none of the other characters seem able to read the signs of what is coming in Dwayne's growingly outlandish behavior.

Breakfast of Champions, then, stands as a critique of the increasing dehumanization of American society, which denies the possibility of meaningful human

relationships in the pursuit of a supposed technological interconnectedness that ironically curtails human communication. The novel portrays a gallery of characters who are constantly engaged in "nonconversations" (Schatt 100) composed of routinely automatic responses and commercial slogans, and devoid of any substantial or emotional content, which "illustrate the hopelessness of communication" (100). As humanity retreats to the aforementioned condition of "verbal-animal of silence" (Schulz 51), people are denied the possibility of establishing meaningful relationships, retreating instead to a state of passive isolation in which public identities become masks that conceal real feelings which are seldom shared with others, thus denying the chance of personal realization and psychological well-being by deliberately keeping "the chaos of private lives carefully hidden from view" (Sumner 155). In one of the most telling scenes of the novel, Dwayne considers committing suicide but instead shoots a bullet at his bathroom tiles, the gunshot unheard by any of his neighbors thanks to their houses being soundproof insulated (one dare say, isolated) from the world outside. However, when the Pontiac dealer immediately decides to leave his home for a drive in a Plymouth car, he feels compelled to explain his choice of vehicle to everyone in the neighborhood:

> As he backed out of his driveway, he thought it important to explain to his neighbors why he was in a Plymouth Fury, so he yelled out the window: "Keeping abreast of the competition!" He blew his horn. (52)

That a man who has just attempted to kill himself would be ignored by the members of his close community and, at the same time, should have to justify why he is driving a car from a rival manufacturer, worried that people may doubt his integrity; that, ultimately, fidelity to a commercial brand should be more socially legitimate than fidelity to life itself, is the definitive symbol of contemporary American insanity to Vonnegut. Always weary of "the masks we wear to conceal the absence of a stable, rational center" (Sumner 59), Vonnegut famously warns that "We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be" (*MN* v). What we should be, he seems to claim, is simply what we are, devoid of disguises or artifice, not afraid of revealing the insecurity, anxiety and fear that is common to us all as human beings living in a senseless world determined by random chance and progressively moving towards entropy. Pulling back from reality and trying to escape into self-compassion only serves to enhance agony by escaping the social contact that is an intrinsic component of human nature and perhaps the only means if not to heal at least to relieve our cosmic insecurity.

Seeking to destigmatize suffering, Vonnegut assures that "All people are insane" (*MN* 115), as human beings are no more than "huge, rubbery test tubes" (*BOC* 3) seething with "a symphony of chemical reactions" (*SS* 71). Lawrence R. Broer claims that "probably no characters in contemporary fiction are more traumatized and emotionally damaged than those of Kurt Vonnegut" (*Sanity Plea* 3), but I beg to add that what Vonnegut is proposing is that to be human *is* to be traumatized and emotionally damaged, as those are the inevitable reactions to the fragmentary impulses of our chaotic existence; the direct symptoms of living in "an exceedingly mad world" (Klinkowitz, "Crimes" 157). Far from romanticizing mental disorder,[49] the author does try to normalize it, arguing that "[a] society, on occasion, can be the worst prescriber of mental health" (*PS* 224). If Susan Sontag proposes that the "exemplary modern artist" should be "a broker in madness" and "a free-lance explorer of spiritual dangers" dedicated to "making forays into and taking up positions on the frontiers of consciousness . . .and reporting on what's there" (*Styles* 45), Vonnegut recounts that the most disturbing facets of human nature are not hiding beyond the reaches of consciousness, but are indeed readily apparent within aspects of so-called everyday reality. Where does madness lie when humans disrespect, mistreat and kill each other by the millions, when life and death become mere statistics, when some people are forced to starve while governments spend millions in weapons of mass destruction, when humans seem to have lost the ability to communicate meaningfully and to understand each other?

Vonnegut answers that madness lies in being "so well-integrated into the machinery of society and history as to be able to move in only one plane, and along one line" (*PP* 36), as his novels constantly call to question our given notions about sanity and expose how "A normal person, functioning well on the upper levels of a prosperous, industrialized society, can hardly hear his conscience at all" (*GBY* 54). Therefore, Peter Freese explains that,

> While in an epistemological sense schizophrenia in Vonnegut's world is the logical corollary of the indissoluble opposition between the unavailability and the

[49] Vonnegut's oldest son, Mark, struggled with mental disease for many years, and wrote of his experience in the 1975 autobiographical novel *The Eden Express: A Memoir of Insanity.* In his own "autobiographical collage" *Palm Sunday*, Vonnegut explains, "Mark has taught me never to romanticize mental illness, never to imagine a brilliant and beguiling schizophrenic who makes more sense about life than his or her doctor or even the president of Harvard University" (*PS* 222–223).

necessity of meaning, in the sense of social criticism it turns from a stigma into something like a distinction, a badge of awareness. ("Man" 233)

By not conforming to social standards, Vonnegut's protagonists expose themselves to being labelled insane, but also assert their stance against the dehumanizing forces of a hypocritical status quo that ignores suffering and thus consolidates the madness that it purports to oppose. In *Player Piano*, Ed Finnerty declares, "Psychiatrists would pull me back to the center, and I want to stay as close to the edge as possible without going over," as he argues that "out on the edge you see all kinds of things you can't see from the center" (84). What Finnerty and other Vonnegut protagonists like Kilgore Trout and Malachi Constant are able to see out on the edge is that, as John Updike holds, "a truly adapted person is not a person at all . . . it is simply an animal with clothes or a statistic" (Fresán 41). Vonnegut's antiheroes seek to assert their humanity by foregrounding the incongruities between the ideal and the real and the paradoxical character of human nature itself. Instead of disregarding chaos, they strive to acknowledge it, to recognize our nature as helpless "playthings of enormous forces" (*SH5* 164), and try to turn it into something constructive by simply "bargaining in good faith with destiny" (*SS* 2). These characters remain unconcerned about appearances because they know that metaphors are useless if they are devoid of content, and if John R. May concedes that "Reasonable people are so scarce that it is not hard to see how the rapacious majority can consider them insane" ("Vonnegut's Humor" 27), Vonnegut professes that "This world would be a drab and empty world indeed if it weren't for zany women and men" (*WFG* 130).

3.7 "There is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre": War as the ultimate expression of chaos

In Vonnegut's work, war stands as the ultimate metaphor for humanity's flawed fundamentalism; a clear encapsulation of the blindly self-destructive tendencies and misguided sense of their place in the cosmic order that people have demonstrated throughout history. The author himself could witness the atrocious randomness of war first-hand during his service in the European front of World War II, when he famously survived the firebombing of Dresden as a prisoner of war. Upon emerging from the

improvised air-raid shelter of a slaughterhouse basement to find the city completely destroyed and most of its (mainly civilian) population killed, Vonnegut probably would have agreed with psychiatrist R. D. Laing's formulation that if "[n]ormal men have killed perhaps 100,000,000 of their fellow normal men in the last fifty years," what ought to be questioned is no so much the definition of "insanity" as the definition of "normalcy" (24).[50]

Leslie Fiedler wonders at how, although World War II was fought against "brutal and reactionary states despised by all men of goodwill," the most highly regarded novels about it intently subvert "values of heroism and combat heroism" ("Divine Stupidity" 8). In the war novels of American World War II veterans turned writers like Kurt Vonnegut, Joseph Heller, and Norman Mailer, war is not a mere setting for action scenes, but instead becomes a powerful literary theme to evoke a "feeling of existential loss and disorientation" (Walsh 4) which, through its stream of futile sacrifices and fanatical acts of destruction, conjures an "ethical wilderness" that produces a shocking "vision of *nada*" (4). War reveals the painfully random nature of human existence by paradoxically making life both more "real" and more "unreal" (Gray 143), as it foregrounds the most primal, instinctual aspects of life and death in its participants while, at the same time, it removes them from their familiar environment and everyday routines and pushes them into a hazy, violent reality where, in the words of another war veteran US novelist, Tim O'Brien, "absolute occurrence is irrelevant," as fact and fiction often mingle and "a thing may happen and be a total lie," while "another thing may not happen and be truer than the truth" (89). The experience of war, thus, highlights the notion of reality as an illusion and the helplessness of individuals to affect or escape the course of events, as "identities become blurred" (Walsh 4) turning soldiers into a dehumanized mass shaken by uncontrollable forces beyond their reach. In *Slaughterhouse-Five,* Vonnegut writes, "One of the main effects of war, after all, is that people are discouraged from being characters" (164).

[50] R. D. Laing, of course, was one of the main proponents of what came to be known as anti-psychiatry, a term coined by David Cooper in 1967 to design a movement whose origins can be traced back to the writings of Jacques Lacan (Nasser 743). During the seventies, anti-psychiatrists raised controversies about the actual effectiveness as well as the potential harm of several routine forms of psychiatric treatment which, they argued, were shaped more by sociopolitical concerns than by the actual integrity and well-being of the human mind (Nasser 744–745). Although he never openly aligned himself with anti-psychiatry, some of the views on the nature of mental health and the virtue of conventional psychiatric treatment expressed by Vonnegut in novels such as *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Breakfast of Champions* seem in line with the main tenets of this school of thought.

Vonnegut's main focus always lies on the daunting effects of war over its participants, as Leonard J. Leff reminds that, whenever he chooses a particular theme, the author "is always concerned with how the theme influences, shapes, molds, and, as is often the case, distorts the individual, on a human level" (30). Subsequently, in novels like *Mother Night* and *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, Vonnegut is not so much intent on describing epic battles and heroic feats as on investigating "the aftereffects that follow the veteran home" (Abele 68); the dislocating burden that soldiers carry when they return to the "normalcy" of their previous lives after facing the horrors of war, and how that normalcy can never be recovered after their face-to-face encounter with the chaotic nature of existence and the darkest depths of the human condition has rendered it illusory. The author himself felt this way after his Dresden experience obliged him to confront "the very problem posed by man's seemingly unbounded proclivity for evil" (Schatt 88), and, as soon as he returned to the United States in 1945, he set out to recount his war experience in literature in an attempted effort to rationalize the chaos that he had witnessed. However, the process proved to be much harder than he had expected, as he explains in the first chapter of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the novel about the Dresden atrocity that he finally published more than two decades later:

> When I got home from the Second World War twenty-three years ago, I thought it would be easy for me to write about the destruction of Dresden, since all I would have to do would be to report what I had seen. And I thought, too, that it would be a masterpiece or at least make me a lot of money, since the subject was so big.
>
> But not many words about Dresden came from my mind then – not enough of them to make them a book, anyway. And not many words come now, either, when I have become an old fart with his memories and his Pall Malls, with his sons full grown. (2)

Determined to write a successful war novel that would recount the untold tragedy of Dresden, Vonnegut nevertheless found that his war memories appeared inaccessible and emerged only as randomly unstructured and incoherent recollections. Yet, he did not seem able to let these memories go and forget the endeavor either, as the experience persistently haunted him and impelled him to testify, to clear his mind of that burden of death which, as Marx famously claimed in "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte" (1852), "weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living" (245). The fire-bombing of Dresden, with its devastation of a historical city that held no real military

significance, defied any rational explanation. Cathy Caruth explains that the defining feature of trauma is, precisely, that it is "an affront to understanding" (*Unclaimed* 154). Therefore, Vonnegut was experiencing how, in Caruth's words, "a traumatic event cannot be 'assimilated' or experienced fully at the time, but only *belatedly*, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it" (*Trauma* 4), while, at the same time, he was being perturbed by the paradoxical dilemma at the heart of any traumatic event, namely the need to achieve a resolution between two contradictory impulses: "the imperative of silence (since trauma is that for which there is no language), and the imperative of speech (since trauma is that which demands language as an alternative to emotional paralysis)" (Gray 54).

In an early short story entitled "The Cruise of *The Jolly Rodger*," published in 1953, Vonnegut reflects on the paralyzing synchronicity between the desperate need to tell one's story and the frustrating inability to make it comprehensible, as he describes the main character's attempt to narrate his war experience,

> He had never tried to tell the tale before, and now, in his eagerness to be glib and urbane, he found himself including details, large and small, as they occurred to him, until his tale was no tale at all, but a formless, unwieldy description of war as it had really seemed: a senseless, complicated mess that in the telling was first-rate realism but miserable entertainment. (*BSB* 102)

In subsequent years, Vonnegut would continue to attempt to find the adequate balance and unearth a means to "represent the unrepresentable, . . . to name the unnamable" (Elsaesser 195) and overcome the traumatizing numbness occasioned by his "duty-dance with death" (*SH5* iii) in World War II. In *Slaughterhouse-Five,* he would finally manage to do so by "challenging his own processes and bringing himself into the center of his fictional activity" (Klinkowitz, *Kurt Vonnegut* 69), understanding that "to describe his feelings of shock and confusion as a young army private . . . the truth was useless" (Shields 232), and instead of delving on specifics what he had to do was translate "the delirium created by his sense of chaos" into his writing (Shields 232). Thus, Vonnegut creates a novel that is deliberately chaotic in its form, which the author describes as "telegraphic schizophrenic" (*SH5* iii), as only by embracing the random nature of human experience as exemplified by the Dresden massacre, can the author finally manage to turn "the unspeakable into speech" (Gray 50). Some years later, Vonnegut would declare that writers get to "treat their mental illnesses, every day" (*WFG*

286) by performing that "socially acceptable form of schizophrenia," as J. L. Doctorow described writing (Fresán 163). *Slaughterhouse-Five,* thus, becomes Vonnegut's therapeutic process of accepting the apocalyptic revelation that chaos is the prime force in the universe. The novel does not try to rationalize the bombing of Dresden, but instead becomes a reflection on "the impossibility of narrating such a traumatic event" (Nicol 88). It is an attempt by the writer to overcome his own trauma and find a reason to go on living, to create a meaningful apocalypse through his literature amidst a world that makes no sense.

Opening with the caveat "All this happened, more or less" (*SH5* 1), *Slaughterhouse-Five* introduces Billy Pilgrim, an affluent optometrist who, like Vonnegut, was captured during the Battle of the Bulge and taken to Dresden as a prisoner of war, where he survived the Allied bombing of the city. Vonnegut explains that Billy has become "unstuck in time" (23) and the plot follows him as he numbly moves through different moments of his life "in a constant state of stagefright, . . . because he never knows what part of his life he is going to have to act in next" (23). These haphazard episodes range from his childhood to his death at age 54, but always inevitably return Billy to his traumatic experience during World War II. This time travel device is generally accepted as a reflection of war veterans' Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which was first recognized as an independent psychiatric classification after its inclusion in the 1980 edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (Lingel 164). In it, PTSD is described as the result of a "person experience[ing], witness[ing], or [being] confronted with an event or events that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of self or others" (427). The *Manual* asserts that the symptoms of PTSD include the persistent re-experiencing of the traumatic events "in the form of distressing images, thoughts, perceptions, dreams, or reliving [them]" (Vees-Gulani 177), which seems akin to Billy's recurring trips back to Dresden.[51] In

[51] Susanne Vees-Gulani elaborates a profound analysis of *Slaughterhouse-Five* using psychiatric theory in "Diagnosing Billy Pilgrim: A Psychiatric Approach to Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*." In the paper, the author identifies several symptoms of PTSD which can be directly linked to Vonnegut's description of Billy, including his unwillingness to openly discuss his war experience with anybody (179), the fact that certain sensory impulses trigger the character's memories of Dresden—"Psychiatrists note specifically that 'sensory phenomena, such as sights, sounds, and smell that are circumstantially related to the traumatic event . . . reactivate traumatic memories and flashbacks' in PTSD sufferers (Miller 18)" (178)— or how the famous "so it goes" refrain recalls the "passive and emotionless reaction to tragedy and death" associated to what Robert J. Lifton labelled the "psychic numbing" or "psychic closing-off" of war survivors (175). All of these act as "protective shields" that offer Billy the chance to live an "outwardly normal" life while still being deeply haunted by the trauma of his war experience (179).

Trauma and Recovery, Judith Herman discusses the experience of former prisoners of war suffering from PTSD, who "are eventually reduced to living in an endless present" during their captivity and, afterwards, "may give the appearance of returning to ordinary time, while psychologically remaining bound in the timelessness of the prison' (89) and thus, even years after their liberation, continue to exist "simultaneously in two realities, two points in time" (89–90). The "spastic in time" (*SH5* 23) condition of the taciturn Billy Pilgrim, who "didn't really like life at all" (102), may therefore be understood as a PTSD-motivated compulsion to constantly re-experience his trauma, a metaphor of how "Psychologically, Billy has never fully left the war" (Vees-Gullani 177).

On the night of his daughter's wedding, Billy is abducted by an alien spaceship and taken to the planet Tralfamadore, where its inhabitants reveal to him the real nature of time, which is not a chronological sequence but an eternal continuum, thus invalidating the concept of death itself:

> The most important thing I learned on Tralfamadore was that when a person dies he only *appears* to die. He is still very much alive in the past, so it is very silly for people to cry at his funeral. All moments, past, present, and future always have existed, always will exist. . . . It is just an illusion we have here on Earth that one moment follows another . . . and that once a moment is gone it is gone forever.
>
> When a Tralfamadorian sees a corpse, all he thinks is that the dead person is in bad condition in that particular moment, but that the same person is just fine in plenty other moments. Now, when I myself hear that somebody is dead, I simply shrug and say what the Tralfamadorians say about dead people, which is "So it goes." (26–27)

The psychologically damaged Billy embraces the Tralfamadorian conception of time as a coping device that allows him to rationalize all that he has been through, and accepts it as "the only option in a world that fails to provide him with a different path" (Vees-Gullani 180). Liberated from obstinately human notions such as free will, causality and justice, Billy can finally accept a universe that allows the cruel randomness epitomized by Dresden. The Tralfamadorian philosophy therefore is an apocalyptic revelation for Billy which, not unlike any other sense-making narrative from religion to conspiracy theories or the us-versus-them dialectic of the Cold War, offers him a "desperate attempt to rationalize chaos" (Merrill and Scholl 69) and to give meaning to a world where death and violence pose constant affronts to human understanding.

Much has been discussed about whether Billy's experience in Tralfamadore is meant to be read as real or as a delusional exercise of fantasy stemming from the character's fragile psyche (Simpson 266). Throughout the novel, Vonnegut is meticulously careful so as not to privilege any interpretation, although, towards the end, he does concede some clues that might imply that Billy is suffering from hallucinations, such as his reading of a Kilgore Trout science fiction story that details how a human is exhibited in a zoo at an alien planet, or the magazine article about the disappearance of Montana Wildhack, Billy's mating partner at the Tralfamadorian zoo. In my opinion, however, to argue for the validity of only one of these options would be missing the point that the author is trying to convey.

In one of the most famous passages of the novel, Billy shares a room at a ward for nonviolent mental patients in a veteran's hospital with Eliot Rosewater, the protagonist of Vonnegut's previous novel, *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*. In this book, Rosewater, who also deals with the severe psychological consequences of his accidental murder of three civilians during the war, is described as "the only American who has so far noticed World War II" (*GBY* 85). This stands as a wry commentary on how, prior to the post-Vietnam recognition of PTSD, the mental after-effects of war experiences on soldiers where commonly shrugged off as "Soldiers Irritable Heart" or "shell shock" (Vees-Gullani 177), as tendencies in psychiatry tended to underestimate the role of external factors in causing trauma and focused solely on "individual vulnerability as the reason for people's suffering'" (179). When Billy checks himself into the hospital in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the doctors agree that "He *was* going crazy" (100), but "They didn't think it had anything to do with the war" (100), insisting instead on analyzing episodes from his childhood and his relationship with his parents. Thus, Vonnegut comments on the prevalent atmosphere of social denial around the psychological wounds of war; the trend to, once again, deny chaos in hope that it will disappear as the proverbial "elephant in the room," instead of facing it directly. Vees-Gullani explains that "One important insight is that PTSD is believed to be caused not only by the traumatizing events themselves" as the "psychosocial atmosphere in a society is clearly a factor that facilitates or hinders the process of coping with stressful life events" (177).[52] Upon returning home,

[52] In a very interesting article entitled "The Psychiatrists Were Right: Anomic Alienation in Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*," Kevin Brown argues that Billy Pilgrim's psychological state is as much a consequence of his early family life and marriage as of his war experiences. Brown posits that, throughout the novel, Vonnegut's portrayal of American postwar society as epitomized but not restricted to Billy's experience aims at portraying the prevalent anomic alienation in a country "where we have become isolated

their country does not provide veterans like Billy, Rosewater and Vonnegut the tools to assimilate and work through their war experiences, and the societal impulse to deny suffering in order to maintain appearances, the generalized imperative of silence, hinders their process of recovery by denying them a forum to discuss their feelings of guilt and anxiety.

During their stay in the hospital, Rosewater introduces Billy to science fiction, and in particular to the writings of Kilgore Trout. "They had both found life meaningless, partly because of what they had seen in the war," Vonnegut writes, "So they were trying to re-invent themselves and their universe," adding that "Science fiction was a big help" (*SH5* 101). Some lines later, Rosewater famously claims that "Everything there was to know about life was in *The Brothers Karamazov,* by Fyodor Dostoevsky. But that isn't *enough* anymore," and ironically beseechs the psychiatrists that "You guys are going to have to come up with a lot of wonderful *new* lies, or people just aren't going to want to go on living" (101). Science fiction provides Billy with exactly the kind of "wonderful new lies" that he needs in order to survive in the face of trauma, affording him the tools to enact the creative reinvention of the world necessary for him to make his life meaningful, because even though "science fiction writers couldn't write for sour apples," they were also "more sensitive to important changes than anybody who was writing well" (*GBY* 19). In the spatial discontinuities characteristic of the genre, which according to Fredric Jameson can be read as "a virtual allegory of the brutal and abrupt world displacements of Americans at war" (*Archaeologies* 323), the character finds a means to rationalize his unavoidable reenacting of his traumatic war experience. In a technological world in which human agency is rendered progressively hopeless, science fiction becomes "the only literature capable of recording the transformation of human subjectivity" (Luckhurst 151), and thus, for characters like Billy Pilgrim and Eliot Rosewater, for whom their traumatic encounter with the chaotic nature of reality has rendered conventional realism obsolete, science fiction is a much more appropriate vehicle to "reflect the condition of the modern mind" (Spinrad *Modern* 3). Such

from one another" (102). Billy thus resorts to "creating imaginary worlds where he is loved an accepted" (105), and finds in Tralfamadore an artificial extended family that offers him the "end of alienation that Billy seeks but cannot find in the real world, on Earth" (106). As I have discussed before, isolation in modern America is one of the main themes of Vonnegut's literature, and would become even more so in his post-*Slaughterhouse-Five* output, so it seems quite plausible to infer that both his war experience *and* the lack of meaningful human relations inform Billy Pilgrim's fragile psychic condition.

experience, Levine and Papasotiriou claim, "can only be made comprehensible from that far-out perspective: realism considered as science fiction, the world viewed from the perspective of another planet" (127).

Through Billy's example, hence, Vonnegut illustrates "how we use the fantastic to make use of the senseless" (Bradbury, *Modern* 216). Ihab Hassan argues that, as the modes of behavior in a mass society "congeal into a hard, uniform crust," fictional heroes must become divers that seek to "discover alternate modes of life on levels beneath the frozen surface" (*Radical* 107). A diver, he claims, "moves where light is seldom sharp, and the shadowy contours of things melt into the strange imaginings of the eye," and in the process loses "the basis to distinguish between illusion and reality which the traditional novel afforded" (107). In its resolution to look straight into the heart of chaos, *Slaughterhouse-Five* willingly asserts itself as a non-traditional novel that defies the juxtaposition between real and illusory, and argues that, in the midst of a random universe that allows for atrocities as unconceivable as the bombing of Dresden to happen, the distinction between truth and lie or sane and insane have been rendered irrelevant. The burning to death of tens of thousands of civilians should be a much more dramatic affront to human understanding than the existence of flying saucers from distant planets, so Vonnegut challenges a world in which the former is unhesitatingly accepted as a given while the second is conceived as a crazy, escapist fantasy. The nature of a postmodern reality determined by chaos theory, he argues, has declared the previous criteria by which humans made sense of reality, including the distinction between literary genres, obsolete; leaving people to define and fill the resulting "spiritual void" (Somer, "Geodesic" 227) with their own creations. Vonnegut, then, "seeks to characterize reality as science fiction and science fiction as reality" (Ketterer 206), and Billy Pilgrim should be read as an artist (S. E. Farrell 102) who uses the materials of science fiction to create a new, more humane aesthetic. Billy's endeavor is a creative means to find that "absolutely indispensable," even if illusory, ontological center alluded to by Derrida ("Structure" 250) that will allow him to survive and help others survive in an inhuman, alienating world. As Ketterer affirms,

> Since all that we know is a lie, and what truth there may be cannot be distinguished from lies, and since most of the lies to which we give assent are so unpleasant, uncomfortable, and destructive, lies that make for happiness or contentment . . .

are to be encouraged. Vonnegut is a propagandist for the virtues of schizophrenia. (307–308)

Throughout the 23-year writing process of *Slaughterhouse-Five,* Kurt Vonnegut progressively understood that "the recording of a personal and historical horror in the world of fact calls for an act of style and fantasy" (Klinkowitz, *Kurt Vonnegut* 63) and that a shockingly chaotic event such as the destruction of Dresden or, for that matter, the atrocities of Vietnam that filled news reels daily at the time the book was finally published, could not be contained within the confines of a traditional novel, and could only be approximated through science fiction. The framing chapters and occasional appearances of Vonnegut as a character throughout the narrative serve to distance him from Billy and explain that he does not necessarily embrace the protagonist's "so it goes" philosophy of conceptualizing death as an inevitable component of life that it is best to ignore. Vonnegut, after all, is determined to look back at Dresden, even when he is aware that "there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre" (*SH5* 18) and that it will only turn him into a pillar of salt (22) as wars are as easy to stop as glaciers (3). Billy's answer to the question of how to find a reason to go on living may not be the same as Vonnegut's, but the author nevertheless values how, like Bokonon in *Cat's Cradle,* the character recognizes that "Truth was the enemy of the people" (*CC* 172) and tries to find meaning among meaninglessness by transforming life into "a work of art" (175). Although in different terms, Vonnegut also resorts to artistic creation as his means to unearth a meaningful reason to live amidst chaos: he writes a novel which integrates Billy's new aesthetic into its structure and thus embraces "the ameliorative possibilities of art for preserving individuality and meaning in the face of tragic experience" (Coleman 681). Kirby Farrell writes that trauma is "a mind-blowing experience that destroys a conventional mindset and compels (or makes possible) a new worldview" (19). Instead of lingering on the destructive aspect of trauma, Vonnegut embraces its apocalyptic potential to open the door to a new consciousness, and *Slaughterhouse-Five* is his "exercise in catharsis" (Sumner 144) to realize that new vision by "moving away from frozen relations, isolation and fatalism toward human connection and the possibility of richer experience" (Coleman 695).

Just like the fictional character of Billy Pilgrim, Kurt Vonnegut had his own trauma to get over, too. From the already discussed haziness that he encountered when he attempted to survey his memory for clear recollections of Dresden and which, even after

completing *Slaughterhouse-Five,* impels him to dismiss the novel as a "short, jumble and jangled" (*SH5* 18) "failure" (22), to the inevitable questions of guilt aroused by the implications of Dresden being a city occupied by the Nazis, which compels the difficult and previously unsung necessity to portray the victimizers of the war as its victims, too, Vonnegut had to design his "own coping strategies and path of healing to deal with the horror of the Dresden air raids" (Vees-Gullani 181). Thus, the "unstuck in time" narrative structure of the novel works as a means for the author not to face his memories directly but to instead "get to the core by slowly uncovering layer after layer" (182). As his novels always proclaim, Vonnegut knows that there are no absolutes, no such thing as unquestionable truth, a notion which can only lead to the violent fanaticism that ignited the spark that burned down Dresden, so he willingly avoids to convey great morals or dictate keys to salvation and, instead, as a writer, chooses to do what he knows best: tell a story.

Psychiatrists assure that telling one's story is an essential step in the PTSD recovery process (Vees-Gullani 182) and for Vonnegut said process is inevitably bound to literary production, so his work becomes "an autotherapeutic undertaking" (Freese, "Man" 232). Acknowledging his own pain is the only means through which the author can come to terms with the meaninglessness of war, as the aim of therapy is "integration, not exorcism (Herman 181). Only by willingly recognizing chaos instead of resorting to despair or denial can the author resist the dehumanizing forces of war, history and randomness and "become a character" (Coleman 77) by asserting whatever free will he has through an act of literary creation that denounces how humans seem blindly committed to perpetuate pain and destruction. Writing a novel, of course, will not put an end to chaos and violence, but through telling his story, Vonnegut can "escape the paralysis of being unstuck in time" (Coleman 695) and embrace meaningful human contact by turning his trauma into a testimony. Testimony, Judith Herman explains, transforms individual experience into a social instrument that can be helpful in the healing process of others, as it combines a "private dimension, which is confessional and spiritual" with "a public aspect, which is political and judicial" (Herman 181).

Vonnegut would later declare, "I keep losing and regaining my equilibrium, which is the basic plot of all popular fiction," adding that "I myself am a work of fiction" (*WFG* xix). By placing himself at the narrative center of *Slaughterhouse-Five,* which stands as a public testimonial of said process of regaining mental equilibrium by transforming

trauma into a new world view, Vonnegut's novel fulfills a social role, namely "to teach the reader how to invent his world" (Freese, "Man" 232). Instead of suppressing or denying the traumatizing consequences of war, Vonnegut defends that the only means to survive in a postmodern reality is to "adapt ourselves to the requirements of chaos" (Allen 155), to develop, in Saul Bellow's phrase, "an ability to live with many kinds of madness" ("Nobel" 321) so that we can fulfill our "immense desire for certain durable human goods – truth, for instance, or freedom, or wisdom" (191). It comes as no surprise, then, that, in the face of the self-perpetrating cycles of human violence as epitomized by the Vietnam War, the novel's acceptance of the contradictory nature of reality and the way we make sense of it would be embraced by the youth of the sixties and seventies, who, according to Philip Deloria, were "bent on destroying an orthodoxy tightly intertwined with the notion of 'truth' and yet desperate for truth itself" (162) and that, after two decades in the writing trade, Vonnegut would finally be universally acclaimed for fulfilling the "mystique of the existential hero-author" (Ritter 90).

3.8 The death of the novel: Chaos applied to literature

Slaughterhouse-Five was a new kind of novel. An equally complex and accessible, sad and funny, realistic and science fictional book that epitomizes the contradictions of its time, seemingly answering Raymond Olderman's question: "If reality has become surrealistic, what must fiction do to be realistic?" (6) What Kurt Vonnegut proposes is that the fiction writer must reflect "the emptiness and psychic disorder of the times" by reinventing "the novel and its methods of order and reference so that it can remain, in fact, a form of realism, true to contemporary life" (Klinkowitz, *Kurt Vonnegut* 68). In its unique combination of autobiography and fiction to narrate an event so traumatic that it "neither be completely fictionalized nor simply repeated through an eyewitness account" (Vees-Gulani 180), as much as in its quick, vernacular-psychedelic style which enacts "a kind of linguistic guerrilla warfare" (Levine and Papasotiriou 126), and the earnestness of its narratorial voice's insistence on openly calling into question the worth of his own creation, *Slaughterhouse-Five* defies the conventions of literature, becoming "both a great work of popular science fiction and a 'postmodern' novel" (Bradbury, *Modern* 216). For Vonnegut, Ketterer claims, there are "no fixed criteria" aside from "life and death" (302), and so he discards distinctions

between literary genres, registers and hierarchies, worrying only about his novel's impetus to encourage life, to help his readers find hope and affirm a humane meaning in the midst of chaos. If Zamora claims that "Apocalyptic texts dramatize the decisive moment when an old world discovers a believable new world," and that "that new design may be the literary work itself" (177), then *Slaughterhouse-Five* is not only an apocalyptic novel, but also an apocalypse of the novel.

It seems fitting that *Slaughterhouse-Five* was published in the midst of a chaotic context of uncertainty and tension for literature, when many voices were proclaiming jeremiads about the future of the novel. In a 1972 interview, novelist Ronald Sukenick argued that "One of the reasons people have lost faith in the novel is that they don't believe it tells the truth anymore" (Bellamy, "Imagination" 60), as increasingly popular mediums such as television and cinema could lay claim to a more effective representation of reality than the printed word, which reflected in falling sales and growing difficulties for emerging novelists to make a living in the literary trade (2). Of course, the discussion about "the death of the novel" is an old one, a debate that, according to Doris Lessing, "has been going on since the novel was born" (13), but around the time of the publication of *Slaughterhouse-Five* it seemed more current than ever, which led critic Richard Poirier to claim that "Literature is now in the process of telling us how little it means" (qtd. in Graff 219). The concept of "the death of the novel" was first formulated in 1925 by José Ortega y Gasset, who claimed that "if not irrevocably exhausted," the novel had certainly "entered its last phase" (56), with the scarcity of possible subjects being such that writers must compensate it by focusing on "the exquisite quality of other elements that compose the body of a novel" (56). In 1967, John Barth sought to complete the process announced by Ortega y Gasset by declaring that literature was "exhausted" and novelists could only imitate previous works, repeating them in the form of "farce" ("Exhaustion" 79). As the chaos of American reality seemed to overcome the wildest imaginings of the human mind on a daily basis, Philip Roth argued that distress "weighs upon the writer no less, and perhaps even more, than upon his neighbor" and, through the resulting impotence, novelists are "apt to lose heart and turn finally to other matters, to the construction of wholly imaginary worlds, and to a celebration of the self" (46).

The apocalyptic environment was also fed by voices who saw the context of change as an opportunity for the novel to explore new directions. Thus, Tom Wolfe concludes his manifesto for the New Journalism claiming "Let chaos reign . . . All the old

traditions are exhausted and no new one is yet established . . . All bets are off!" (*New* 51). To John Hawkes, the new tradition should all but dispense of elements such as "plot, character, setting, and theme," which he claims are "the true enemies of the novel" (qtd. in Scholes 170), a notion shared by Barth in his description of the "Revolutionary Novel," which he claims should reject all these elements "in order to transcend the limitations of particularity" (*Chimera* 256). In a book titled *The Death of the Novel and Other Stories* (1969), Ronald Sukenick alludes to a chaotic world that no longer offers the stability of a clear metaphysical center, claiming that "God was the omniscient author, but he died: now no-one knows the plot" (41) and arguing that, having left the age of realism behind, literature in its conventional and canonical sense no longer existed, thus forcing the contemporary writer to "start from scratch" (41) by accommodating "the ongoing flow of experience, smashing anything that impedes his sense of it, even if it happens to be the novel" (*In Form* 206). For his part, Thomas Pynchon celebrated that "The Novel of Bullshit is dead and some kind of re-enlightenment is beginning to arrive, to take hold" (qtd. in Dalsgaard 32). The era seemed to be split in a tragic apocalyptic dichotomy between those who feared "the death of the novel" as a neo-apocalyptic point of no return and those that envisaged the promise of a literary New Jerusalem amid the collapse of traditional novelistic mores.

Never one to clearly take sides or issue statements, and always distrustful of the literary criticism establishment, Vonnegut not only enacts the new possibilities opening up for the novel in the style and structure of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, but incorporates the current debate about the literary genre's future into the novel's plot as well. Near the end of the book, Billy Pilgrim goes on air at a New York radio station with the intention of sharing his Tralfamadorian revelations with the general public. The topic of discussion for the day in the radio talk show is "whether the novel was dead or not" (*SH5* 205), and different critics present their suggestions as to what they believe "the function of the novel might be in modern society," which include "To provide touches of color in rooms with all white walls," "To describe blow-jobs artistically," and "To teach wives of junior executives what to buy next and how to act in a French restaurant" (206). By including such an open allusion to the controversy over "the death of the novel" in a book that in itself proposes the new direction that Vonnegut believes the novel should take, the author is making fun of both camps in the struggle, and commenting on how writers should stop theorizing and instead get back to writing the best book they can, as the future of the novel

is not created through critical manifestoes but through novels, and conventions are not defied by critiquing them, but by creating new, more adequate ones. Change within artistic modes is both inevitable and necessary, and the resistance to accept it stems from the fear of being left behind, of not fitting in with the new reality brought forth by an apocalyptic change of paradigm, as Vonnegut explains in his review of Joseph Heller's *Something Happened* (1974):

> To accept a new myth about ourselves is to simplify our memories and to place our stamp of approval on what might become an epitaph for our era in the shorthand of history. This, in my opinion, is why critics often condemn our most significant books and poems and plays when they first appear, while praising feebler creations. The birth of a new myth fills them with primitive dread, for myths are so effective. (*WFG* 122)

The novel, of course, did not die. Agreeing with Vonnegut's notion of its ever-evolving nature, Samuel Cohen explains that the novel is "more of a force than a fixed genre" (24) which has "from its inception devoured itself" (25) given that, as much as it allegedly holds "a mirror up to the world," it has forever "turned the mirror back on itself" (25) in a tendency towards self-reflection that can be traced back to sixteenth century Spanish picaresque and even "protonovels" such as the second century's *The Golden Ass* (25). The history of the novel, Frank Kermode says, "is a history of anti-novels" (131) which have constantly pushed the genre forward towards a more profound relationship with reality, and, as Wolfe elucidates, "When we talk about the 'rise' or 'death' of literary genres, we are talking about status, mainly" (*New* 50), which does not preclude the fact that "The system of narrative is self-regulating and will not tolerate a fictional vacuum" (Scholes 212). In other words, the novel will not die as long as authors like Kurt Vonnegut continue being intent on expanding its limits to accommodate the true essence of human experience. John Fowles jokes, "If the novel is dead, the corpse still remains oddly fertile" ("Notes" 149), because, in retrospect, what the passionate debates around the role, nature and future of the novel did was herald a "distinctive new era of style" in literature (Bradbury, *The Novel* 8), commonly referred to as postmodernism.

Linda Hutcheon explains that the postmodern is "a problematizing force in our culture" (xi) which raises questions about concepts that are generally taken as given, common-sensical or natural, and "never offers answers that are anything but provisional" (xi). Thus, the starting point of postmodernism is essentially the acknowledgement of

chaos; the acceptance of a "purely physical world" (Zamora 52) that makes no sense in human terms and cannot be understood through the anthropocentric paradigms and grand meta-narratives of the past. From that acceptance, the postmodernist imagination seeks to investigate reality, knowing that full knowledge and understanding are untenable illusions, and in the process becomes "an anarchic landscape of worlds in the plural" (McHale 37). In that sense, postmodernism is not an isolated literary trend but is actually "part of a larger enquiry into the nature of modern naming and narrative" (Bradbury, *Modern* 266), of a "quest by the late modern imagination to find discovering forms for presenting life and consciousness in our ever-changing and troubling world" (239).

By illuminating the unavoidably problematic nature of attempting to document reality, postmodernism reveals how all our meaning systems are generated (Rosen 124) and essentially operate as fictions which respond to "an ideological subtext which determines the conditions of the very possibility of their production of meaning" (Hutcheon xii). Even narratives which are not typically considered fictions such as history or news reports are essentially texts and thus operate as stories that mediate the world to introduce a particular meaning which is always "constructed and imposed rather than found" (Nicol 103). Therefore, postmodernism sets out to "strip away the fictions that govern our lives" (Rosen 175), unmasking previously unquestioned "official records" (McHale 96) as power instruments which act as "a way of perceiving the world that is also a fight to make the world over as one wants it to be" (Parrish 1) and emphasizing how "there are only *truths* in the plural, and never one Truth" (Hutcheon 110). In "The Discourse of History" (1967), Roland Barthes explains that even though, in the past, history was sanctioned almost as a science, "bound to the underlying standard of the 'real,' and justified by the principles of 'rational' exposition" ("Discourse" 7), in essence historiography, just like fiction, is composed of "narrative units (events, situations, utterances, and so on) which must be selected and ordered by a narrator, who is by definition partial, limited in the range of perspectives from which he can observe the narrative" (Nicol 101); a revelation which fundamentally equates the process of the historian with that of the novelist. Grand metanarratives like history and religion, hence, are rethought as human constructs, mere myths of order the access to which is conditioned by textuality, revealing how there are no absolutes and every aspect of reality is mediated and assimilated through the filter of personal interpretation.

Postmodernist literature, then, stems from a "firm belief in the contingency of meaning" (Deloria 180) and challenges the foundations of literary realism through the investigation of "ontological issues" (McHale xii) such as the nature of knowledge, reality and textuality. Bran Nicol explains that the fiction described as postmodernist is "far too diverse in style to be a genre" (xiv), so that it is better to consider it a particular aesthetic: "a sensibility, a set of principles, or a value-system which unites specific currents in the writing of the latter half of the twentieth century" (xvi). Perhaps the main, unifying creed of this aesthetic is a rejection of, or at least a skepticism towards, traditional literary realism, which "cannot be made to work for our time" as "the writing of it is anachronistic, invalid, irrelevant, and perverse" (B. S. Johnson 153), and has even become another "form of complicity" (Graff 217) to perpetuate old structures of power. Postmodernist literature thus "calls into question the claims of literature and art to truth and human value" (Graff 219), as it insists on how reality cannot be fully transcribed into words because it is unknowable, the portrayal of it only accessible to human beings through inexorably biased metaphors, and therefore "There is no point in carefully creating fiction that gives an illusion of life when life itself seems illusory" (Lodge 108).

The upshot of reality being understood as a fiction, a discourse which is essentially constructed and mediated, is that fiction becomes "a crucial element of human knowledge, a central function of the mind" which stands as "the ultimate game for which all other games are metaphors" (Ickstadt 210). Given full credit as the main instrument through which we perceive and understand reality, fiction is finally free to assert its potential as "more than a representation of life but a making of life" (Bradbury, *The Novel* 1). Rather than attempting to reproduce reality, postmodernist novelists dramatize the processes through which we experience and make sense of it, doing away with conventions and embracing formal experimentation as "the *sine qua non* of a greater realism" (Butor 50) that may serve to "find more subtle correspondences between the reality which is fiction and the fiction which is reality" (Scholes 8) in a chaotic world beyond certainties. To this effect, Jean-François Lyotard argues that,

> A postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by preestablished rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgment, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work. Those rules and categories are what the work of art itself is looking for. (81)

Thus, postmodernist literature celebrates fragmentation and embraces play, reveling on the apocalyptic moment of transformation in which the old rules have been deemed obsolete and a new paradigm has not yet been implanted. Acknowledging how, in Kurt Vonnegut's words, "Truth" can often be "the enemy of the people" (*CC* 172) whereas "Lies told for the sake of artistic effect . . . can be, in a higher sense, the most beguiling forms of truth" (*CC* ix–x), postmodernism embraces formal and thematic invention to attain an "imaginative transformation" (Klinkowitz, *Disruptions* 32) of the world in pursue of "a new consciousness" (Hassan, *Contemporary* 26) that may entitle humanity to assert more humane meanings through fiction. Freed by the demystification of absolute realities to "try all the literary variants" and "make a virtue of the provisionality of all discourse" (Bradbury, *Modern* 207), the postmodernist novel ignores the dogmatic distinction between elite and popular culture, cooking an unprecedented stew of genres, styles, and registers and placing its highest premium on "art and joy" (Scholes 3) in a way that dismisses modernism's "angst-wracked concern with psychological depth" as "middlebrow, adolescent, as passé as existentialism" (Reynolds 345). Ultimately, postmodernism proves how, in the words of Leslie Fiedler,

> The long-predicted death of the novel turns out to be the death of the Art Novel, the "poetic" novel read by an elite audience to whom high literature represents chiefly the opportunity of verifying their own special status in a world of slobs committed to the consumption of "mass culture." ("Divine Stupidity" 6)

Kurt Vonnegut, whose novels defy categorization in their "farrago of literary syntaxes" (Schulz 15) which combine multiple fictional modes, from science fiction to satirical novel of manners, self-reflective autobiography and journalistic minimalism, stands as one of the quintessential practitioners of this experimental, self-questioning aesthetic labelled postmodernism, whose most "inventive and daring representatives," according to Bradbury, are American writers of the late-sixties (*Modern* 198). Vonnegut's books downplay the conventions of literary realism in their peculiar dismissal of suspenseful plots—"A Vonnegut novel is not read to find out what will happen; we are often told that on the first page," Lorna Jowett clarifies (137)—as much as in their fantastically grotesque and science fictional imagery.[53] Through their "radical

[53] It is no coincidence that the first significant critical examination of Vonnegut's work appeared in Robert Scholes' *The Fabulators* (1967), an early study of American postmodernist writers which argued that "good fiction" must "provide us with an imaginative experience which is necessary to our imaginative well-being" (24).

juxtapositions of space fantasy and homely everyday existence," Vonnegut's novels reflect the chaotic, "TV montage reality of contemporary life" in a unique style that Jess Ritter terms "social surrealism" (43), and with his characteristic sense of humor and refusal to be solemn even when discussing topics like history, religion and war, the author clearly embodies the postmodernist stance of viewing even the most sacred institutions as arbitrary constructions which should be subject to questioning and laughter. Through all of these trademarks, Vonnegut expresses his desire to shift from "a historical to an anthropological perspective" (Ickstadt 210) where the humane will be the only yardstick to measure life, and tackles a comic apocalyptic duty to divest his readers from "the habit of attempting to order experience in terms of the old cosmology" and instead "adapt to the requirements of chaos" (Nadeau 130).

Already in his first and most conventionally plotted novel, *Player Piano,* Vonnegut shows signs of his experimental tendencies, as James M. Mellard defends that the author "no doubt felt about Jamesian fiction what Paul [Proteus] was beginning to feel about his brave new world" (183) and, just as the main character leads a revolution to overthrow the machine state, "The object of Vonnegut's literary technique in the novel, similarly, is the overthrow of literary conventions of visual imagery, continuous plotting, connected characterization, uniform point of view" (176). As his sentences and chapters grow shorter, his narrative lines more disjointed, his authorial voice more intrusive, and a characteristic tendency towards pastiche means that, at any given point, the narrative can be interrupted by a short play, a song, a deliberately amateur felt-tip pen drawing or, in the case of *Deadeye Dick,* even a set of detailed recipes, the author insists on pushing conventions even further. In *Cat's Cradle,* Vonnegut goes so far as to downright rejecting the novel as "the Western act which, more than any other, finds meaning in history" (Meeter 202) by crafting "a comic investigation of epistemology" (Schatt 67) which invites the reader to laugh in the face of the delusion of meaning. His interrogation of history and humanity's narrow, pathologically self-centered perspective, continues in his science fiction novels, which present humanity as an insignificant speck of dust in the universe, and culminate in *Galápagos,* which proposes human history as just a brief, anecdotal episode within the full narrative arc of life on Earth.

Vonnegut's vision of what art should be is perhaps best exemplified in his novel *Bluebeard* through the juxtaposition of the characters of Dan Gregory, the realist painter who considers modern art "the work of swindlers and lunatics and degenerates" who are

to blame for how "the world has gone mad" (147) and Rabo Karabekian, the abstract expressionist who paints pictures "about absolutely nothing but themselves" (9). Susan E. Farrell explains that, for Vonnegut, "Gregory's delusions of moral grandeur cause bloodshed and suffering," while abstract art, which can be read as a pictorial analogy of postmodernism itself, "refuses to present a moral stance on the world" (104), leaving that prerogative to the reader. The author's refusal to impose a moral stance is best reflected in his practice of what David Lodge calls the "problematic novel" (105), a type of narrative whereby self-aware novelists hesitate over the decision of what path to choose at the "crossroads" posed by the postmodern dilemma of the "death of the novel" and decide to "*build their hesitation into the novel itself*" (105), resulting in a work of literature that does not offer "any simple or reassuring message or meaning" and instead stands as "a paradox about the relation of art to life" (105). As I have discussed, *Slaughterhouse-Five* is perhaps the most famous example of this type of "problematic novel" in the Vonnegut canon, as the author incorporates the process of overcoming the difficulty to voice his own war trauma into the novel's plot, but it is a model that would become one of his trademarks through *Breakfast of Champions* and up to his last novel, *Timequake*, which stems from Vonnegut's recognition of his own writer's block—"And then I found myself in the winter of 1996 the creator of a novel which did not work, which had no point, which had never wanted to be written in the first place" (*TQ* xi)—and invites the reader along in a process meant to "fillet the fish" (xii) and use the salvageable parts to write a new novel, referred to as *Timequake Two,* which features constant allusions to the relinquished original.

In *Slaughterhouse-Five,* Vonnegut develops what has been hailed as his "manifesto for postmodern fiction" (Bradbury, *Modern* 216) in the form of his description of Tralfamadorian novels. In an often-quoted passage of the novel, the inhabitants of Tralfamadore explain to Billy Pilgrim that their novels are "laid out in brief clumps of symbols separated by stars," with each clump being

> A brief, urgent message—describing a situation, a scene. We Tralfamadorians read them all at once, not one after the other. There isn't any particular relation between all the messages, except that the author has chosen them carefully, so 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 effect. What we love in our books are the depths of many marvelous moments seen all at one time. (88)

Robert Nadeau explains that the cul-de-sac of the postmodernist novel is that, while it claims to reject the conventions of an outmoded realism, it nevertheless "relies wholly upon metaphysically based conceptions on the nature of space and time that have structured the novel from the very beginning" (190). Novelists are free to address their defiance of literary traditions in their themes but unable to create "a fictive landscape in which the metaphysics commensurate with new physics is pervasive and implicit throughout" (183) both in form and technique by avoiding conventions such as plotting, structure, dialogue, description or even words themselves. Richard Gray states that "what is acknowledged is not always enacted" (51), and the inescapable paradox of postmodernist writing is that "the imaginative artist who invents a new set of conventions in accord with an alternative metaphysics would not appear to be writing novels at all" (Nadeau 184). However, Nadeau claims that, through his description of Tralfamadorian novels, Kurt Vonnegut alone "has arrived at a conception of plot which, as thought experiment, at least, is commensurate with the metaphysics implied in the new physics" (194); utilizing science fiction to foresee an artistic apocalypse whereby literature can finally be able to adapt to the requirements of chaos and reflect experience as it is.[54]

Still, no matter how obtuse the notions he is trying to convey or the literary experiments he conducts, as Vonnegut is "always careful to avoid the solipsism which made many of his fellow innovators lose their audiences" (Freese, "Man" 237). Comparing his craft to architecture (his father's trade), the author explains that his dream is to create "a dwelling as no one has ever seen before, but which at the same time proves to be eminently habitable" (*FWD* 55), and for such intent he never forgets that "any fictional discourse is dependent on the reader" (Freese, "Man" 237), and that just as the ultimate ambition of an architect must be for his building to be functional and comfortable, so, too the "image of life that is beautiful and surprising and deep" conjured

[54] Even though the novel does not intend to replicate the hypothetical style of Tralfamadorian novels, Robert Lundquist still understands that, in the fragmented structure of *Slaughterhouse-Five,* Vonnegut attempts to overcome the loss of metaphysical stability in the second half of the twentieth century by creating a new novel commensurate with a new reality, which aims to provide stability where there is none, arguing that "through the constant movement back and forth in time that constitutes Vonnegut's narrative, we see Billy becoming his history, existing all at once, as if he is an electron." This, according to Lundquist, "gives the novel a structure that is, to directly state the analogy, atomic" (74).

through his "harmless untruths" must be accessible and enjoyable, as "Literature, unlike any other form, requires those who enjoy it to be performers" (*FWD* 55). His awareness of this fact leads Vonnegut to develop a distinctively personal and close narrative voice that is perhaps the main key to his mass appeal, and he does so through what is perhaps the most representative of postmodernist techniques: metafiction.

3.9 "I was on par with the Creator of the Universe": The metafictional paradigm of *Breakfast of Champions*

As the translation of reality into words comes to be understood as an unattainable illusion and audiovisual media assert their authority to capture experience in a more reliable way than literature, B. S. Johnson claims that "the only thing the novelist can with any certainty call exclusively his own is the inside of his own skull," and concludes that "that is what he should be exploring, rather than anachronistically fighting a battle he is bound to lose" (152). Kurt Vonnegut had already experimented with a clearly self-conscious narratorial voice in his non-fiction articles for magazines such as *Esquire* and *Harper's* during the fifties and sixties, which brought him close to the New Journalism,[55] but it is in *Slaughterhouse Five* that he finally incorporates himself into his fiction as an integral component of the novel, "making himself present as its author and furthermore making that act of authorship a key part of the narrative itself" (Klinkowitz, *America* 53). This delving into the writing process as the subject of fiction is the development that would finally bring Vonnegut literary success and popular fame (53), as the subject of his novels increasingly became his own self-consciousness through his reliance on metafictional strategies.

Metafiction allows Vonnegut to create a personal, recognizable voice that readers can identify with, but it is first and foremost a technique used to cancel illusion by highlighting a text's status as a fictional construct. As the fictional world "acquires a

[55] "Am I a New Journalist? I guess," Vonnegut himself writes in the preface to his first non-fiction collection *Wampeters, Foma & Granfalloons* (xvii). In it, he praises the New Journalism as "the literary equivalent of Cubism," and describes it as a technique that allows writers to break rules and "see luminous new aspects of beloved old truths" (234). Nevertheless, utilizing a tellingly science-fictional argument, Vonnegut ultimately aligns himself with fiction rather than journalism: "The New Journalist isn't free to tell nearly as much as a fiction writer, to *show* as much. There are many places he can't take his reader, whereas the fiction writer can take the reader anywhere, including the planet Jupiter, in case there's something worth seeing there" (xviii).

visible maker," Brian McHale explains, "its own status must inevitably change, too: it has become less the mirror of nature, more an *artifact*, visibly a *made* thing" (30). Akin to the Russian Formalist concept of "baring the device" by "foregrounding the machinery which perpetuates the illusion of fiction" (Nicol 37), metafictional self-reference acts as an extension of the postmodernist mistrust of narratives that appeal to a supposedly truthful status. By referencing itself and the writing process behind it, a fictional text flaunts its nature as fiction, cancelling the suspension of disbelief that is key to literary realism, and instead presenting itself as an artificial construction which cannot be accepted at face value. Metafiction, thus, allows postmodernist literature to become an "illusion-breaking art" (McHale 220) which indirectly implies that every aspect of reality is mediated, serving to "unmask the fictions by which we live by calling attention to the process of storifying itself" (Rosen 123). Through his insistence on utilizing a distinctive authorial voice that introduces details of his own personal life and his writing process into his fiction, Vonnegut never allows readers to forget his status as author as well as that of the text as a fictional creation, forcing them to "continually confront the artifice" (64) that is at the heart of any form of narrative discourse. All of our hierarchies of thought are made up of words, of metaphors and illusions—of lies, essentially—Vonnegut implies, and therefore we must be careful with the narratives that we accept as true and choose to perpetuate.

The motto of modernist writing, McHale explains, might as well have been "exit author" (199), as writers like Joseph Conrad and James Joyce sought to remove the traces of their presence as mediators to make their texts more akin to real experience. Paradoxically, however, McHale explains that their strategies of self-effacement actually call attention to the role of "the author as *strategist*" (199), which makes their presence ever-more conspicuous. Conversely, through metafictional techniques postmodernism seeks to bring the author back to prominence by highlighting his role as creator. However, McHale explains that "if modernist self-effacement is a form of self-advertisement, then, by the logic of paradox, self-advertisement is conversely a form of self-effacement" (199) and argues that the motto of postmodernist writing should consequently be borrowed from the title of Roland Barthes' influential 1968 essay: "The Death of the Author." As the romantic myth of the author as creative genius is substituted by the recognition of "a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash" ("Death" 146), Barthes argues that personal interpretation is the key to the creation

of meaning in fiction; a meaning that is no longer authoritatively dictated by the author but perceived and filtered through what Ihab Hassan calls the "kaleidoscope of our consciousness, a changing and many-colored thing" (*Contemporary* 169). Thus, Barthes famously concludes his essay stating that "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" ("Death" 148), as both become tantamount in their status as co-creators of the meaning of a text. Cancelling the hypnotizing illusion of make-believe that rendered readers passive consumers of fiction as an escapist distraction, postmodernist metafiction invites the reader to participate in the creative process and incites him to action as, "instead of allowing him to escape the truth of his own life, [it] keeps returning him to it but, one hopes, with his own imagination activated and revitalized (Sukenick, *In Form* 25).

The catch of metafiction comes for the author himself, as "the artist represented in the act of creation or destruction is himself inevitably a fiction" (McHale 30). McHale calls the penetration of an artist into his text "*trompe-l'oeil*" (215), as the author instantly becomes a character as fictional as any other, and argues that the autobiographical character who is at the same time a godlike author is completely impossible, as "the ontological barrier between an author and the interior of his fictional world is absolute, impenetrable" (215). *Slaughterhouse-Five* made Kurt Vonnegut well aware of this fact, as the unprecedented success of the novel meant that he was suddenly hailed as something which he was not; the character created by his metafictional voice threatening to overtake the author himself. His own nephew Tiger Adams recalls how,

> He was sort of the darling of the hippie movement in the sixties and the seventies and he was like hipper than any of his kids. And he really wasn't, he just kind of had that image. And the image was created obviously from his writing. People who saw his lectures had no idea what he was like other than from his writing. So he sort of, I think, felt obligate to portray what he wrote about. (qtd. in Shields 302–303)

Practically overnight, Vonnegut's life "turned upside down" (Wakefield, *Letters* 152). After twenty years receiving almost no recognition for his writing, he suddenly felt scrutinized like "an animal in a wicker cage" (Shields 285), under enormous pressure to write a follow-up to the most successful novel of his career and shocked to find that the ultimate consequences of him including personal details in his metafiction were that many now considered his life a subject for criticism as legitimate as his work. According to

fellow writer David R. Slavitt, Vonnegut had "willfully blurred the distinction most of us keep between our work and our lives, having put yourself into your work and having made yourself into a literary subject" (qtd. in Shields 356). Feeling as "an American fad—of a slightly higher order than the hula hoop" (Wakefield, *Letters* 166) and experiencing James Baldwin's dictum that "If you really want to know what loneliness is, then become famous" (190), Vonnegut resolved to take his metafictional impulse to the extreme by building his personal chaos into his next novel. In 1972, he wrote that "for better or for worse, I have always rigged my stories so as to include myself, and I can't stop now" (*BTT* xv). The following year's *Breakfast of Champions* would become the apex of Vonnegut's postmodernism; a novel designed by the author as a desperate attempt "to clear my head of all the junk in there" (*BOC* 5), which, inadvertently, would act as an apocalyptic process of renewal that would allow him to illuminate the path to move from chaos to creation.

Vonnegut builds all his personal anxiety in the aftermath of *Slaughterhouse-Five* into the narrative frame of *Breakfast of Champions,* a novel in which he not only flaunts his role as creator of the fiction and the characters that inhabit it but also inserts himself into the narrative as yet another character, thus epitomizing Lodge's concept of the "problematic novel" (105). Through a disquietingly confessional authorial voice, the author addresses his fragile psychological state—"There in the cocktail lounge," he writes, "peering out through my leaks at a world of my own invention, I mouthed this word: *schizophrenia*" (*BOC* 198)—openly questioning the quality of the novel itself and even discussing his mother's death and his own suicidal instincts:

> "This is a very bad book you're writing," I said to myself behind my *leaks.*
> "I know," I said.
> "You're afraid you'll kill yourself the way your mother did," I said.
> "I know," I said. (198)

Just like the writing of *Slaughterhouse-Five* allowed Vonnegut to voice his trauma as a survivor of the bombing of Dresden, *Breakfast of Champions* attempts to function as a cathartic process to "make my head as empty as it was when I was born onto this damaged planet 50 years ago," by clearing his mind of the narratives that have been implanted in it and which "are out of proportion with life as it really is outside my head" (5). To do so, the author once again resorts to science fiction, retelling the history of the United States as if through the detached perspective of an alien observer who, free from

subtexts, connotations and biases, can portray the senseless violence of the country's history and the arbitrary meaninglessness of its cultural symbols. These symbols are further deconstructed through deliberately amateurish ball-pen drawings which, subverting Pop Art's desire to "make ordinary banalities take on a new, mysterious, totemic meaning" (Schatt 101), portray the empty essence of elements, from flags to everyday objects and symbols which are inescapably linked to hundreds of connotations in our subconscious, hence exposing the fabricated nature of culture and how all our mental processes to create meaning respond to deeply embedded narratives which privilege a particular vision of reality and history. Vonnegut thus seeks to expose the processes of how sociopolitical meanings are ideologically shaped through metanarratives of power, politics and consumerism, and his deadpan chronicle of American history in *Breakfast of Champions* is in accordance with Linda Hutcheon's concept of "historiographic metafiction" (5), as the author seeks not only to critique history as a fiction, but also to rewrite what he considers to be a more accurate form of history through his own fiction. As Timothy Parrish acknowledges, "One resists the truth of a given history not only by labeling it as false but also by writing, or enacting, a counterhistory in narrative form" (2), an idea clearly shared by Vonnegut in his assertion that the cleansing process of clearing "all the junk" from their heads is something "most white Americans . . . should do" (*BOC* 5).

History, writes Heinz Ickstadt, is "a form of narrative discourse by which formal coherence is imposed on a 'virtual chaos of events'" (210), just like art can be defined as "the imposition of human order upon chaos" (Graff 236). In *Breakfast of Champions*, Vonnegut rejects both as "old-fashioned" models of storytelling (*BOC* 214), as he claims that, by implying that life has main and secondary characters, morals and fair retributions for human actions, they create expectations of harmony and meaning that simply cannot be satisfied and only lead to frustration and violence as exemplified by a contemporary American culture marked by loneliness, compulsive consumerism and inequality. The author thus resolves to subvert the Jamesian principles of artistic selection and ordering in order to create "as perfect a work" as possible (H. James, "The Art of Fiction"), to instead rejoice in imperfection by creating a new literary form that "is not premised upon a belief in the hierarchy of being and makes no suggestion that a rational scheme or design is at work in experience" (Nadeau 130). Vonnegut's quintessentially postmodernist "anti-novel" (Schatt 98) will attempt to reflect the essence of life exactly as it is:

> Once I understood what was making America such a dangerous, unhappy nation of people who had nothing to do with real life, I resolved to shun storytelling. I would write about life. Every person would be exactly as important as any other. All facts would also be given equal weightiness. Nothing would be left out. Let other bring order to chaos. I would bring chaos to order, instead, which I think I have done. (*BOC* 215)

Breakfast of Champions, therefore, attempts to fulfill what Samuel Beckett, in a 1961 interview, defines as the task of the postmodernist artist, namely to create a "new form" which "will be of such a type that it admits the chaos, and does not try to say that the chaos is really something else" (qtd. in Lodge 156). Again, Vonnegut asserts that the chaotic nature of existence cannot be disregarded, as only through its acknowledgement can the apocalyptic process of arriving at a new creation be completed. By integrating chaos into the form of fiction, an author has the potential of perpetuating the evolution of the novel into a form truer to human experience while, at the same time, making a "statement which attempts to change society towards a condition he conceives to be better" (B. S. Johnson 156). In his commitment to bring "chaos to order," Vonnegut accepts dislocation, contradiction and meaninglessness as integral parts of life, and proposes that only through the displacement of traditional illusions of order that seek to ignore those forces, human beings might uncover new ways to confront their nature which will allow them to transform violence and existential despair into a more nourishing relationship with themselves and their environment.

To further fulfill his commitment to create fiction which stands as a more faithful reflection of the nature of life, Vonnegut denies his novel the privilege of an ending, echoing the Tralfamadorian vision of eternal time in *Slaughterhouse-Five* by presenting life as an endless cycle which continues even beyond death, which seldom offers a neat narrative finale because life simply goes on, indifferent to the passing of individuals as their narratives, prejudices and ideals continue to be perpetuated. "The proper ending for any story about people it seems to me, since life is now a polymer in which the Earth is wrapped so tightly," he writes, "should be . . . etc." (*BOC* 234), which subsequently becomes the final word in the last chapter of the book. Brian McHale argues that, in its foregrounding of ontological themes and structure, postmodernist fiction is "*always* about death," as death is "the one ontological boundary that we are all certain to experience, the only one we shall inevitably have to cross" (231). As an apocalyptic writer, however,

Vonnegut is prone to address the nature of finality itself, apocalypse being a doctrine that "mocks the notion of conclusive ends an endings even as it proposes just that—the conclusive narration of history's end" (Zamora 17). Thus, adopting the cosmic perspective afforded by science fiction which he developed in novels such as *The Sirens of Titan* and *Slaughterhouse Five*, which present life on Earth as a mere anecdote amid the unfathomable vastness of the universe, and acknowledging the constant cycle of evolution that would be the central element of *Galápagos*, Vonnegut answers the fictional cul-de-sac of what John Fowles labelled "the tyranny of the last chapter" (*The French Lieutenant's Woman*, 390) by concluding that, just like life has no logical, tidy and revelatory endings that offer the resolution of a traditional novelistic finale, fiction that seeks to represent the true essence of life should never end, and simply acknowledge the continuity of life with "etc." or "and so on," which would be the final words of the follow-up to *Breakfast of Champions*, *Slapstick* (274).

As history is acknowledged to be a fiction, and the potential to make history is recognized in fiction, *Breakfast of Champions* presents the novelist as a being "on par with the Creator of the Universe" (*BOC* 205), whose powers are akin to that of a science fiction character or even an apocalyptic God. Writers have the potential to create reality, and they should be aware of how said capacity can serve to perpetuate the fundamentalist metanarratives of history, politics and religion, to which fictional realism indirectly acts as an accomplice. By exposing fictions as metaphorical constructs through science fiction and metafictional techniques, Vonnegut escapes the illusion of reality afforded by the suspension of disbelief and instead "sanctifies the creative resources of the human imagination as a constructive force" (Klinkowitz, *Kurt Vonnegut* 69). The author never allows his narratives to be mistaken for bedrock truth, as he understands that, aiming to fulfill their comic apocalyptic purpose of illuminating a more humane future, said narratives "must remain properly *fictional* for the magic to work" (Klinkowitz, *Kurt Vonnegut* 18). To further reinforce how his writing process is subject to his own all-too-human fallibility and contingent upon the essentially random nature of life, in *Breakfast of Champions* Vonnegut describes the process whereby he himself receives an unexpected revelation from a fictional character of his own device.

Said character is Rabo Karabekian, the minimalist painter for whose creative work Vonnegut initially claims to have "no respect whatsoever" (*BOC* 214), but whose impassioned defense of human awareness surprises even the author himself, who

ultimately labels it "the spiritual climax of this book" (224); an episode which Vonnegut did not expect or even plan, and which dramatically alters the narrative course of the novel and the author's own psychic state.[56] Able to attribute this transformative revelation only to the most essential component of existence, Vonnegut concedes that "Chaos announced that it was about to give birth to a new me by putting these words into the mouth of Rabo Karabekian" (224), who, confronted by the patrons of the Tally-Ho Room, incensed after the Midland City council spends fifty thousand dollars on his painting *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*, a twenty feet wide and sixteen feet high canvas painted in *Hawaiian Avocado* green with a thin, Day-Glo orange reflecting tape (*BOC* 213), contends,

> I now give you my word of honor, . . . that the picture your city owns shows everything about life which truly matters, with nothing left out. It is a picture of the awareness of every animal. It is the immaterial core of every animal—the 'I am' to which all messages are sent. It is all that is alive in any of us – in a mouse, in a deer, in a cocktail waitress. It is unwavering and pure, not matter what preposterous adventure may befall us. A sacred picture of Saint Anthony alone is one vertical, unwavering band of light. If a cockroach were near him, or a cocktail waitress, the picture would show two such bands of light. Our awareness is all that is alive and maybe sacred in any of us. Everything else about us is dead machinery. (*BOC* 226)

Karabekian's unexpected revelation about the sacred nature of all beings as "unwavering bands of light," though probably opportunistic considering the cynical nature of the character throughout the rest of the book, is received as a shock by Vonnegut, who previously had "come to the conclusion that there was nothing sacred about myself or about any human being, that we were machines, doomed to collide and collide and collide" (229). At what might as well be considered the peak of his metafictional technique, the author receives an apocalyptic revelation from his character which leads

[56] To reason how a character of his own device can surprise him with an unpredicted gesture, Vonnegut concedes, "Here was the thing about my control over the characters I created: I could only guide their movements approximately, since they were such big animals. There was inertia to overcome. It wasn't as though I was connected to them by steel wires. It was more as if I was connected to them by stale rubberbands" (*BOC* 207).

him to admit that his life was "renewed by the words of Rabo Karabekian" (229),[57] and although, as Sumner notes, "Rabo's epiphany . . . about the awareness that makes human life worth living is often lost amid the book's downbeat, riotous satire" (169), it probably stands as the key to understand the Vonnegut's progress from chaos to creation. Said key stems from the embracing of the chaotic contradiction at the heart of human nature, equally powerless in the immutable face of death, which unifies all beings in its randomness and denial of meaningful conclusions, and capable of shaping life at will via the infinite power of their imagination.

Through the awareness that makes them "unwavering bands of light," all human beings are entitled to the creative potential to transform reality that allowed Billy Pilgrim and Kurt Vonnegut to go on living after being exposed to the cruelest of human instincts in Dresden. Each person houses the flawed, "mother night" tendencies that lead to fundamentalism and war, but, at the same time, we treasure the creative potential that heals wounds and creates constructive meanings that allow us to find fulfillment amidst the senseless chaos of existence. Moved by the revelation of the creative potential within each individual, Vonnegut's aim in *Breakfast of Champions* becomes the achievement of a "visionary end" (Hassan, *Contemporary* 47), as he bids readers to "to harmonize our schizophrenic halves" (Somer, "Geodesic" 231) in order to fulfill our comic apocalyptic potential to make the world over in a more humane manner through an imaginative act. The author wishes to reform "human consciousness even at the expense of [his] own art" (Hassan, *Contemporary* 21), a desire which is realized in the novel's epilogue, in which Vonnegut breaks the final ontological barrier of fiction by approaching his most famous character, hack science fiction writer Kilgore Trout, to inform him of how "I'm your Creator" and "You're in the middle of a book right now" (*BOC* 299). Vonnegut tells Trout

[57] It is probably no coincidence that Karabekian is an Abstract Expressionist painter, a movement which stands as a clear artistic precedent of postmodernism in its practitioners' determination to "turn from the representation of the public world to the expression of the private realm" illuminating "new ways of seeing" in an urge to find "meanings that felt truer to their experience" (Levine and Papasotiriou 92), and, just like metafiction, does so by "foregrounding . . . the *act* of artistic creation" (Wilford 280). In a 1983 essay about Jackson Pollock for *Esquire* magazine, Vonnegut celebrates Abstract Expressionistic paintings "without persons or artifacts, without even allusions to the "blessings of Nature" as the most "appropriate reaction by painters to World War II, to the death camps and Hiroshima and all the rest of it" (*FWD* 44) and, in a passage that calls to mind his own accidental revelation through Karabekian's words in *Breakfast of Champions*, he praises how "Like all great jazz musicians, Pollock made himself a champion and connoisseur of the appealing accidents which more formal artists worked hard to exclude from their performances" (44). In *Bluebeard*, the 1987 novel devoted entirely to the character of Rabo Karabekian, Vonnegut hails Abstract Expressionistic paintings as being "about absolutely nothing but themselves" (*BB* 9), which can be read as an analogy to his resolution to shun storytelling and write about life in *Breakfast of Champions*.

that he has resolved to "set at liberty all the literary characters who have served me so loyally during my writing career" (*BOC* 301) and implores him to "Arise, Mr. Trout, you are free, you are *free*" (301).[58] Thus, Vonnegut risks the prospects of his future writing career in the altruistic pursuit of humanizing his character, of conceding him the free will that will allow him to make his own choices and create his own reality freed from the reins of his creator, who is determined not to "put on any more puppet shows" (5). Through his final admonition of "*Bon voyage*" to Trout (301), Vonnegut enacts the apocalyptic rite of initiation that he thinks all human beings should perform in order to survive in a meaningless, contradictory universe determined by chaos. In said rite, the first step of acknowledging our limitations as "listless playthings of enormous forces" (*SH5* 164) must be followed by an embrace of the infinite creative potential of the human imagination as a comic apocalyptic tool to transform reality.

Through the metafictional recognition of fiction as a healing force in *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Breakfast of Champions*, Vonnegut's literature illuminates a path for its own creator to finally embrace a life that is synonymous with chaos. Karen and Charles Wood explain that "Vonnegut must turn to his own world, create his own reality, because the cohesiveness of reality which has been the goal of writers for centuries has not materialized" (150), and even if this turns the writer into a "a propagandist for the virtues of schizophrenia" (Ketterer 307), it still allows him to show his readers a way to awake from the nightmarish burden of human history into a more humane and bearable reality, which Kermode claims is the ultimate aim of the "modern apocalypticist" (121). History and reality may be fictions, but we are forced to inhabit those fictions day by day, so escaping from them into anguish or denial is no option, as Gerald Graff explains that "In a society increasingly irrational and barbaric, to regard the attack on reason and

[58] Brian McHale considers this encounter a parable for the interaction between postmodernist writing and science fiction which, as "the ontological genre *par excellence*" serves as "a source of materials and models for postmodernist writers" (16): "The Kurt Vonnegut who projects himself into the world of his novel in order to interview—and liberate!—his own character is practicing romantic irony, and thereby aligning himself with the postmodernist revival of romantic irony. So Trout, archetypical science fiction writer, alter ego of the 'early' Vonnegut, meets the 'later,' postmodernist Vonnegut – what could be more symbolic? Particularly since the occurrence of such a meeting in itself exhibits the postmodernism of *BOC*. Spokesman of one of the genre of ontological poetics, Trout finds himself inside a text belonging to the other ontological genre—this is the relation of science fiction to postmodernist writing, in a nutshell" (72). Nevertheless, in an ironically metafictional twist, McHale reveals how "The paradox, of course, is that by setting him free, Vonnegut reveals his character's *un*freedom," which he considers "a paradigmatic postmodernist moment of ontological short-circuit" (214).

objectivity as the basis of our radicalism is to perpetuate the nightmare we want to escape" (249). Instead, we must carefully select the fictions that we choose to live by, because if nothing can be hailed as ultimately true, then nothing is ultimately *untrue* either, and therefore people are free to use the creative potential of their awareness to perpetuate humane fictions that reassure life as the sole thing that is sacred in the world. The human mind does not house the potential to dethrone chaos, but it does have the power to recognize it and use it to its own advantage, embracing its infinite possibilities to transform the world for the better. Umberto Eco writes that every text is "a machine for producing possible worlds" (*Role* 246); as a writer, Kurt Vonnegut recognizes his potential to create a better world, and as a *postmodernist* writer, he recognizes how he can translate that potential to his readers as co-creators of meaning in his texts, thus inciting a comic apocalyptic process to transform chaos into creation through "harmless untruths" (*CC* vii). As Vonnegut himself concludes, "We are here for no purpose, unless we can invent one. Of that I am sure" (*JB* 301).

4. CREATION

4.1 How chaos unlocks the door to a new creation

Although born out of a context of crisis and grounded in an acknowledgement of chaos, Kurt Vonnegut's literature is, first and foremost, a fiction of hope. Far from being the "cynic, fatalist, quietist, or nihilist" that he has often been characterized as (Coleman 681), Vonnegut actually belongs to what John R. May terms "a purer strain of apocalyptic writers, a tradition that imagines the worst because it believes in something better" (*Toward* 192). As such, his novels are apocalyptic not only in the modern, colloquial sense of imagining the end of the world, but also in the traditional connotation of responding to an urge to make sense amidst chaos, tackling moral concerns with the aim of fostering change in a period of deep social crisis. Rosen claims that the ultimate aim of the apocalyptic writer is to find "an organizing structure that can create a moral and physical order while also holding out the possibility of social criticism that might lead to a reorientation in the midst of a bewildering historical moment" (xiii), and thus Vonnegut sets out in search of a new philosophy of life that will allow him and his readers to understand or at least tolerate the violent and disquieting nature of existence in the atomic age.

It is through the metafictional experiments of *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Breakfast of Champions* that the author finally manages to transcend the deadening trauma of life in a meaningless universe and renew his faith in the constructive potential of human awareness, unearthing what Stanley Schatt calls "some code that would make life meaningful and understandable" (115). Nevertheless, the impulse to instill social change is present since his earliest works, whose apocalyptic motifs have been described by the author himself as "a way of saying God doesn't care what becomes of us, and neither does Nature, so we'd better care," as "We're all there is to care" (Reed and Leeds 25). Rather than dark predictions of an impending end, Vonnegut's dystopian scenarios are an admonition to "recover, in a post-humanist world, a new humanism" (Klinkowitz, *Kurt Vonnegut* 70); litanies that encourage his readers to use their imaginative powers in order

to achieve the renewal which might fulfill May's "threefold scheme of traditional apocalypse" (209) after judgment and catastrophe. In other words, the ultimate aim of Kurt Vonnegut's writing is to transform crisis and chaos into a new creation.

As defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, creation is "[t]he action or process bringing something into existence from nothing" ("Creation, n."). The word inevitably brings to mind religious myths of the origin of the world, perhaps most famously the opening of Genesis in the Old Testament, in which God creates "the heaven and the earth" (Gen 1:1), as well as "man in his own image" (1:27). The religious notion of creation, hence, identifies the term with "[t]he bringing into existence of the world or the universe; the beginning of the world as an event from which time can be thought to begin" ("Creation, n."), and uses it to design all that God created, including the universe and everything in it. Modern scientific thought, however, most prominently the Big Bang Theory, postulates that the creation of the universe was the result of purely physical processes, and Darwin's evolutionary theory explains that the origin of mankind can be traced back through biological transformations that extend millions of years into our past. It was only when humanity developed the capacity of reflexive thought that it started to question its own origins and to suggest possible explanations for its existence, obeying an impulse to understand and conceptualize reality that invites a further understanding of creation not just as the physical construction of the universe, but also as the deliberate mental act of bringing the world into ordered existence.

Creation, thus, is a process, but *a* creation is the result of said process, too: "[a]n original production of human intelligence, power, skill, or art; *esp.* a work of imagination." ("Creation, n."). This means that any human artifact, physical or mental, including any myth of the origin of the world, of how God created us to fit his own image, or of how there is a meaningful purpose to our existence, is inarguably a product of the imagination, an artifact of our own creation through which we try to bring the world into ordered existence. As I explained in the previous chapter, postmodern deconstruction, in its desire to interrogate previously unquestioned assumptions, applies this same reasoning to argue that all the belief systems and metanarratives that humans live by, be they religious, political or social, are discursive constructs which obey particular interests or desires, and it does so by uncovering the fictional mechanisms behind the dogmas and philosophies that we live by. Since the dawn of history, humanity's need to understand, to believe, to narrate, and to control has resulted in the imposition of mythical narratives

of order upon a world in which the existence of absolute meanings is a fallacious illusion. This process of fictionalization of reality is the inescapable corollary or our seemingly innate desire for truth, structure and purpose which, amidst a universe in which humanity is but are a mere, insignificant speck of dust, is inevitably flawed and has historically been a source of existential dread, anxiety and violence.

As a postmodernist novelist, Kurt Vonnegut attests to the essentially chaotic and meaningless nature of human existence. However, this recognition of futility does not cause him to fall into a neo-apocalyptic state of hopeless despair and lose hope in the human ability to find meaning in life. Instead, Vonnegut accepts and even embraces meaninglessness. No longer a source of anxiety and trauma, the author's acquiescence to chaos becomes a liberation for humanity, a "healthy acknowledgement of the transcendent power to make meaning in our own lives" (Tally, 128). Just as Albert Camus declares at the beginning of *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) that "The absurd, hitherto taken as a conclusion, is considered on this essay as a starting point" (10), Vonnegut's acceptance of an indifferent, meaningless universe in which life has no real purpose and all attempts to explain reality are ineluctably provisional is not a final resolution, but a point of departure which, by eliminating any semblance of absolute moral certainties, empowers humanity to create its own meanings in life. Todd F. Davis explains that "Vonnegut's belief that the universe is purposeless is not his main theme; it is his assumption" (*Crusade* 11), and claims that, in his fiction, the author "moves beyond the recognition of our current condition as shockingly futile and begins to make attempts at alleviating the painful oppression of those circumstances that create the very futility he chronicles" (13). Thus, Davis proposes that the most appropriate term to define Vonnegut's apocalyptic philosophy is "postmodern humanism" (*Crusade* 27), a paradoxical doctrine that "affirms humanistic values while maintaining a postmodern perspective" (29).

By exposing the fictional nature of myth-making and deconstructing the ideologically biased workings behind the grand metanarratives that structure modern society, postmodernist thought "allows for the proliferation of stories, refuting any single claim to 'truth'" (Davis, *Crusade* 21). However, the inescapable conundrum of postmodernity is that, taken as a conclusion, it can only "taunt our desire to make sense" (Hassan, *Postmodern Turn* 196). Therefore, what should be the next step after the deconstruction of totalizing metanarratives? David Lodge writes that "History may be, in

a philosophical sense, a fiction, but it does not feel like that when we miss a train or somebody starts a war" (109), and thus, human beings need to be able to function in society amid a reality that, however much an artificial discursive and mental construct, is for all practical purposes the space in which we all coexist. Still, if everything is a creation of the mind and there is no totalizing center to decide what is true or false, right or wrong, moral or amoral, then what criteria should people apply to make decisions in their daily lives? Considering how, in Davis' words, what we "most desire" as human beings is "clarity of justice and morality" (*Crusade* 23), the open-ended, inconclusive nature of postmodern philosophy seems an inescapable source of anxiety and despair. Vonnegut's writing, however, "offers a hopeful solution to the postmodern condition" (31), as in tackling the central question of whether humanity can find "a source of value that does not totalize or essentialize" (24), the author argues that our very nature holds "the potential for reassociations, for creation, for a world beyond fragmentation" (31). This apocalyptic potential to attain a new vision, and to affirm a new way to live, is based on a simple precept: in the absence of a universal center of value, of that "master convention" (Yarbrough 37) that anchors all our meanings, beliefs and behavior, said center must be "willed into place" (37). It must be artificially created.

In *Cat's Cradle* (1963), Vonnegut rewrites the myth of Genesis according to the *Books of Bokonon:*

> In the beginning, God created the earth, and he looked upon it in His cosmic loneliness.
>
> And God said, "Let Us make living creatures out of mud, so the mud can see what We have done."
>
> And God created every living creature that now moveth, and one was man. Mud as man alone could speak. God leaned close as mud as man sat up, looked around, and spoke. Man blinked. "What is the *purpose* of all this?" he asked politely.
>
> "Everything must have a purpose?" asked God.
>
> "Certainly," said man.
>
> "Then I leave you to think of one for all this," said God. And He went away. (265)

Bokonon's creation story underscores humanity's innate craving for a center of value understood as a purposeful dogma that will explain our existence. Throughout his

oeuvre, Vonnegut highlights this stubborn eagerness for meanings that escape our reach and in the process, according to Raymond Olderman, pictures humans as "modern Lilliputians, claiming big things for ourselves in a universe too immense to be anything but indifferent," and, as a consequence, turning life on Earth into "a waste land" by "looking for some meaningful absolute purpose instead of simply living" (192). Blindly intent on asserting a purpose that not even God Himself considers that all things must have, humanity falls into the trap of transforming narrative constructions into bedrock truths, and viewing life through a tragic apocalyptic prism of manichean fundamentalism, which causes violence, war, anxiety and oppression. At the time when Vonnegut wrote his novels, in the midst of the Cold War, this totalizing tenacity to understand the world in dualistic terms of good against evil had gone so far as to move Albert Einstein to claim that humanity was "drifting toward catastrophe beyond conception," to the point that "[w]e shall require a substantially new manner of thinking if mankind is to survive" (qtd. in Holt, "Meeting"). Chaos, the German physicist seemed to imply, could only be defeated with creation.

Such new system of thought as hinted by Einstein is precisely what Kurt Vonnegut attempts to conjure in his writings; an apocalyptic philosophy that will allow humanity to reject absolutes and preserve life on Earth. He does so by challenging the tragic interpretation of the apocalypse as a predictive telling of events to come and replacing it instead with a postmodern understanding of the myth as an artificial creation, a construed narrative whose value resides in "the aesthetic functioning of the text experienced as allegory" (O'Leary 75). This interpretation of the apocalypse through the comic frame which, as O'Leary explains, "requires the denial of all claims to absolute knowledge" (214), understands "apocalyptic fulfillment as a product of human action rather than divine predestination" (84), and replaces the vision of history as a degenerative process from Genesis to Apocalypse for its conception as an "open horizon of possibility" (92) in which multiple apocalyptic ruptures can lead to progressive change and improvement, which may allow for the fulfillment of God's promise in Revelation to make "all things new" (Rev 21:5) without necessarily having to bring history to a close. In Revelation, as Adela Yarbro Collins explains, the magnitude of the disorder reaches such a point that "it can be righted only by the destruction of the world as it had been known" (116) and its replacement by the blissful realm of New Jerusalem. For postmodernist novelists who refigure the apocalyptic myth through a comic frame, however, the destruction ceases to

be requisite, as the promise of New Jerusalem is transmuted into "a new way of seeing: a new vision" (Rosen xxiii); less a new world than "a new way of understanding the old world" (xxiii). As Charles Reich would have it, the real ultimate comic apocalypse rests in the attainment of "a new knowledge of what it means to be human . . . in order that man can once more become a creative force, renewing and creating his own life and thus giving life back to his society" (139–140).

In Bokonon's Genesis myth, God ultimately concedes man the ability to think of a purpose for the world, and thus Vonnegut defends that the only means to achieve a fundamental reorganization of human thought that may illuminate a brighter future; in other words, the only path to a true apocalypse of the mind, is through the embrace of our fictive powers to construct reality; of our potential to create. Etymologically, the term creation derives from the French form *création*, which itself stems from the Latin *creātiō*, defined as "election or appointment" ("Creation, n."). Human agency, thus, our capacity to consciously choose what to create, is at the root of the word's meaning, and Vonnegut believes that an awareness of the nature of all human narratives as fictions goes hand in hand with the apocalyptic potential of said fictions to shape and change the world for the better. When interpreted as unquestionable, bedrock truths, these fictions can become dangerous instruments of fundamentalism and violence, but when their nature as human constructs is acknowledged and highlighted, if stories are openly conceived of as such, they can also become useful and constructive. This way, the recognition of chaos paradoxically becomes a liberating tool for mankind, as the absence of absolute, unquestionable meanings allows people to invent their own personal purposes, and empowers all of us to literally create reality on a daily basis. The world, James B. Miller says, is "at all time in process," and "not a creation so much as a *creating*" (9), and therefore the essence of Vonnegut's message is "not just that there was no absolute meaning to things, but that perfectly useful meanings could be contrived at need, simply if we were honest about the process" (Klinkowitz, *America* 63). In all his novels, "[t]he meaning of the world remains man's invention" (Klinkowitz, *Disruptions* 48), and it is precisely his determination to write that best symbolizes Vonnegut's apocalyptic intent to implore his readers to create a better world as, in Bradley and Tate's words, "the story of creation reaches its logical conclusion in the creation of stories" (105).

4.2 Harmless untruths: *Foma* and the power of fictions to heal humanity

Throughout his literature, Kurt Vonnegut is "more concerned with our response to existence than with the philosophical nature of that existence" (Davis, *Crusade* 10), and his apocalyptic message is not an investigation of *why* we live as much as an admonition to *how* we should live. Time and again, the author portrays how humanity's insistence on twisting the cosmic indifference of the universe into order and meaning misplaces the emphasis from what really matters in life to chimerical quests for supposedly absolute truths which are ultimately unattainable and construed rather than found. In a 1974 speech, he declared, "No respecter of evidence has ever found the least clue as to what life is all about, and what people should do with it," explaining that all people have are "guesses," and concluding that "[b]ad guesses are poisoning our lives today" (*PS* 178). Said bad guesses stem from what Beth Schroeder terms "a collective need to reach outward, ever outward, in order to discover some grand meaning in life, rather than explore the depths of the internal dimensions of the individual" (76); a search for ultimate purpose which is bound to prove fruitless and breed fundamentalism and dehumanization. Humanity's tendency to view life from a tragic apocalyptic prism and succumb to what Vonnegut calls "the totalitarian mind" (*MN* 223) in pursue and defense of unquestionable narratives that will give sense to our existence ultimately leads to slaughter and wars, to the blind urge to unquestioningly follow orders that allowed for the Nazi death camps, and to the mushroom cloud of ultimate destruction that threatened the world during the Cold War. After all, Vonnegut declares, "Earthlings who have felt the Creator clearly wanted this or that have almost always been pigheaded and cruel" (*WFG* 89).

In *The True Believer* (1951), Eric Hoffer writes, "Faith in a holy cause is to a certain extent a substitute for the loss of faith in ourselves" (14). As if responding to Hoffer's claim, Vonnegut's fiction stands as an exhortation for humanity to recover that lost faith in itself and find the meaning of life not outward, in some unattainable projection of absolute purpose that science has proven futile, but inward, within our infinite potential to create and care for others. Throughout his writing career, the author never ceases to believe in humanity's apocalyptic potential to change the world for the better, as he constantly defends that "as far as improving the human condition goes, our minds are certainly up to that," because "[t]hat's what we're designed to do" (qtd. in Allen,

Conversations 77). However, he argues that these capabilities have historically been misguidedly applied in the wrong direction. In a 1973 interview, Vonnegut declared, "This promising of great secrets which are beyond our grasp—I don't think they exist," explaining that, instead, "[t]he mysteries which remain to be solved have to do with relating to each other" (Allen, *Conversations* 74). Amidst the crisis of the Cold War, Vonnegut's novels argue that humanity's only hope for survival is a fundamental reorganization of people's mindsets; a revelation that will ultimately expose tragic apocalyptic fundamentalism to be an artificial construct, and reveal how either-or categorical thinking, our all-too-human tendency to view the world through a rhetoric of extreme opposites, is, in Nadeau's words, nothing but "an arbitrarily developed, culturally derived mechanism in the construction of our symbolic universe which is not ontologically grounded in the life of nature" (63), and therefore can be replaced by a new vision.

Vonnegut's hope in the possibility of this New Jerusalem of the mind that will defeat the rhetoric of the atomic age is ultimately grounded in his anthropological training at the University of Chicago, where he learned how, in his own words, "culture was as separate from the brain as a Model T Ford, and could be tinkered with" (Wakefield, *Letters* 319). It was during his stint in Chicago that the young author developed his notion of the arbitrary, ephemeral nature of reality as a phenomenon that does not respond to absolutes but is instead a malleable and constantly changing concept. Each individual's interpretation of reality is shaped and modified by the ever-changing facts of life which escape our grasp, be they personal, such as the place and time we are born in, our family environment and our education, or historical, such as wars, economic recessions, or natural disasters. However, our notions of reality are also molded by the human-made artifacts of culture, and studying anthropology convinced Vonnegut that "a culture can contain fatal poisons which can be identified" (319), and that these poisons can be challenged and ultimately corrected to effect profound changes in the way people perceive and experience life and in how they behave towards each other. By becoming a writer, Vonnegut consciously takes on the task of highlighting and fighting the cultural evils which he identifies in post-war American society, creating a fiction which is essentially "activist in nature" (Davis, *Crusade* 13), and functions as an apocalyptic instrument to reconstruct reality through the imagination and "bring human life back into harmony with the universe" (Nicol 217). William James once wrote that "[w]e receive in

short the block of marble, but we curve the statue ourselves" (246), and thus Vonnegut, understanding that each individual has the potential to shape his or her own experience, that we all constitute our own reality and that the world can be recreated for the better if only we understand it as the narrative construct that it ultimately is and willfully choose to partake in the fictionalization process, sets out to "shock his readers into a moment of comprehension" (Davis, *Crusade* 13) that will make them realize their own creative potential and work towards the construction of a fairer, more humane world. In other words, Vonnegut's novels want the reader to undergo a comic apocalyptic transformation.

In *The Aesthetic Dimension* (1977), Herbert Marcuse contends that art itself may not be able to change the world, but it can surely "contribute to changing the consciousness and drives of the men and women who would change the world" (32), and similarly, Vonnegut declares that the ultimate aim of his literature is to "catch people before they become Generals and Senators and Presidents" and "poison their brains with humanity" by encouraging them to "make a better world" (Scholes, "A Talk" 109). This "better world" must necessarily be imagined before it can be realized. Like all human endeavors, it must originate in an act of fictionalization, in a narrative construct of the mind that conceptualizes reality as it is perceived at the present moment and envisages a potential scenario that could be different. Fiction precedes reality and not vice versa, because, as Jerome Klinkowitz argues, "[c]reating fiction is the way we make sense of life" (*America* 59), and in a world in which human beings are irrevocably surrounded by chaos, we are "equipped for coexistence with it only by our fictive powers" (Kermode 64), by the narratives which are our sole instruments to order and shape experience. These narratives are created with the sole tool available for human beings to explore and conceptualize their world: language. Their ultimate nature as language implies that all accounts of life are descriptions, artifacts that stand as inexorable intermediaries between the ultimate essence of experience and our understanding of it. However, rather than a barrier that shields human beings from the core of experience, language is actually the key that opens up that core, allowing us to reinvent the world and make it meaningful. Language is the basis of what Klinkowitz labels "man's greatest power, what separates us from other living creatures," which is "the ability to imagine that anything, even he himself, is different from what it is" (*Disruptions* 52). That ability to imagine and express

how the world could be different is the essence of the creative potential that, to Vonnegut, makes each human being an "unwavering band of light" (*BOC* 227).[59]

The Book of John, the fourth and last of the canonical gospels included in the New Testament, opens with the famous lines, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). The passage can be interpreted as to mean that language is God, and that God as language spoke the world into existence through a narrative act of fiction. Language, thus, is presented as the ultimate instrument of creation, a tool which allows for the invention of life, of the universe, and of everything in it, including humanity. As "narrative animals" (xi), however, it is actually human beings who, through thousands of years of evolution, developed the skill of language, the faculty to communicate, to narrate, and to imagine through words; to conceptualize and interpret reality with language. It was humanity that came up with the concept of God to explain and understand its own origin, as a narrative impulse to give meaning to its existence. Therefore, if God is the Word but the Word is indeed a human creation, then no longer should we face an existential dilemma about our double nature, the eternal conflict between the animal half that obliges us to live within certain limits and the symbolic half that pushes us to transcend those limits, because language as the ultimate creative instrument opens up an infinite pursuit of possibilities for our imagination. In *Breakfast of Champions* (1973), Kurt Vonnegut recovers his faith in the creative potential of humanity after Rabo Karabekian delivers his speech about awareness as "all that is alive and maybe sacred in any of us" (*BOC* 226), the force of perception that allows for the existence of the world, to the point that the author calls Einstein's $E=Mc^2$ "a flawed equation" (247) because "there should have been an 'A' in there somewhere for *Awareness* – without which the 'E' and the 'M' and the 'c' . . . could not exist" (247). It is ultimately language which, by giving us the capacity to imagine, to rationalize, to remember and to narrate, allows for the constructive force of human awareness to exist, giving humanity the ability to interpret the world through narratives of order and create the fictions that we call reality. In Vonnegut's view, then, our command of the Word turns humanity into God.

[59] Of course, the so-called Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, also known as the linguistic relativity hypothesis, postulates that the structure of languages affect the cognition and worldview of their speakers, creating an inseparable connection between people's perceptions of reality and the language they speak (Lucy, 13486).

Still, composed as they are of language, shaped by our subjective awareness, and stubbornly attempting to twist the prevailing chaos of the universe into an anthropocentric concept of order, all the fictions through which we humans construct reality are, perforce, devoid of essential truth. Be they true or not, however, these narratives are crucial, as the stories we decide to believe and tell are the paradigms that we live by, the ideological instruments that "contribute to our well-being or to our destruction" (Davis, *Crusade* 58). Aware of the double nature of narratives, the postmodernist in Kurt Vonnegut "labors to debunk our notions of truth" (Davis, *Crusade* 42) by exposing the artificiality of our belief systems and how they are all equally flawed in their appeal to ultimate knowledge. However, at the same time, the humanist in him understands that, just as they can be dangerous instruments contributing to dehumanization, confrontation and war, narratives are nevertheless "the only tools we possess for improving the human condition" (65). In *Bluebird* (1987), Vonnegut writes, "Belief is nearly the whole of the universe, whether based on truth or not" (161), and thus the author proposes his humanist solution to the postmodern condition: to embrace fictions in order to create a better world, but to do it without ever losing sight of their artificial nature. Amidst the ambivalence of postmodernity, where no center of value can be asserted above any other, Vonnegut finds hope in the infinite proliferation of narratives, of what Lyotard calls "les petites histories" (qtd. in Davis 136), as they present endless possibilities for social change. Unlike most other postmodernists, however, Vonnegut ascertains "his refusal to accept complete relativism" (Davis, *Crusade* 137) in the creation of one rule that all narratives must unequivocally follow, a center of value which he considers as flawed as any other in its claim to legitimacy, but which he nevertheless considers absolutely crucial. This sole criterion is the idea that human life is valuable, sacred, and precious, and that when relating to each other, our ultimate axiom must be "Goddamn it, you've got to be kind" (*GBY* 129).

Peter Scholl explains Vonnegut's quintessentially contradictory philosophy describing how

> His books propose that absurdity lies at the heart of the cosmos, thus making any sort of moral statement is at the least a little foolish. Still, paradoxically, he insists that man must be treated with kindness and respect, as though he were the center of the universe and possessed of an eternal soul. . . . Vonnegut has lost the Faith, has repudiated Christianity, its creeds and assorted institutions, but he has retained

> all the ethical reflexes which sometimes embellish that religion. . . . He retains belief in the worth of man as an article of faith, though it is a faith he cannot justify intellectually, and which he sometimes only half-heartedly maintains. (11)

Vonnegut's celebration of human life as sacred while openly acknowledging his utter lack of grounds to validate such a claim is the crux of his postmodern humanism; a philosophy that "works with an awareness of its own constructedness toward a symbolic construction of a better 'reality'" (Davis, *Crusade* 32). The author concedes that the idea that "humanity is at the center of the universe, the fulfiller or the frustrator of the grandest dreams of God Almighty" is "the most ridiculous superstition of all" (*WFG* 165), but still, he maintains that "[i]f you can believe that, and make others believe it, then there might be hope for us" (166), as human beings may finally abandon the tragic apocalyptic rhetoric of hate and violence and "might begin to treasure and protect each other instead" (166). Thus, Vonnegut believes that superstition is the sole viable source for a comic apocalyptic transformation, and willingly chooses to embrace the illusion that the human soul is a sacred unwavering band of light in order to make the world a fairer, more humane place. There may be no conclusive validation for the existence of this unwavering band of light, but the writer determines to celebrate its possibility and openly revel in fictions as long as they allow for the creation of a "heartfelt moral code" (*PS* 184) that will ameliorate the pain of his fellow human beings and make their lives bearable. Thus, he concedes that, in a world in which everything has been proven to be a fiction, the "only useful distinction to be made is that between fictions that encourage the forces of death and those which abet the forces of life" (Ketterer 302). In a sense, by asserting that the only norm of judgment for our ideas and actions must be whether they respect the life and dignity of all human beings as an article of faith, Vonnegut is fulfilling Ludwig Feuerbach's claim that "theology must become anthropology" (qtd. in Yarbro Collins 16). Historically, humanity has projected its greatest qualities outward in the conception of God, and if it wishes to survive into the future, in a world after Auschwitz and Hiroshima, it now must reclaim those qualities for itself and cherish its own nature with the same devotion as it reveres God. Addressing the graduates of Benington College in 1970, Vonnegut declares, "Only in superstition is there hope," and admonishes the students that "[i]f you want to become a friend of civilization, then become an enemy of truth and a fanatic for harmless balderdash" (*WFG* 165).

The "harmless balderdash" that human life is sacred and must be respected above all else is what Vonnegut calls *foma*: a "harmless untruth" (*CC* ix) that can soothe humanity, help us through the traumatic experience of life and even improve our condition, as long as it is always taken at face value as nothing more than a comforting lie. The concept of *foma* lies at the center of Bokononism, the fictitious religion that Vonnegut creates in *Cat's Cradle,* whose founder, Tobago native and World War I veteran Lyonel Boyd Johnson, also known as Bokonon, openly acknowledges the fictional nature of his creed:

> I wanted all things
> To seem to make sense
> So we could all be happy, yes
> Instead of tense.
> And I made up lies
> So that they all fit nice,
> And I made this sad world
> A par-a-dise. (*CC* 127)

As the narrative of *Cat's Cradle* progresses, the novel's narrator, John, slowly abandons his former Christian faith to embrace Bokononism, and Vonnegut intersperses the action of the plot with several passages of the religion's foundational text, *The Books of Bokonon*, which stands as a paradigm of postmodernism in its ever-changing and expanding nature, with new passages in the form of "calypsos" being constantly added to the point that no two copies of the text are the same. Allen Brien calls *Cat's Cradle* "a modern Bible in hip terms" (63) and, just like the Book of Revelation endeavors to relieve the suffering of early Christians by presenting it as a meaningful stage in God's divinely appointed plan for the eternal salvation of humanity, Bokononism, too, attempts to reconcile the violence and cruelty of human existence with a vision of humanity as sacred. However, it does so through a total denial of the claims to an absolutist position typical of established religions, rejecting the tragic apocalyptic rhetoric of extremes, and arguing that there are no absolutes, as good and evil are relative concepts that "can only be evaluated in terms of each other" (Schatt 64). Bokononism expects no miracles from the heavens to come and save humanity. If humanity wants to be saved, it will have to do it itself by learning to appreciate life as it is and by embracing the flagrant *foma* of its own sacredness. The opening verse of the *Books of Bokonon* openly exposes the religion's

deliberately paradoxical nature by admonishing that "All the true things I am about to tell you are shameless lies" (*CC* 5) but, as John proceeds to add, "Anyone unable to understand how a useful religion can be founded on lies will not understand this book either" (6).

Bokononism is a useful doctrine because, by assuring that the only sacred thing in the world, even above God Himself, is human life, it allows its adherents, the inhabitants of the island of San Lorenzo, to lead happier lives. Among a state of extreme poverty in which "truth," the harsh reality of everyday life, is "the enemy of the people" (*CC* 172), Bokonon sets out to "provide the people with better and better lies" (172), to make life "a work of art" (175) that has a meaning and purpose that "any human being anywhere could understand and applaud" (175). Furthermore, by encouraging the people to respect each other, "to acknowledge their connectedness, and to spend their short time on earth with grace and compassion" (Strand 239), the religion ultimate manages to make "the happiness of the people grow" (*CC* 175). Discarding any notions of higher purposes by taking the "cosmic view" (135) and acknowledging the insignificance of human existence amid the immeasurable chaos of the universe, candidly directing attention to "the shortness of life and the longness of eternity" (135), Bokonon resorts to preaching a sort of "cosmic coolness" (Schatt 65), and attempts to reorder "our notion of the finite world so that we may accept it, rather than simply rebel against it in fruitless anger" (Klinkowitz, "Crimes" 167). Bokonononism, thus, is a comic apocalyptic religion, as it promises to deliver salvation in life, not in a hypothetical afterlife in heaven. The New Jerusalem that Bokonon offers his followers is a new vision; an apocalyptic revelation that will allow them to appreciate life as all that we have, and to work within their limitations to try to improve the human condition.[60]

Through Bokononism, a quintessentially postmodernist ethos that "paradoxically offers a narrative for living without establishing a metanarrative" (Davis, *Crusade* 63), Vonnegut proposes that a meaningful doctrine can be "founded on a floating center that acknowledges its own fallibility, its own constructedness" (Davis, *Crusade* 11), and that said flaunted fallibility can prove to be useful and have a significant creative potential to

[60] In *Cat's Cradle,* John learns that the last words uttered by a Bokononist before dying are "Now I will destroy the whole world" (*CC* 238), which clearly equate the death of an individual with the demise of the entire universe and, subsequently, discard any notion of an afterlife in which people may enjoy the fruits of their good behavior in life. Instead, this vision presents life as the only viable framework within which to exercise change, ameliorate suffering, and attain the moral enlightenment of a comic apocalypse.

improve people's lives. Openly embracing humanistic fictions, Vonnegut seems to say, is our only chance to survive in a postmodern world in which traumatic events of unfathomable violence expose the dark nature of the human spirit and the rhetoric of science challenges the foundations of religious faith and denies humanity's innate desire for anthropomorphic myths of order. Only by looking inward, by searching for meaning within our own human nature and embracing our creative capabilities, may we discover the "never-ending possibilities of life" (Davis, *Crusade* 11). Unlike the "lies" of other religions and creeds which have historically caused countless suffering and destruction, Bokonon's *foma* are "a pain pill for the ills of the world" (Klinkowitz, "Crimes" 167), a new type of lies which prove to be "purgative, restoring man's happiness, balance, and comfort" (167). By openly revealing its nature as fictions, Bokononism indirectly exposes that all so-called truths, be they religious, scientific or ethical, are no more than linguistic constructs, "metaphors for a life process that will never be fully described or contained by them" (Nadeau 125–126). As such, Vonnegut's use of his fictitious religion goes well beyond the mere "satire on primitive Christianity" that some have interpreted it as (Goldsmith 19) and works as an apocalyptic instrument that allows readers to "recognize our conventions *as* conventions" (Meeter 203) and realize that meaning, in all spheres of life, is invented instead of discovered, and therefore we human beings must invent our own rituals, and essentially "make life an art form" (Somer, "Geodesic" 241) if we are to achieve a comic apocalyptic transformation that will usher in a new mindset.

The crux of Vonnegut's argument, according to Klinkowitz, is that "[a]ll truth must be self-invented" (*Kurt Vonnegut* 44), and that "pretense is evil only when it mistakes itself for something absolute" (53). Vonnegut argues that we "can go on living only through the acceptance of illusions," because "[w]e need illusions not to escape life but to deal with it" (Olderman 190), so instead of simply denying the existence of God on a scientific basis, we must embrace the endless value of God as a metaphor, as a "heartfelt moral code" (*PS* 184). Ultimately, Vonnegut seems to propose that if God does not exist as an entity and is only a metaphor made of language, and if language is the tool that human beings use to create the world, then it is human beings who create God and not the other way around. God, however, is a necessary concept, as it serves to fulfill our need for morality and order, for reassuring myths that explain and give purpose to our existence. Nevertheless, if we humans must create God, why not make Him a kind God, a God who, in Ginger Strand's words, "encourages us to find the sacred in nothing more,

and nothing less, than our human selves" (239), instead of a violent God who compels us to mistrust, hate and kill each other? In other words, why not choose to view the apocalypse through a comic instead of a tragic lens?

Cat's Cradle pits Bokonon's humanist, comic apocalyptic discourse against the tragic apocalyptic stance of Dr. Felix Hoenikker, the scientist who is not "interested in people" (*CC* 13) and values only "truth" (54). Hoenikker is a brilliant mind who nevertheless falls into the naïve trap of believing that, in its claim to absolute truth, science is completely neutral and above all moral concerns. It is his sheer carelessness and complete lack of humane concerns that allows Hoenikker to develop *ice-nine*, the substance that, nonchalantly left in the hands of his three children, who desperately long to find the love that the "Father of the atomic bomb" (*CC 6*) simply was not interested in giving them, winds up causing the destruction of the whole world. With the example of Hoenikker, Vonnegut argues that there is "no such thing as pristine innocence" (Nadeau 127) and that even science, in its ultimate essence, is nothing but a fiction, yet another human-made narrative that attempts to twist chaos into order.[61] The fact that an absurdly arbitrary series of accidents leads to the accidental release of *ice-nine* into the ocean at the end of *Cat's Cradle,* causing all of the earth's water supplies to freeze and, in consequence, putting an end to life on the planet can be read as Vonnegut's lesson on "the interrelatedness of all things" (Nadeau 127); on how human acts are not isolated from each other and, therefore, humane values should be the measure of all our actions in life, because there is no such thing as pristine innocence and neutrality. All of us, as human beings, are responsible for the progress of the human race; we create the world through the fictions that we choose to believe, support and invent; fictions which, nevertheless, hold the potential to destroy the world, especially if we lose sight of their nature as constructs and become blind believers. The eschatological motifs of *Cat's Cradle* expose the very real dangers of having "to many people in high places who are stone-cold dead" (*CC* 69), but Vonnegut's aim is to move beyond a neo-apocalyptic vision of despair and force his readers into action, so that catastrophe in the scope that he envisions will ultimately be avoided.[62] Davis writes that "[i]n a decentered world, we are fictions,

[61] Albert Einstein himself declared that "[p]hysical concepts are free creations of the human mind, and are not, however it may seem, uniquely determined by the external world" (qtd. in Strand 253).

[62] In this sense, John R. May likens Vonnegut's intent to yet another Bokononist concept: a *wrang-wrang*, defined in *Cat's Cradle* as "a person who steers people away from a line of speculation by reducing that line, with the example of the *wrang-wrang's* own life, to an absurdity" (*CC* 78). In the novel, the negative

constructing our own realities and truths" (*Crusade* 60), which entitles us to a great potential that, nevertheless, entails a great responsibility, too, because, as Vonnegut dutifully warns in one of his most often-quoted aphorisms, "We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful what we pretend to be" (*Mother Night* v).

Even through his most extreme end-of-the-world scenarios, Vonnegut maintains his faith in humanity's ability to bring forth its own salvation by guiding its course into the future with intelligence, compassion, humor, and altruism, by rejecting the fundamentalist narratives that cause confrontation and embracing humanist narratives that value life above all else. Time and again, the protagonists of his novels, faced with the existential conundrum of their inability to fulfill their necessity for a sense of purpose and order in a chaotic universe in which no absolute meaning can be empirically proven, resort to a deliberate act of fictionalization, to the willful creation of an artificial center of value that allows for the invention of their own meanings, unhesitatingly choosing to believe in a narrative that they know is not ultimately true but that they consider fair. Through this flaunted act of fictionalization, these characters learn to accept and embrace their limitations, to acquiesce to chaos instead of rebelling against it and, as a consequence, become aware of their own true creative potential, thus standing as an example of how the world can be changed, of how fundamentalism can be challenged and apocalyptic transformation can be enacted in an individual scale. By showing his readers how the potential to transform reality is at the tip of their fingers, Vonnegut's fiction becomes the predominant metaphor for this creative potential, as the author tackles the social commitment to improve other people's lives and alter the course of American history brandishing his writing as his sole apocalyptic weapon.

The utmost "power of the Apocalypse," according to Yarbro Collins, resides precisely in its nature as literature, in its potential to effectively articulate and deal with a perceived sense of crisis, sublimating it through the "creation of a new linguistic 'world'" (165). Joan Didion famously claims that "[w]e tell ourselves stories in order to live" (11), and it is certainly true that art in general and literature in particular allow humanity to

example of a character called Sherman Krebbs leads the narrator away from nihilism and allows him to embrace Bokononism. Similarly, May writes that "Vonnegut as *wrang-wrang* consistently maintains an apocalyptic tone in his unambiguous criticism of society," even though "the alternative to the course that he would steer us from is not always equally clear" (*Toward* 192–193). This intent to expose the evils of current society in order to warn people to move away from them and create their own personal alternatives could well be the ultimate explanation for the recurrence of themes and motifs of ultimate destruction in the work of a writer who is actually totally hopeful about the creative potential of the human race.

vindicate itself, to intone a life-affirming yelp of "We are here," which Ihab Hassan describes as "the cry literature has articulated with the fullest resonances through the ages" (*Radical* 3). This cry is directed at affirming life over death, transforming defeat into redemption and carousing in the joy of being alive, seeking to "make our world habitable and newly human" (*CAF* 178). In doing so, the novel, in Robbe-Grillet's famous dictum, ceases to be simply a form to "inform us about reality" and instead becomes a means "to *constitute* reality" (160), a pivotal tool in the ongoing process of our cognitive shaping of the world. At a time when, in Robert Coover's words, "[m]ost of society's effort goes into forging the construct" (qtd. in Ickstadt 219) artists who, like Kurt Vonnegut, wear their activism on their sleeve, help to "weaken and tear down structures so that they can be rebuilt, releasing new energies" (Coover qtd. in Ickstadt 219) aimed at making the world a fairer, more humane place to live in. Through his work, Vonnegut challenges the tragic apocalyptic rhetoric of grand metanarratives of power in order to furnish new, reforming fictions that may allow readers to "re-discover a sense of the density of our lives" (Murdoch 30) and thus incite them to "fight against our inaction and our blunders that too often harm us, as well as the planet" (Davis, *Crusade* 12). The novel might as well be the most appropriate artistic realm to reveal the endless transformative potential of reality, because, in Nadeau's word, as

> The art form best equipped to extensively articulate the relationship between objective and subjective realities, [the novel] could serve as the artistic medium through which Western man might rediscover in lived experience a sense of being-in-the-world as something other than a sealed-off subjectivity cruelly victimized by external forces. (196)

Vonnegut, however, is aware of the dual power of all narrative structures, including novels, and knows how, depending on their treatment, they hold the potential to become agents for fundamentalism as much as tools to unmask it. As he demonstrates through the example of Bokononism, the author believes that meanings must remain openly construed for any metaphor to work, or else the metaphor's content may be mistaken for bedrock truth and become "the stuff of great mischief" (Klinkowitz, *Kurt Vonnegut* 18), ultimately leading to "holy wars waged over what were meant to be harmless rituals" (18). This is true of novels as much as of religion, because, as Vonnegut argues through *Breakfast of Champions'* denunciation of literary realism as responsible for Americans' reactions of apathy, despondence and violence to the inescapable

disappointment of their lives failing to live up to the expectations created in books (*BOC* 215), novels which are made "too much like real life" (Klinkowitz, *Kurt Vonnegut* 73) can be "mistaken for messages" (73). Therefore, readers need to be reminded that novels are fictional in order for them to effectively work their magic as agents for change instead of tools to enhance fundamentalist worldviews.[63] Vonnegut, thus, understands that the main criteria he must impose for his fictions is not to favor the more likely over the less likely. In essential terms, all literary genres, be they supposedly realistic or fantastic, are "all equally true or untrue" (Ketterer 302), and so what an author must try to distinguish is "the more humane and practical from the more inhumane and impractical" (Ketterer 272). Well aware of this, Vonnegut selects a genre which is not only harmlessly devoid of the prospect of being interpreted as a prescriptive dogma, but also allows him endless creative possibilities to fulfil his desire to contemplate reality through a freshly new perspective while remaining attuned to the changing nature of his own time: science fiction. This way, the often-maligned genre becomes Vonnegut's tool of preference to demonstrate humanity's endless potential to reinvent reality through imagination; to create a better world through art.

4.3 Science fiction: Vonnegut's apocalyptic vehicle for creation

Decades before Brian McHale's critical endorsement of science fiction as "postmodernism's noncanonized or 'low art' double, its sister-genre" (59), Kurt Vonnegut was able to recognize the genre's potential to fulfill his adamant search to illuminate a new kind of fiction, at once experimental and didactic, that could become "a paradigm of postmodernity" (Davis, *Crusade* 6). Free from the trappings of literary realism, which inevitably depends "upon a certain faithfulness to the kinds of rigid mental systems and patterns that inhibit life" (Ketterer 302), precisely the type of constructs that Vonnegut desires to challenge with his fiction, the well of seemingly endless possibilities of science fiction gives the author the potential to "struggle with philosophical ideas concerning our condition in a form that reflects this very struggle" (Davis, *Crusade* 6). The elusively multifaceted and chaotic nature of life implies that the most helpful

[63] Klinkowitz goes even further in this regard, and claims that, "from an aesthetic point of view, once the stuff of religions or novels becomes the one and only truth, their art evaporates, leaving us with content alone, which deteriorates into just that much unformed chaos from our quotidian lives" (*Kurt Vonnegut* 18).

narrative designs to try to capture its essence shall be "loosely structured, fluid, if only so one system may easily metamorphose into another" (Ketterer 302), and science fiction allows for this open nature while at the same time fulfilling Vonnegut's desire to remain accessible, easy to read, and "keenly attuned to the cultural tensions of the popular literature and imagination of his time" (Klinkowitz, *Disruptions* 54). Although his embrace of the genre originally meant that his novels were relegated to ostracism by a critical establishment that believed that all subjects should "reside in neat little compartments" (*HP* 147) and therefore scientific concepts must not be mixed with literature and "a person cannot be a serious artist and also have had a technical education" (*AMWAC* 15), in the long run it allowed Vonnegut to build the strong cult following, especially among the youth, which would turn him into "probably . . . the most beloved American writer of post-World War II literature" (Rosen 45). Unlike many of his postmodernist peers, who chose to inhabit a baroque "ivory tower" of language that consolidated their academic reputations at the cost of alienating the general American readership (Martín Párraga, "Hacia" 203), Vonnegut's use of science fiction estranged him from the critical intelligentsia but, nevertheless, allowed for the unprecedented popular success that was his greatest triumph.

If, back in the early post-World War II years, science fiction was an unconventional vehicle for an experimental writer, Vonnegut's personal vision of the genre was no less unorthodox; a far cry from the exotic tales of otherworldly monsters and all-American heroes in space of the genre magazines of the era. Rather than embrace the ideal of the rocket-age conquistador as the latest incarnation of the mythical American frontier man in a quest to spread civilization amidst the retrograde wasteland of outer space, Vonnegut often overturns the lens to speak from the viewpoint of an extraterrestrial being observing life on Earth, a technique that allows him to describe humans through the eyes of a culture for which *we* are the aliens. Through this trademark approach, Vonnegut subverts the tropes of science fiction with the spirit of an anthropologist, shifting the typical focus of the genre from action-packed adventures to deep philosophical inquiries, posing "parabolic questions and deliver[ing] metaphorical answers about the human condition" (Simpson 263). Not surprisingly, as opposed to the vision of technologically sublime *übermensch* in pulp paperbacks, this intergalactic perspective serves to expose the violent and fundamentalist impulses of earthlings and to highlight the absurdity of our overblown pretentions in a universe to which we are at best

insignificant. It is a humbling device that allows for a veiled socio-political satire in the guise of space opera, as Vonnegut recognizes the potential of science fiction as what Fredrik Pohl terms "political cryptogram," a means to "say things in hint and metaphor what the writer does not dare say in the clear" ("Politics" 10). The author once compared his use of science fictional motifs to Shakespeare's device of "bringing on the clowns every so often to lighten things up" (*WFG* 263), as if dressing his social criticism in the guise of time travel and trips to other planets were a means to make it more palatable to his readers and preventing his novels from turning into dense philosophical meditations that would alienate his ideas from the popular audience of middle-class Americans that he was trying to reach.

Vonnegut approaches science fiction with the spirit of a fabulist, creating new worlds to "illustrate ideas, in the tradition of Voltaire and Swift" (Shields 233). Inevitably, those worlds become a distorted mirror image of our own that allow for a detached commentary on the current state of human affairs. And what better means to capture the essence of the post-Hiroshima, post-Auschwitz age, a time seemingly beyond the limits of amusement when, in Vonnegut's own words, "Science had given humanity forces enough to destroy the earth, and politics had given humanity assurance that the forces would be used" (*BSB* 24), than a genre premised on how the implausible can actually be proven possible? The space and time dislocations, eschatological motifs, and meditations on otherness of science fiction are an ideal encapsulation of the Cold War spirit of numbed uncertainty, and allow the author to portray the chaotic nature of life in the United States at a time in which the country had started to inhabit, in Umberto Eco's famous phrase, a condition of "hyperreality" (*Travels* 2) within which the authentic cannot be easily distinguished from the fake. Disturbed by the dehumanizing implications of the nuclear arms race and the careless technological credo of progress for its own sake above all moral concerns which Vonnegut himself had witnessed during the bombing of Dresden and at his job at the General Electric Company,[64] Vonnegut understands the genre not as a projection of hypothetical worlds in outer space, but as a means to investigate "the probable future that science was spawning in the here and now" (Strand 165). While "Golden Age" science fiction praises the American engineer and scientific innovation as a solution to all of mankind's problems, Vonnegut, starting in *Player Piano* (1952), subverts this notion through a postmodernist twist on the genre which exposes the

[64] In the author's own words, "the General Electric Company *was* science fiction" (*WFG* 263).

technological sublime as yet another fundamentalist metanarrative of control and dehumanization; a national myth that points to a near future in which it may not seem scandalous to proclaim, as the US president does in Vonnegut's first novel, that a machine called EPICAC XIV is "[t]he greatest individual in history" (*PP* 120).

Vonnegut's take on science fiction is not a parody of the genre, but a pure realization of the promise of its name; an unprecedented opportunity to examine social, political and philosophical concerns against the backdrop of scientific concepts such as chaos theory and entropy, cultural relativism, the theory of evolution, and Einstein's theory of relativity; all the while maintaining the key fictional elements of plot, setting, characterization and dialogue. All these factors are filtered through a postmodern willingness to expose that reality, as it is commonly conceived, indeed "constitutes one vast web of deception" (Ketterer 203), and that said illusory nature is as much a consequence of the grand metanarratives that shape our understanding of the world as of humanity's "limited awareness of space and time" (203). As an apocalyptic writer, Vonnegut's science fictional explorations intend to unveil a new conception of reality that exposes humanity's place in the universe, which had previously been "concealed and obscured by man's faulty world view" (Ketterer 203), but as a science fiction writer he labors to do so with strong scientific feasibility in order to deny our misguidedly anthropocentric view of the universe.

The new conception of reality that Vonnegut reveals exposes our insignificance in the cosmic order and how our desire for meaning and purpose in life are no more than illusions but also, paradoxically, how human awareness can be conceived of as the greatest force in the universe, a force that holds the potential to create that very meaning and purpose. This is the crux of Vonnegut's postmodern humanism, the comic apocalyptic philosophy which combines his "acerbically witty humbling of humanity" with his "insistence that to love and serve humanity is our highest calling" (Davis, *Crusade* 51). Therefore, whereas the prototypical plot of the pulp science fiction paperback of the time explains how "in the course of a couple hundred action-packed pages, the hero alone singlehandedly overturns the world" (Bloch 106), the final vista of a novel like *Player Piano* is of the impotence of the common folk faced against the relentlessly dehumanizing machine of the technocratic state and the entropic process of history. Nevertheless, Vonnegut implies that the recognition of chaos as the greatest force in the universe is the first step towards creation, and his failed rebels prove that there is

dignity and hope in opposing the dehumanizing course of history, and show how the individual can transform reality, even if said transformation is left only "to the record" (*PP* 340). *Player Piano* is the first of a series of science fiction experiments through which Vonnegut exposes his comic apocalyptic belief in humanity's potential to reorient our postmodern nightmares into the attainable dream of a better world by exchanging the apocalyptic promise of New Jerusalem as a messianic kingdom in the afterlife for that of a new chance to find meaning and fulfillment here on Earth.

Ketterer poses that the fourth and last phase of the science fiction plot, after dystopia, catastrophe, and post-catastrophe, is that in which "the center of interest shifts to the cosmic voyage and world beyond earth" (123), a phase whose "informing inspirations" are the "new Heaven and the new Earth" (124) prophesied in the book of Revelation. Science fiction, therefore, is an essentially apocalyptic literature that reaches its apex in the creation of a new reality; in the imagining of plausible new worlds that incite a philosophical apocalypse (Ketterer 20) in the minds of readers through the contrast with the reality that they presently inhabit.[65] Hence, it stands as the best means of expression for Vonnegut's comic apocalyptic project to expose the human mind's possibilities to reinvent the world through the creation of stories that, in their flawed fictionality, never aspire to the status of bedrock truth but rather incite readers to discover and create their own truths through "a radical reconnection of the historical and the imaginary, the realistic and the fantastic, the sequential and the simultaneous, the author and the text" (Klinkowitz, *Kurt Vonnegut* 69). In *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), the author acknowledges the transformative potential of the genre conceding that science fiction was "a big help" in Billy Pilgrim and Eliot Rosewater's healing process to "re-invent themselves and their universe" after having found "life meaningless" during their experiences in World War II (*SH5* 101).

In a world that has transcended all acceptable limits and where daily life seems to demand the same suspension of disbelief as the wildest form of fantasy, Vonnegut understands that science fiction can fulfill the need for what Robert Scholes calls "a

[65] The process of the religious apocalyptist actually has much in common with that of the science fiction narrator. Norman Cohn explains that "an apocalyptist commonly received his revelations in visual form, whether as dreams or as ecstatic visions – sometimes he even felt himself transported to some distant region of the earth, or of the heavens" (164), which recalls the otherworldly experiences of Vonnegut characters such as Malachi Constant or Billy Pilgrim. "Often," Cohn continues, "the events that were revealed to him were disguised in symbols and allegories" (164), much like the metaphorical connotations of typical science fictional tropes such as space invasions, interaction with alien races, or post-apocalyptic scenarios.

cosmic imagination" (217) that will allow people to understand that reality is indeed a process in which humanity constantly imagines and re-imagines itself, and so each individual has the potential to "play a role in the re-imagination of himself" and "turn civilization in the direction of integration and away from alienation" in order to "bring human life back into harmony with the universe" (Scholes 217). But first, humanity must undergo a revelation to realize its proper place in the cosmic order. In order to perform an act of creation, it is indispensable to acquiesce to chaos.

4.4 Cosmic anthropology: The Tralfamadorian lessons to look for meaning inward

As mentioned before, Kurt Vonnegut approaches science fiction first and foremost with the spirit of an anthropologist, contemplating the genre as a means to place humanity in an intergalactic context of cultural relativism in which Earth is but a small, insignificant planet amid the immeasurable vastness of the universe. This presents human beings not as the greatest creation of a ubiquitous and all-knowing God, but as essentially a biological accident; merely the result of a series of evolutionary processes guided solely by chance. The author once explained that even "[a] firstgrader should understand that his culture isn't a rational invention, that there are thousands of other cultures and they all work pretty well; that all cultures function on faith rather than truth; that there are lots of alternatives to our own society" (*WFG* 279), and throughout his novelistic career, Vonnegut underscores this idea with his tendency to create characters who, in their role of observers from other, supposedly less developed cultures, actually act as deadpan analysts that unmask the absurdity of American culture. Characters such as the Shah of Bratpuhr who, in *Player Piano,* urges the inhabitants of the purported technological utopia whom he actually sees as slaves to "Live!" (*PP* 169), or Bokonon, the sailor from Tobago who becomes the leader of what the American visitors to the "Banana Republic" of San Lorenzo consider anything but a primitive cult, are distanced enough from the American myth of cultural superiority as to identify "the absurdity and nonsense upon which modern society carries forth its development" (Vallina Samperio "Wasteland" 107). This is a key characteristic of postmodernism, which, in its efforts to expose the construed nature of discourses that feign their claim to truth, allows for voices "once silenced by the modern monomyth of one essential 'truth'" to "speak from the margins" (Davis, *Crusade* 14). In *Galápagos* (1985), Vonnegut takes this notion even further by

undermining "the perceived superiority of humanity in the biosphere" (Tally, 123) and exposing how humans are just one of thousands of species on Earth, with nothing to privilege them among the rest whatsoever, as the far-reaching narrative of evolution developed throughout the novel demonstrates that "nature does not differentiate between people, iguanas, and seaweed" (Rosen 53), because "evolution is a series of events that connect all things equally, privileging no one species over another" (53). Even the aspects that supposedly make the human race unique, such as the performance of rituals and the capacity for artistic creation, are not presented as humanity's exclusive domain, as implied by the book's narrator when, after describing the elaborate mating dance of the blue footed booby, he asks: "Dare we call it 'religion'? Or, if we lack that sort of courage, might we at least call it 'art'?" (*GP* 115).[66]

It is the science fiction trope of space travel, however, that allows Vonnegut to develop his theme of cultural relativism beyond a human or planetary scale and explore the insignificance of humanity amid the infinity of the cosmos. The theme was first and most deeply explored in his second novel, *The Sirens of Titan* (1959), which, according to Ketterer, "provides an outside perimeter or a cosmic backdrop against which the action in all of Vonnegut's works is played" (297). In the book, protagonist Malachi Constant transforms from an amoral profligate who attributes his immense wealth and luck to the notion that "somebody up there likes me" (*SOT* 15) to a beatific wise man who understands that the only path to "goodness and wisdom" (2) is understanding that truth lies "within every human being" (1) and that the sole purpose of human life is "to love

[66] Perhaps the most critically discussed motif employed by Vonnegut to develop this notion of "cultural relativism" among all the species on Earth is the image of the birds intoning their call of "Poo-tee-weet?" (*SH5*, 215) after key moments in the plot of several of his novels, most famously after the bombing of Dresden in *Slaughterhouse-Five.*
Schatt argues that the birds represent "the cool, detached way to deal with a catastrophe" (79) and Olderman expands that they are a metaphor of the lack of human purpose and meaning, as in their detached indifference to human matters (quite literally flying above them), their call seems to imply that human affairs do not have the cosmic significance that we insist on attributing to them (198). Olderman speaculates that "it probably means 'so what'; but it also means 'I see the dimensions of human life and I survive!'" (199).
To Vallina Samperio, the birds, owing to their status as an "outside element" are able to "perceive the human being has isolated himself from the benefits of nature, having exchanged them for the supposed fruits of technological progress" ("Wasteland" 107), and he even proposes a homophonous translation of "Poo-tee-weet?" as "You see what?" (108); a sort of reproval of humanity's destructive tendencies from our neighbors in the sky.
Finally, an analogue can also be clearly traced between the recurrent appearance of birds in post-massacre scenarios in Vonnegut's novels and the scene in the book of Revelation in which, after the battle of Armageddon, an angel summons the birds to "Come and gather yourselves together unto the supper of the great God, that ye may eat the flesh of kings, and the flesh of captains, and the flesh of mighty men, and the flesh of horses, and of them that sit on them, and the flesh of all men, both free and bond, both small and great" (Rev 19:17-18).

whoever is around to be loved" (320). The character's process, which Vonnegut develops against the backdrop of the startling revelation that the whole of human history has merely been a pantomime orchestrated to serve a ludicrous purpose for the planet Tralfamadore, symbolizes the quintessence of Vonnegut's apocalyptic philosophy, which is that the acceptance of chaos is the only path to unlock the door to creation, and that the potential to do so resides within the core of each individual.

Cloaked in the seemingly preposterous regalia of a space opera, *The Sirens of Titan* is indeed a "serious and highly original metaphysical treatise" (Goldsmith 10) which, "in the tradition of *Siddharta, Der Zauberberg,* and *L'etranger,*" wrestles with "nothing less than the cosmological question" (10). By revealing the chimera of human-made meaning, the novel, according to Hildebrand, "seems to wipe out both pride and self-pity at the same time, not to mention God and the Devil" (124), a terrific notion that pulls the metaphysical ground on which human thought has rested for centuries from below our feet, but at the same time proposes that, once all absolute notions have been discarded and we realize that it is foolish to look for purpose "outward" (*SOT* 1), humanity must be judged in exclusively human terms. Thus, Karen and Charles Wood propose that in *The Sirens of Titan* Vonnegut uses "the themes and motifs of science fiction to produce a new answer to the old question" (148); that is, the question over the nature, significance and purpose of life that has haunted our race since the dawn of history. This new answer, through which Vonnegut, according to Wood and Wood, "adds a dimension . . . which is missing in most of our previous literature" (149) is that "[f]or a relativistic world, he sees no need for new answers," as "[i]rresolution needs no resolution but should rather be appreciated as the ultimate reality" (148). This notion, which is the seed of Vonnegut's comic apocalyptic philosophy, can only be realized through an integration of science and fiction as pure as Vonnegut's, as what the author is doing, essentially, is giving a literary, palatable shape to Albert Einstein's notion that "The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious," because it is "the source of all true art and science" (qtd. in Strand 253).

To achieve this revelation, however, humanity needs a little help, and that is when Vonnegut's favorite alien race, the Tralfamadorians, come handy. The interactions between the inhabitants of Earth and Tralfamadore, first in *The Sirens of Titan* and subsequently in *Slaughterhouse-Five,* serve as philosophical dialogues in which the elder race reveals some of its cosmic knowledge on the futility of meaning and the illusion of

understanding to the younger, more naïve and misinformed earthling civilization. The discovery in *The Sirens of Titan* of how many of the most important landmarks of human history, from Stonehenge to the Great Wall of China or the Moscow Kremlin are indeed merely billboards to assuage a Tralfamadorian pilot stranded on the seventh moon of Saturn that the replacement part his spaceship needs is on its way (*SOT* 276), and the final revelation that the message this pilot is carrying is a mere note that reads "Greetings" (306), serve to expose the futility of our attempts to attach a narrative of meaning and purpose to human history.

Furthermore, Vonnegut uses the dystopian history of the Tralfamadorians themselves as a dire admonition of what the future could hold for humanity unless it abandons its fundamentalist tendencies. The original inhabitants of the planet, he writes, were "obsessed by the idea that everything that existed had to have a purpose, and that some purposes were higher than others" (*SOT* 279). Thus, they spent their time trying to unearth such hidden meaning of life, but whenever they found one, they considered it so ludicrous that "rather than serve such a low purpose, the creatures would make a machine to serve it" (279–280) while they continued the search for their higher calling. These machines, Vonnegut explains,

> Did everything so properly that they were finally given the job of finding out what the highest purpose of the creatures could be.
>
> The machines reported in all honesty that the creatures couldn't really be said to have any purpose at all.
> The creatures thereupon began slaying each other, because they hated purposeless things above all else.
>
> And they discovered that they weren't even very good at slaying. So they turned that job over to the machines, too. And the machines finished up the job in less time than it takes to say, "Tralfamadore". (280)

Beyond acting as a "what if" scenario to illustrate Vonnegut's deepest fears about the human condition, the most important otherworldly revelations that Tralfamadorians offer earthlings are probably those related to the nature of time. For the inhabitants of Tralfamadore, "[e]verything that ever was always will be, and everything that ever will be always was" (*SOT* 292), as they are able to perceive time not as a chronological

succession of moments, but as an everlasting and invariable totality. "All time is all time," one of the extraterrestrials explains in *Slaughterhouse-Five*,

> It does not change. It does not lend itself to warnings and explanations. It simply *is*. Take it moment by moment and you will see that we are all, as I've said before, bugs in amber. (*SH5* 86)[67]

This vision of time as a constant whole allows for a perspective well beyond the parameters of human chronology, to the point that a character in *The Sirens of Titan* can summarize the history of Earth between the years 1 and 1 million A.D. by simply explaining that "Following the death of Jesus Christ, there was a period of readjustment that lasted one million years" (*SOT* 46), an idea that Vonnegut would return to in *Galápagos,* with its million-year narrative scope in which human hegemony is proven to be a mere episode in the ever-evolving history of the planet. The greatest cognitive shock that arises from the Vonnegut's description of the Tralfamadorian view of time, however, is the sheer denial of history as a meaningful narrative. By proposing that we live in a predetermined universe where everything that will happen has already happened, including the absurd and unavoidable destruction of the whole universe when a Tralfamadorian pilot blows it up experimenting with new forms of fuel for his spaceship (*SH5* 116), the author implies that notions such as causality, purpose and meaning are totally pointless because, essentially, there is no *why*. Thus, Tralfamadorian time is in direct opposition to apocalyptic time, which also offers a total view of history but, in this

[67] Ginger Strand traces Vonnegut's concept of the dual nature of time to his reading of Norbert Wiener's *Cybernetics* (1948), which delves into the distinction between Newtonian and Bergsonian time. Bergsonian time, or the time of biology, Strand explains, "moves relentlessly in one direction – birth, growth, decline, and death succeeding one another in an inexorable forward march," whereas Newtonian time, or the time of physics hypothesizes that "everything has already happened: nothing new can be created, and nothing can really ever die" (184). In a spirit similar to the Tralfamadorians, Vonnegut's fellow science fiction writer Philip K. Dick contends that "[t]here are two times," the first being "our experience or perception or construct or ontological matrix" and "the outer flow of the universe" which "moves in a different direction" (*Shifting* 215). Both times are real, Dick says, but "by experiencing time as we do, orthogonally to its actual direction, we get a totally wrong idea of the sequence of events, of causality, of what is past and what is future, where the universe is going" (215).
In the apocalypse, of course, time is also a problematic concept. The book of Revelation proposes the narration of the end of time, a moment after which "there should be time no longer" (Rev 10:6) while parallely, existence continues in the eternal realm of New Jerusalem, in a hypothetical time beyond time. Thus, "the story of apocalypse is simultaneously about the ending of everything and yet suggests a time afterward" (Rosen xxiv). Elizabeth K. Rosen goes even further into the investigation of apocalyptic time by examining it as a narrative device, explaining how St. John occupies two different moments simultaneously in Revelation, "since he is both in the present being shown the future and in the future experiencing it," which creates "a tension between time as a principle (a continuum of successive individual moments) and time as a narrative concept (a method of juxtaposing different moments in a story)" (xxiv). Vonnegut's concept of Tralfamadorian time can be interpreted as his vision of Newtonian time, but it also functions as a realization of the apocalyptic promise of a time beyond time.

case, with the intent of allowing believers to "discover God's will for the present as well as the overall meaning of human existence" (*Toward* May 13). In the Tralfamadorian view there is no God other than chance, as all the events of time exist simultaneously instead of being linked in a chain of causality, as much as earthlings, as "the great explainers" (*SH5* 85) insist on thinking otherwise due to their limited perception.[68] All our attempts to rationalize the course of life as we humans see it, therefore, are flawed from the beginning, doomed to result in myths of order; mere metaphors which do not really correspond to the actual nature of reality which is inaccessible to us. All we are left to do is stubbornly attach narratives of purpose, luck, providence, cause and consequence to "accidents in a very busy place" (*SS* 14).

Lawrence Broer claims that, due to the grave implications of its revelations about human cognition and the nature of the cosmos, the name of the planet Tralfamadore can be interpreted as an anagram of "fatal dream" (*Sanity Plea* 87). However, I personally understand that the revelations about the meaninglessness of existence and the ludicrousness of our anthropocentric attempts to rationalize reality in *The Sirens of Titan* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* actually serve as Vonnegut's admonishment that chaos should be embraced rather than denied, as the acquiescence to life *as* chaos is the first step towards the creation of a more balanced and sustainable existence. The lessons of Tralfamadore, therefore, are not aimed at causing despair but stand instead as the pivotal step in the apocalyptic transformation Vonnegut wants his readers to undergo, because "the fulfillment of the apocalyptic imagination demands that the destructive chaos give way finally to a new order" (Ketterer 14). Tralfamadorian time does not deny apocalypse as a revelation of meaning, but rather it subverts the narrative from a tragic doctrine that believes in the existence of a preordained divine plan for the salvation of a segment of humanity to a comic interpretation that empowers each individual to bring forth his or her own salvation in life by recognizing that, in the absence of grand meanings, we are free

[68] In a quintessentially Vonnegut twist, it is a Tralfamadorian zoo guide who, in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, struggles to explain the human perception of time to his fellow Tralfamadorians, thus presenting us earthlings as the unusual aliens and not the other way around.
The guide asks the crowd at the zoo to imagine that they are "looking across a desert at a mountain range on a day that was twinkling bright and clear" (*SH5* 115). While they are free to gaze in any direction they so wish, among them is Billy Pilgrim, "this poor Earthling" (115) whose head is "encased in a steel sphere which he could never take off" (115); a sphere that features only a small eyehole to which a six-foot pipe is attached. "All Billy can see," the guide explains, is "the little dot at the end of the pipe" (116) and, to make matters even worse, he is also tied to a flatcar on rails that "sometimes crept, sometimes went extremely fast, often stopped—went uphill, downhill, around curves, along straightaways" (116). Totally unaware of his abnormal situation, "[w]hatever poor Billy saw through the pipe, he had no choice but to say to himself, 'That's life'" (116).

to create our own. Chris Glover writes that "Knowledge of the specifics of the ultimate demise of the entire universe should not prevent one from appreciating life as it is" (206), and thus Vonnegut invites his readers to avoid the rigidity of being "unstuck in time" (*SH5* 23) and committing the same mistakes time and again like Billy Pilgrim, because life does not have to be that way and there is an alternative path. It is in our hand as human beings to work towards improving our condition, precisely because, instead of witnessing time as an inalterable whole, we inhabit what Vonnegut's friend Norman Mailer once referred to as "the perpetual climax of the present" ("White Negro" 290). We humans determine how to act and contribute to the collective creation that we call reality on a daily basis, and therefore we must assume our responsibility in creating a more humane world and understand that individual behavior is the foundation for better societies. Franz Kafka once wrote that, in reality, Judgment Day is "a summary court in perpetual session" (169). To this, Vonnegut would at that its final verdict is in our hands.

Vonnegut ultimately uses Tralfamadore as a vehicle to compel his readers to realize their limitations and understand that they are not at the center of the cosmos but merely a tiny wisp amid the inscrutable immensity of time and space. By observing humanity "from an interplanetary vantage point" (Olderman 212), the writer unveils the apocalyptic revelation of our true place in the cosmic order, a fact that he hopes will confer his readers a newfound sense of grace that unlocks the door to their creative potential. Only once human beings acknowledge their condition as "modern Lilliputians" (Olderman 192) and discard any notion of a higher purpose in life may they abandon the same tragic apocalyptic course that led to the annihilation of the original Tralfamadorians and start to look inward for new purposes. Our inescapable limitations as humans imply that these purposes will inevitably be fictional constructions that bear no relation to the actual workings of the cosmos, and so the only criteria to measure them must be not their veracity, but the fact that they are harmless and respect human life as the only abstraction that we can really understand and the only sacred article of faith that we must respect; the *foma* that we must live by.[69] Thus, the revelation of Tralfamadorian time ultimately does

[69] Vonnegut often described himself as a humanist, and he was actually Honorary President of the American Humanist Association from the death of the former Honorary President, his fellow science fiction writer Isaac Asimov, in 1992, until his own passing in 2007. In *Timequake,* the author explains that "[h]umanists try to behave decently and honorably without any expectations of rewards or punishments in an afterlife. The Creator of the Universe has been to us unknowable so far. We serve as well as we can the highest abstraction of which we have some understanding, which is our community" (*TQ* 72). Thus, the humanist credo is justified by the *foma* of human life as sanctified entity that must be revered as sacred even in the

not attempt to lead us into despair at the inescapable lack of meaning and the unchallengeable limitations of our perception, but rather to invite us to stop wondering why and get to work to improve the human condition, because if time is indeed not a linear movement from Genesis to Apocalypse, from Eden to New Jerusalem, then, in Schatt's words, "it becomes man's responsibility to create a Heaven on Earth" (93) and usher in the Millennium as a new world of mind that accepts our rightful place in nature, rejects the fundamentalist rhetoric in vogue during the Cold War and cherishes life above all else.

Robert Scholes writes that alienation is "the price we pay for civilization" (217), and through science fiction Vonnegut aims to challenge that alienation and the subsequent inaction by generating "in literature and in life, systems that bring human desires into closer harmony with the systems operating in the whole cosmos" (217). Just like Billy Pilgrim in *Slaughterhouse-Five,* Vonnegut pretends to prescribe "corrective lenses for earthling souls" (29) that will reveal the significance of human-made meaning as the only source of hope and enlightenment, because "[t]o search for the purpose of human life in the transcendent and not in ourselves, or in meaningful human relationships with others . . . is making the world around us more absurd than it is" (Abádi-Nagy 49). Perhaps the clearest illustration of how the author believes that this potential is present in every single human being is the character of Malachi Constant in *The Sirens of Titan,* who, through the example of his apocalyptic transformation becomes, in Davis' words, "Vonnegut's attempt to educate humanity" (*Crusade* 49). From his first appearance as a carefree libertine who attributes the outrageous fortune he inherited from his father to the hand of God, Malachi undergoes an intergalactic epopee through the Moon, Mercury and Titan that reveals to him the arbitrary nature of existence and the absurdity of attempting to rationalize forces which are beyond human understanding. In the process, Malachi becomes a witness of the absurd violence and egotistical pretentions of humanity, and chooses to conceive of his experiences as a lesson in humbling, which makes him understand and accept "the limitations imposed upon us by existence and by our innate tendencies and past follies" (May, *Toward* 198), and how in a world in which "we are what we pretend to be" (*MN* v) we all must accept our responsibility in each other's wellbeing as the only true calling we have in life.

absence of scientific evidence to prove it as such. "Humanist," the author concludes, "is nothing more supernatural than a handy synonym for 'good citizenship and common decency'" (*GDK* 17).

Thus, if at the beginning of *The Sirens of Titan,* Malachi Constant misguidedly claims that "I guess somebody up there likes me" (15), by the end of the novel he can finally validate those words, not because he is extremely wealthy or powerful, but because he has been able to appreciate "the gift of life" (318). Understanding the harmful nature of his previous misconceptions, Constant realizes that it is solely up to himself to make his own existence meaningful through friendship, love and family. After years obsessing over the connotations of a name which means "faithful messenger" (*SOT* 30), the character reaches the moment of his death with a serene satisfaction, finally aware that the message he had to deliver is much simpler than he would have thought and yet stands as the greatest message that we all must carry: a life. James M. Mellard writes that, "For Vonnegut, the *Logos,* the word between Alpha and Omega, *is* life" (194) and that is the narrative that we all must create: a life which, beyond delusions of grandeur and fantasies of great aspirations, grants us the very real prospect of creating our own Heaven on Earth for ourselves and the people we love. Being alive and possessing the gift of human awareness allows us all to fulfil our apocalyptic potential to transform the world into a fairer place when it really matters: while we are living and not in a hypothetical afterlife.[70]

The creative potential of human awareness, of the narratives we can create, even in their ultimate nature as *foma,* nothing but harmless untruths, is presented by Vonnegut as the greatest force in the universe, able even to change the nature of a Tralfamadorian robot devoid of feelings to whom humanity is but a primitive race useful only as a tool to achieve his purpose. Through its interaction with the character of Winston Niles Rumfoord in Titan, the Tralfamadorian robot Salo discovers the meaning of friendship, a notion which "was a fascinating novelty to him" (*SOT* 283) as he had never heard of it before he met his fellow intergalactic castaway on the seventh moon of Saturn. *The Sirens of Titan* presents this intrinsically human notion, unheard of beyond the Solar System, as an infinitely powerful transformative force when Salo, devastated by having disappointed Rumfoord with his revelation of how all of humanity had been used for a ludicrous Tralfamadorian purpose, ultimately transcends his machine nature, betrays his

[70] Vonnegut's few visions of the afterlife invariably present it as a dull, wearisome existence that not only fails to deliver the promise of either salvation in Heaven or agony in Hell, but makes the deceased appreciate how it was actually life that held all the potential blessings attributed to Heaven in religious discourse. Thus, in *Slapstick,* a device to talk to the dead reveals that what awaits us after our passing is "tedious in the extreme" (219), as souls are left to be "bored stiff" (264) for all eternity in an uninteresting and monotonous place they refer to as "The Turkey Farm" (219); a vision that grants further validation to the Shah of Bratpuhr's exhortation to "Live!" in *Player Piano* (169).

commitment, and reveals the nature of the message he was commissioned to carry, all as an act of friendship. "The machine is no longer a machine," Vonnegut writes (*SOT* 306), implying that, however insignificant humanity may be in the cosmic order, our greatest assets are a transformative force that has no rival in the whole universe, and placing his hope in his fellow human beings' understanding of the power that lies at the reach of their hands.

4.5 "Look inward": The apocalyptic potential within each individual

Just like Revelation is a text that pretends to illuminate the future through hope, unveiling secrets that will enlighten "one's acceptance of the past" and strengthen "his approach to the present" (May, *Toward* 22–23), *The Sirens of Titan*, as a paradigm of Vonnegut's comic apocalyptic philosophy, also proposes a narrative to explain human history (even if it presents it as preposterous) and submits the credo of postmodern humanism as the only plausible means to approach an uncertain present. In the process, the novel reveals the potential that gives humanity its greatest power: its ability to change, to transform itself and its world and alter the course of history by embracing a truly meaningful purpose that abets life over death. The novel is, as Herbert Klein puts it, "an allegory on contemporary man's physical condition and the steps he would have to take to change it" ("Genre"), in which Vonnegut illuminates the power of humanity's infinite creative capacities and lays his hope in his fellow human beings' acknowledgement and embrace of them. As such, the book is narrated from a distant future in which humanity's vitriolic tendencies are but a relic of a foregone past; a time of goodness and wisdom in which "[e]veryone now knows how to find the meaning of life within himself" (*SOT* 1). Such narrative perspective is a science fiction device but also a nod to the time scale of John's apocalypse, and serves to underscore the limitations of our anthropocentric understanding of time. As "short-lived and short-sighted" beings (Rosen 63), we demand changes to be immediate and instantly noticeable, when the rhythms of evolution actually operate on a much larger time scale than those of human life and can only be appreciated with a perspective of thousands of years.

However, at the time of the Cold War, when the clock seemed to be ticking towards an ever closer eve of nuclear destruction that could end the whole world, there

was no time to spare waiting for long-term changes, and so Vonnegut claims that the only source of hope resides in the individual human being's apocalyptic potential to reinvent reality. Paradoxically, at the same time that he argues that our perception is limited, time as a whole is predetermined, and history is meaningless, Vonnegut proposes that the individual human being, like Malachi Constant, still has the power to exert change, if not on a global scale at least certainly in the immediate social and physical surroundings that conform his or her personal "world." In that aptitude, the author argues, resides our greatest hope for the future and, more pressingly, the present, as local, individual change, is the trigger for deeper collective changes, and the comic apocalyptic process must be experienced by each individual as a personal evolution before it can be translated into full-scale socio-political transformations. In essence, Vonnegut, is proposing evolution as a creative narrative to challenge the chaotic discourse of entropy, explaining that, contrary to the second law of thermodynamics, organisms can actually progress "from the simple structure to the more complex" (Zamora 73). Evolution, in this sense, is not the million-year biological process of *Galápagos*, but the capacity to realize our mistakes and work towards improving them; the faculty to "learn" (*GP* 324) which resides at the heart of the "unwavering band of light" (*BOC* 227) of each person's awareness. It may even be our own ignorance about the fixed nature of the universe, the limited perception that prevent us from understanding time as an unchangeable whole like the Tralfamadorians and instead force us to view it as a sequential progression, which allows human beings to transcend our cosmic powerlessness and permit our imagination to take off in flights of fancy that picture a different world, but therein precisely lies the key that unlocks the door to comic apocalyptic transformation. The word creates the world, and our ability to imagine things being different than they are, to project and believe in change and express it with words, empowers us to work towards the construction of the very realities we imagine, and to overcome chaos through creation. Therefore, Vonnegut presents the transformation of Malachi Constant as an example that may illuminate the course through which all men and women can ultimately repudiate the fundamentalism and violence of the atomic age and create a more humane reality. In his odyssey of galactic exile, Malachi finally understands that home is not actually a physical destination but, in Sumner's words, "a state of mind and a way of relating to others" (40), and that is the realization that the author wants his readers to arrive at, too.

In *The Sirens of Titan,* Vonnegut places special emphasis on how this apocalyptic transformation must be an individual process, and implies that collective projects to usher in change run the risk of breeding the very fundamentalism they purport to oppose, an idea he develops through the character of Winston Niles Rumfoord. Apart from being a metaphysical exploration of the nature and meaning of life, Vonnegut's second novel also stands as a complex treatise on the workings of social change. Peter Paik explains that, unlike texts in the utopian mode, which present "the image of a society already established and governed according to more rational and enlightened principles" (2), a novel like *The Sirens of Titan* deploys "the speculative mode in order to explore the dynamics whereby a social and political order is transformed" (2). Thus, Vonnegut's text presents a "bedeviling ethical dilemma" (19) by unmasking the dehumanizing violence often perpetrated in the name of creating new sociopolitical orders as well as the "harsh realities that call for these undertakings" (20). Science fiction allows the author to explore these dynamics with a freedom that he probably would not have been granted by a realistic narrative because, as Paik contends, the "exaggerated scaffolding provided by the fantasy" (21) in its motifs of alien races and space travel, permits the reader to refrain from the moralistic impulses that would arise from a similar plot developed in a very familiar here and now. The distance bestowed by narratives dealing with "imaginary societies and alternate realities" (21) allow readers to approach perspectives different from their own devoid of "the blinding glare of moral authority" (21) and therefore opens up the possibility of critical reflection to a degree simply inconceivable in a more undisputedly prestigious literary form such as a realistic novel or a political essay.

At the start of *The Sirens of Titan,* New England millionaire Rumfoord runs his spaceship into a "chrono-synclastic infundibulum" (*SOT* 20), which results in him and his dog Kazak existing as a wave phenomenon that intermittently materializes at different points in space and time in a fashion that precedes Billy Pilgrim's "unstuck in time" condition in *Slaughterhouse-Five.* Taking advantage of his new, quasi-ubiquitous condition, Rumfoord resolves to become a demiurge and embark on an apocalyptic project to alter the course of history and improve the human condition. However, his plan for the salvation of the planet is developed with a Machiavellian zeal that willingly disregards the horrifying violence of his acts as a necessary step towards salvation. "Enough of these frizzles in leadership, in which millions die for nothing or less," the character declares, "Let us have, for a change, a magnificently-led few who die for a great

deal" (*SOT* 177); and as such he orchestrates a massacre in the form of a faux Martian invasion which is suppressed by earthlings with such brutality that, traumatized by their acts, they refrain from ever using violence again. Thus is world peace achieved at the cost of deception and violence, and subsequently maintained through a religion of universal guilt, The Church of God the Utterly Indifferent, which refutes any notion of free will, and a system of enforced handicapping whereby citizens are obliged to conceal and reject their biologically-gifted talents and attributes, thus robbing them of their uniqueness, repressing the category of the modern, self-affirming individual and replacing it by a "self-scourging and self-mortifying subject resembling that of the Middle Ages" (Paik 40). However pure his original intentions, therefore, Rumfoord's new order is even more fundamentalist and totalitarian than the previous one, accomplished as it is through genocide and exercised through the imposition of dehumanizing metanarratives that rationalize his acts as necessary stages in the overarching chronicle of history and coerce the survivors into rejecting any further upheavals. As the ultimate gesture to fulfill his demiurgic project, Rumfoord utilizes Malachi Constant as a symbol of all that used to be wrong with the human condition and condemns him to exile in Titan as an epiphany that will finally purge humanity and illuminate a new beginning. "We will imagine, to our spiritual satisfaction . . . that you are taking all mistaken ideas about the meaning of luck, all misused wealth and power, and all your disgusting pastimes with you," Rumfoord says to Malachi (*SOT* 260), thus denying him his status as an individual and reducing him to the condition of a means to an end; an emblem that can be discarded and humiliated without any form of compassion as it has been disavowed of everything that makes it human in the first place.

It does not seem a stretch to conceive of Rumfoord as a metaphor of the path taken by the United States after World War II. In their self-appointed role as world's police, the nation's leaders appeared openly determined to challenge injustice and inhumanity even through supremely inhuman acts (Paik 55) such as warfare, nuclear production and support for non-democratic regimes as long as they allowed to hamper the advance of communism, understood as the source of all evil in the tragic apocalyptic dichotomy of the Cold War. Through his showbiz flair and inexhaustible "supply of dumfounding new sensations" (*SOT* 266), Rumfoord manages to shrug off any kind of criticism or opposition, as the general public, rejoicing in a newfound state of prosperity, simply opts

to ignore the horror and deceit that has laid the foundation for their current condition. Paik explains that

> The state of the contentedness and satisfaction experienced by posthistorical individuals thus depends on the one hand on their unconstrained enjoyment of abundance and security, which they no longer regard as objects to be achieved through toil and sacrifice, and on the other hand on their being rendered apathetic to the historical accumulation of injustices and grievances, which they reflexively disparage as the relics of a primitive and barbarous past, in accordance with the principle that the 'wounds of the Spirit heal, and leave no scars behind.' The grievous price of achieving utopia thus ceases to be terrible once *Homo sapiens* reaches the stage at which it feels free to shrug off as unduly burdensome the moral reservations entailed by the sacrifices that have been committed for the sake of advancing the progress of history. If economic productivity and technological advancement solve the problem of human antagonism, it does so by abolishing the category of the human itself, hence [Alexandre] Kojève's doctrine of 'annihilation of Man properly so-called' with the attainment of the realm of freedom and the arrival of the concord and unanimity enjoyed by pacified beasts. (43–44)

In a sense, the citizens of Rumfoord's "utopia" have reached that "pacified beast" stage that Francis Fukuyama liken to the carefree contentment of a dog (311). Fukuyama describes it as a state similar to the complacency of a dog in which people, satisfied with having all their primary necessities covered, cease to envision any kind of improvement or reflect on the circumstances that have led them to this state and simply set out to rejoice in their carefree present condition. In all of his novels, Vonnegut attempts to fight this post-human inaction that passively accepts violence as a given and ignores atrocities such as Dresden, Hiroshima, or My Lai, opting instead to look back at history and recognize violence so that it will not be repeated. Said decision, however, is a matter of individual choice, as political projects for change are prone to fall prey to the very fundamentalism and dehumanization that they seek to challenge, because power corrupts leaders into thinking they are somehow above the common denominator and can ignore the "sanctity of the individual" (Davis, *Crusade* 54) in order to attain their goals. Characters like Winston Niles Rumfoord in *The Sirens of Titan* or Felix Hoenikker in *Cat's Cradle* are a commentary by Vonnegut on how many people suffer the delusion that they are unique

and entitled to a pristine innocence in their pursuit of a significant purpose beyond moral concerns, a notion that the author proves utterly misguided when the whole of human history is revealed to obey a completely farcical aim at the end of *The Sirens of Titan.*

However, individuals like Malachi Constant, whose apocalyptic transformation enables him to find a means to appreciate and cherish life for what it is in purely human terms and beyond self-aggrandizing prospects, prove that there is hope as long as we understand that "sense and meaning can only be the ineluctable responsibility of each individual" (H. Klein, "Genre"). Just like Alvin Hoffer declares that "[f]aith in a holy cause is to a considerable extent a substitute for the loss of faith in ourselves," Vonnegut incites his readers to recover the faith in their creative powers and find their own causes to live for, as long as these causes recognize how life equates all human beings and no one has the right to use the lives of others as a means to an end. Only by respecting all life as sacred may the world be improved in a manner that repudiates the tragic apocalyptic myth of purifying and reinvigorating destruction and instead embraces apocalyptic transformation as a spiritual allegory for personal improvement. As a postmodernist writer, Vonnegut is suspicious of the attainment of this goal through utopian projects that believe in a final state of New Jerusalem-style perfectibility for humanity. Instead, he understands the myth of New Jerusalem as a spiritual state that each individual has the potential to create and reach on his on her own terms and through his or her own path. In a 1988 speech, the author declared that the villains of his books are never individuals but forces such as "culture, society, and history" (*PS* 31). In his anti-heroic struggle to improve human life, Malachi Constant is an example, as are most of Vonnegut's protagonists, of how these forces can be resisted and defeated through the assertion of human values and human potential. The author's hope, however, is that each reader will follow his characters' lead and create their own comic apocalypse to sanction the forces of life over those of death, not through majestic utopian projects, but by concentrating on "daily, local activity that may improve human life" (Davis, *Crusade* 32).

4.6 "You are somebody now": The path of Vonnegut's antiheroes from revelation to revolution

Even though he was embraced by the sixties' counterculture as a hero and deemed a leftist radical by the contemporary media (Shields 248),[71] Kurt Vonnegut often contended that "everything I believe in I was taught in junior civics during the Great Depression—at School 43 in Indianapolis, with full approval of the school board" (*WFG* 277). As such, his ideas on social transformation and the creative potential of the individual expressed in novels such as *The Sirens of Titan* do not respond to a radical political agenda but can actually be traced back to the foundational myth of America as a redeeming fiction, a "society born out of imagined possibilities" (Bigsby 12) where "[h]ope sprang eternal in a promised land that straddled a continent" (Cullen 34) with the ever-present promise of starting again, of creating a new life. Stephen D. O´Leary argues that, despite "the occasional popularity of tragic visions of catastrophe" (189), it is the comic understanding of apocalypse which sustains American culture, with its "notion of an open temporal horizon of possibility in which America appears, however hazily, as the 'shining city on a hill' that points the way into the new age" (189), and, no matter how grave the crisis of the Cold War era becomes, Vonnegut never ceases to believe in the individual, that "sacred American icon" (T. Miller 342), and his or her potential to attain redemption and enlighten the path to a better life. Novel after novel, the author insists that the country "could live up to its promise if only people would embrace their better selves—the selves dedicated to equality and free speech and kindness and giving the downtrodden a hand" (Strand 251), and through the example of his protagonists, he attempts to illustrate "the course of action that Americans must pursue if they desire to prevent the American Dream from becoming an American nightmare" (Schatt 157), a gesture which he thinks depends not on politicians and large organizations, but on the individual transformation of each citizen.

What is needed, Vonnegut argues, is what Klinkowitz calls a "new mythology" (*Kurt Vonnegut* 62); a rhetoric that will replace the outmoded American Dream, which has been twisted into a tragic apocalyptic discourse that justifies social and economic

[71] The view of Vonnegut as a firebrand liberal still persists, especially among conservative sectors. Reporting the author's death in 2007, American TV channel Fox News offensively referred to him as "a sacred cow of the New York literary scene" renowned for his "unique brand of despondent leftism" (Brownlee, "Loathsome").

inequality, creating the gruesome expectation that "a man can always solve his problems" (*WFG* 259) and leading citizens to believe that failure, poverty and depression respond to a sort of Social-Darwinist predestination and cannot be contested. Amid an ever more unequal, self-centered and dehumanized society in which consumerism is presented as the sole solution to endemic loneliness, and suffering and anxiety are concealed behind the smokescreen of the manufactured hyper-realities of television, the final implication of Vonnegut's novels is that the United States and the whole world is "headed for cataclysm unless we find something to live by" (Olderman 191), and that said something must be found within ourselves, not in external sources. The narrative that Vonnegut proposes as an alternative to this pervading malaise, however, is not a radical reconfiguration of social structures, but is in its stead based on a postmodern and humanistic refurbishing of the great foundational pillars of the American creed: faith in the transformative powers of the individual, the embracing of a Christian ethic of altruism and respect for others, and an ideal of community based on the myth of rural and small-town America of Vonnegut's own youth in Indianapolis. Time and again, his novels present protagonists who, far from heroic archetypes, are common men and women who struggle to find meaning amid the chaos and violence of Cold War America by assuming their own responsibility in the present state of humanity and resolving to work towards its improvement.

Vonnegut, as Davis explains, is "unwilling to wear rose-colored glasses" and instead "depicts the plight of humanity in brutally honest terms" (*Crusade* 12), showing how these anti-heroic figures strive to create their own purpose in a world that seems, and often even proves, to have none, but by realizing their own creative potential, respecting human life as sacred, and rejoicing in the company of others, they prove that they, and therefore we, do have the ability to make life better and exert change. In *Bluebeard*, Vonnegut writes, "Nowhere has the number *zero* been of more philosophical value than in the United States" (72), and as if determined to prove this idea, his antiheroes demonstrate that, although they may not be able to change the world in global terms, they are certainly up to the task of changing themselves, of asserting a human center of value amid a chaotic existence that will allow them to start again and make their lives meaningful. This way, they become a source of hope, an illustration of how creation can be born out of chaos, as they open a path for greater changes, for salvation even, if others follow their lead and resolve to "intelligently and humanly" direct "our course into the

future" (Broer, "Duty Dance" 174); towards the enactment of a comic apocalyptic transformation of all humanity.

In the climactic scene of his 1970 play *Happy Birthday, Wanda June,* Vonnegut has the female lead, Penelope, exclaim at her husband Harold, a character that represents the old values of the Hemingway-style uber-masculine adventure hero,

> The old heroes are going to have to get used to this, Harold—the new heroes who refuse to fight. They're trying to save the planet. There's no time for battle, no point to battle anymore. (*HBWJ* 93)

This could well stand as a definition for the prototypical antihero of Vonnegut's novels; a figure which, according to David Simmons, is deployed by the author as a "somewhat didactic attempt to encourage a humanitarian protest against a society considered to be corrupt" (*Anti-Hero* 28). This humanitarian protest rejects any kind of violence and opposes the fundamentalist binaries that the characters identify as causing many of the evils of society, but it does not lead them into the alienation characteristic of many protagonists of American fiction in the immediate post-World War II years. Unlike characters such as Holden Caulfield in J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) or the anonymous narrator in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), who react to the corruption that they identify in society by choosing "values involving personal integrity over those involving political solidarity" (Levine and Papasotiriou 47), Vonnegut's protagonists are never content to withdraw from social interaction and retreat to a realm of privacy and self-imposed isolation. In a manner that precedes the ideals of the sixties counterculture that would vindicate his novels as foundational classics, the antiheroes fabricated by Vonnegut always go through an apocalyptic process of enlightenment that allows them to gain consciousness of the real workings of American society, becoming aware of how the system oppresses the individual citizen and creates inequality, and, most importantly, envisioning an alternative and working towards its accomplishment.

David H. Goldsmith proposes the following description for the path that Vonnegut usually has his main characters follow:

> He selects a protagonist and sets him up against a formidable opponent, but an opponent to whom he is *in some way allied*, the conflict resulting in an epiphany for the protagonist. The path of this conflict can be either from innocence to experience, or just the opposite, or both, but it always results in a heightened

> awareness for the principal character, and occasionally for someone else. . . . In a sense, then, all Vonnegut's heroes are revolutionaries, some consciously so, others only by accident. (32)

Certainly, all of these antiheroes are initially related to the powers they will subsequently oppose, be they high ranking officials in the oppressive state (Paul Proteus in *Player Piano*), happy-go-lucky millionaires (Malachi Constant in *The Sirens of Titan*, Eliot Rosewater in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*), or soldiers that participate in terrible acts of violence during wartime (Billy Pilgrim and Edgar Derby in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Leon Trout in *Galápagos*). Therefore, once they have undergone the revelation that allows them to think for themselves and realize the dehumanization to which they are contributing, the first step that they have to follow in their transformation is to resist the colossal forces of society and history in order to escape the trap of what Max Weber called the "iron cage" of rationalization (180). This "cage" is the system of rules and structures through which societies establish the tragic apocalyptic narratives of purpose, pursuit of efficiency, and control that discourage individual thought and development and preclude citizens from assuming or even considering the consequences of their actions. To escape this illusion of innocence, Vonnegut's antiheroes must first willingly acknowledge their own guilty role in upholding the construct, and resort to face the consequences of their actions and how they have contributed to fostering fundamentalism, inequality and destruction, too, no matter how unintendedly. The author, in Rachel McCoppin's words, believes that "we must all recognize our own personal responsibility for the violence in the world around us if we are ever to eradicate, or at least lessen, man's inhumanity to man" (53), and he repeatedly warns against the dangerous myths of pristine American purity, especially those engendered after World War II[72]. Characters like Paul Proteus and Malachi Constant, who recognize and repudiate their role as cogs in the machine of dehumanization and subsequently opt to resign from a system that they consider morally corrupt even if it affords them a high status and economic comfort, become examples of

[72] In *Mother Night* (1961), a character tells the protagonist Howard W. Campbell, Jr., "You are the only man I ever heard of . . . who has a bad conscience about what he did in the war. Everybody else, no matter what side he was on, no matter what he did, is sure a good man could not have acted in any other way" (*MN* 15); whereas in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, a character refers to Eliot Rosewater, deeply traumatized for his accidental murder of three civilians in the war, as "The only American who has so far noticed World War II" (*GBY* 85). On their part, Billy Pilgrim's obsession over the bombing of Dresden and Kurt Vonnegut's own trauma about surviving it should require no further explanation at this point, as they were extensively analyzed in epigraph 3.7 of this dissertation.

how, in the author's mind, the first step for correcting injustice is to accept our own personal responsibility in "the tragicomedy of existence" (Shields 24).[73]

By taking the step of recognizing the guilt for their "sins of omission and sins of commission" (Davis, *Crusade* 100) instead of mindlessly drifting through life with an illusion of immaculate and powerless innocence, Vonnegut's antiheroes achieve a renewed sense of humanity. The assertion of their own individuality, of the capacity to think for themselves, resist the impulse of history, and recognize their own fallibility is an exercise of free will that allows each of them to, in Bert Schroeder's term, "become a character" (77). This transformative potential, Vonnegut argues, is lurking within the "unwavering band of light" of each individual's awareness, and allows his characters not only to understand "what it truly means to be human" (Schroeder 86), but also to repudiate any form of vanity and self-centered ambition in order to acknowledge a sense of connection between all human beings. The author, according to Davis, "suggests that we must learn to see ourselves as connected to one another and to the physical world" (*Crusade* 131), and that no single individual should embrace the dangerous illusion that he or she is removed from responsibility in the collective process of reality, whether innocently or greedily, as we are all, as Vonnegut himself puts it, "cells in a single, huge organism, mankind" (*WFG* 229). Rejecting said connection, saying and doing nothing about the violence and injustice around us, and turning our heads away from the tragic apocalyptic structures at work in our society is, in Vonnegut's words, "a brand-new method for committing suicide" (*PS* 64). Therefore, once they have undergone their apocalyptic breakthrough, Vonnegut's newly aware antiheroes understand that, just like responsibility is shared by all humanity, so must retribution be the work of us all, and so from then on, they direct all their efforts at trying to correct the social ills that they have identified and working for the common good of all humanity. So does the Vonnegut antihero become a "modern pilgrim engaged in an uncertain quest along an unmapped route" (Goldsmith 1); a route whose ultimate destination is the construction a more humane and fair reality.

The task is not easy, of course, and oftentimes it even proves to be unattainable, as the very concept of antihero implies that these characters are ultimately powerless to

[73] "I am not pure. We are not pure. Our nation is not pure," Vonnegut declares in a 1973 speech (*WFG* 215), contending instead that "[w]e are a mixture of good and evil" (214); words that inevitably bring to mind the first epistle of John in the New Testament, which asserts, "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8).

exercise significant changes in the greater arrangements of society and history. However, when Vonnegut's characters are forced to face their powerlessness they do so "not cynically but wisely" (Shields 125), achieving peace in knowledge, as they are able to understand how their new, humane vision is the key to creation, and their own limitations can become the source of their greatest potential. As proved by the contrast between Winston Niles Rumfoord's misguided utopian project and Malachi Constant's spiritual enlightenment in *The Sirens of Titan*, Vonnegut believes that personal transformation must be the ultimate goal of each individual. If a corrupt system is totally disassembled and rebuilt again, inevitably the same evils will reappear taking a different shape, because pristine innocence is an infeasible illusion. Therefore, only through the progressive modification of enough cells in the system, which in turn may influence or even infect neighboring cells, can the whole organism that we call humankind ultimately undergo a true, significant, and lasting metamorphosis. Thus, the antiheroic figures of Vonnegut's literature, as single individuals that manage to free themselves from the handicapping narrative of history and exert a humanitarian protest by becoming characters, even if, in short sight, their rebellion seems to be a failure, are eventually successful in proving that there is hope for change if their example serves to "poison" others with their own humanity.

This notion is already explored in Vonnegut's first novel, *Player Piano*, whose protagonist, top engineer Paul Proteus, realizes how the system he has helped to consolidate is far too spellbound by its fundamentalist discourse of absolute efficiency through machinery to consider the pernicious effect it has on the happiness, dignity, and uniqueness of the "real" people (*PP* 142). Paul's revolution against the totalitarian state ultimately fails, but his last gesture is to raise a toast "to the record" (340) as one of his co-conspirators exhorts him to "[s]mile, Doctor Proteus, you're *somebody* now" (340). The character's attempt to alter the grand course of history may have been a failure, but he has certainly been able to change *his own* reality by managing to identify the harmful narratives that foster dehumanization and expose them as mere metaphors that can be challenged and modified. In essence, what matters most about Paul's revolution is not its outcome, but the fact that, in the progress of rebelling against the system and envisioning a fairer alternative, he has proven that each human being has the potential to recreate the world. John Fowles writes that "[t]here must be a virtue, in an age that is out to exterminate both the individual and the enduring, in the individual's attempt to endure by

his own efforts alone" ("Notes" 144), and in his endeavor to arrest the process of technological dehumanization and his claim that "there must be virtue in imperfection, for Man is imperfect, and Man is a creation of God" (*PP* 302), Paul Proteus, as Vonnegut's first antihero, illustrates the virtues that could ultimately lead to the creation of a more humane society. This would be the kind of society in which people accept their natural limitations, embrace the connection between all human beings, and understand that their very capacity to imagine a better world treasures their ability to create it. The revolution fails, but the example of Paul Proteus prevails, and it will echo throughout Vonnegut's oeuvre in his subsequent antiheroes, who, more or less openly, are all, as Goldsmith explains, "revolutionaries" (32). From Malachi Constant's urge to lead a meaningful life among the relentless chaos of the universe to the "midget" (*CC* 101) Newt Hoenikker's rejection of fundamentalist narratives of meaning that pretend to pass metaphors for bedrock truth, attesting instead that there is "[n]o damn cat, and no damn cradle" (*CC* 166), or Billy Pilgrim's intent to "[c]omfort so many people with the truth about time" (*SH5* 28), most of Vonnegut's main characters indulge in a humanitarian act of rebellion and direct all their efforts at trying to tear down the tragic apocalyptic structures of society and rebuild them through a new, comic apocalyptic vision that affords each individual the power to shape reality.

In *The Rebel* (1951), Albert Camus writes, "Rebellion, though apparently negative, since it creates nothing, is profoundly positive in that it reveals the part of man which must always be defended" (19).[74] This greatest facet of humanity, as illustrated by the example of Paul Proteus and Vonnegut's subsequent rebel antiheroes, is that part of a man or woman which struggles for the attainment of a better world not only for themselves, but for all of humankind. The revolutionary impulse of Vonnegut's protagonists is an act of personal affirmation through which the author vindicates the transformative potential afforded to the individual by the exercise of his or her free will,[75] but its ultimate goal is always collective, not aimed at feeding their own self-esteem as beings touched by a heightened perception or potential that places them above the rest,

[74] This, of course, opens up the dichotomy explored by Francis Fukuyama in *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992), in which he claims that "Human life, then, involves a curious paradox: it seems to require injustice, for the struggle against injustice is what calls for that which is highest in man" (311).

[75] This notion brings to mind the words of Martin Luther King, who, reflecting on the group nonviolent resistance employed by civil rights activists in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1955, explained that, even if it "does not immediately change the heart of the oppressor," it indeed does "something to the hearts and souls of those committed to it. It gives them new self-respect" (qtd. in Carter 103).

but rather at sharing their vision with others, and fighting alienation and estrangement in order to create deeper human connections among the whole of society. In *Counterrevolution and Revolt* (1972), Herbert Marcuse proclaims, "no revolution without individual liberation, but also no individual liberation without the liberation of society" (48), and likewise, if individual change is the first step in the path of Vonnegut's antiheroes, their subsequent move is to attack social ills and to transform their personal enlightenment into a collective experience. Ihab Hassan contends that, for these type of characters, "the Cartesian argument par excellence is: 'I rebel – therefore we exist'" (*Radical* 30), and so the ultimate impulse of Vonnegut's rebels is always altruistic. The author often argues that people should not expect "spectacular miracles from the heavens," as "the problems of ordinary human beings will have to be solved by human beings" (*PS* 184), and proposes that the highest calling we must follow in life is to serve our fellow men and women for a very simple reason: "The secret is that they're human" (*GBY* 68). Even in his vindication of the individual, Vonnegut is always careful to single out characters that believe that they are unique and that their lives are somehow special or above the rest, such as Rumfoord in *The Sirens of Titan* or Dwayne Hoover in *Breakfast of Champions*, as utterly misguided fools, and advocates instead for an altruistic behavior that will acknowledge the unifying connectedness that links human beings of all races, countries and social statuses, and work to ameliorate the existential pain of all humanity.[76]

[76] Vonnegut's ultimate guideline for social interaction, therefore, might as well be Edgar Brightman's "Law of Altruism," which claims that "each person ought to respect all other persons as ends in themselves, and, as far as possible, to cooperate with others in the production and enjoyment of shared values" (Simmons, *Anti-Hero* 142). The ultimate source for this kind of altruistic behavior, of course, can be traced back to the teachings of Jesus Christ.

For a self-proclaimed "atheist" (*PS* 191), Vonnegut never shies away from acknowledging the influence of Christianism in his humanitarian ideas. "I admire Christianity more than anything – Christianity as symbolized by gentle people sharing a common bowl," he declares in a 1973 interview (*WFG* 246), whereas time and again he points to Christ's Sermon on the Mount as the source for many of the ideas that made him into a radical socialist in the eyes of many. In his last book, *A Man Without a Country*, Vonnegut claims that "if Christ hadn't delivered the Sermon on the Mount, with its message of mercy and pity, I wouldn't want to be a human being" (81), and, following his trademark philosophy of not allowing metaphors to overshadow their content, he contends that "[i]f what he said is so good, and so much of it is absolutely beautiful, what does it matter if he was God or not?" (80). His vision of Jesus, hence, connects with Albert Schweitzer's early twentieth-century proposal to reinterpret the "Christ of faith" as a historical figure, a secularized vision that praises Jesus Christ not necessarily through a religious prism, but simply as a "man who lived for the good of others" (Simmons, *Anti-Hero* 135).

In an appropriately titled article entitled "Kurt Vonnegut, Christ-Loving Atheist," Dan Wakefield explores the proliferation of Christian motifs in Vonnegut's writing, and concludes, "Despite his freethinking humanist views, no other major American novelist of the postwar era expressed such a fascination with Jesus, nor referred to him as often in his work (both fiction and nonfiction), as Kurt Vonnegut. Except for John Updike, a confessed Christian, and James Baldwin, who had been a junior minister at a Pentecostal church as a boy in Harlem, it is hard to think of any other leading writer of the era who mentioned Jesus at all, except as a curse word" ("Atheist").

What Vonnegut is ultimately pleading for through the figure of his antiheroes is a change of paradigm in the way humans relate to each other, a movement "from I to we" (T. Miller 342) that will allow people to find the meaning of life in the contact with others, those human relations that, according to Camus, "help us to carry on because they always presuppose further developments, a future—and also because we live as if our only task was precisely to have relationships with other people" (*Selected Essays* 36). As he defends in *The Sirens of Titan*, "[n]ot to be lonely" and "not to be scared" are the most "important things in life" (*SOT* 185) in the midst of an inscrutable, often disconcerting and dramatic existence, and friendship, love and the company of others as "donors or receivers . . . of common decency" (*SS* 6) are the best means to kindle a light of meaning in the darkness of chaos.[77] Describing the ideas of Thomas Pynchon in a passage that can just as adequately be applied to Kurt Vonnegut, Neil D. Isaacs, explains that, in his recognition of "the entropic forces at work in the dying civilization," Pynchon locates a source of heroism in "the Protean existence of the artist and the lover" who, in the process of loving and creating give away a part of their selves for the good of others, and thus become "We-systems that replace the old I at the center of old paranoid constructions" (Isaacs 196). What the artist, the lover and, I would add, the revolutionary, have in common, is that they direct their efforts at combating isolation and creating a community in which to share the experience of life with others, rejoicing in the creation of collective purposes that make life meaningful for all. This is the ultimate aim of the comic apocalyptic project of Kurt Vonnegut, who claims that "[w]e might say that one human being is no human being" (*PS* 196), just like the essential impulse of Revelation is to create a comforting sense of communal purpose and shared identity based on the values of "humanization, justice, and love" (Yarbro Collins 167).

The fundamental source of this communitarian impulse can be traced, like most components of Vonnegut's philosophy, to the foundational ideology of the United States.

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[77] In *The Sirens of Titan* Vonnegut even creates an alien race, the Harmoniums, who communicate with each other by sending only two possible messages: "Here I am, here I am, here I am," and "So glad you are, so glad you are, so glad you are" (*SOT* 189). "The first," the narrator explains, is an automatic response to the second, and the second is an automatic response to the first" (189), as if comforting each other with the assurance that they are not alone were the sole purpose of these Mercurian organisms' existence.
In *Galápagos*, no matter how much the "humans" of a million years into the future have mutated when compared to our present state, the author explains that "they still try to comfort those who are sick with soothing tones of voice" (*GP* 246), which seems to imply that, however different they may be physically and cognitively, these future beings retain the common decency that Vonnegut considers the most human of our attributes.

Jim Cullen explains that the Pilgrims who founded the first colonies in New England longed, first and foremost, for a sense of community: "not a philosophical or legal framework so much as a series of deep emotional and affective bonds that connected people who had a shared sense of what their lives were about" (22). The tension between this communal impulse and the Puritan ideal of individualism is the source of the ever-paradoxical American character and forms the two-sided coin of Vonnegut's antiheroic ideal, in which individual reaffirmation must be directed at the common benefit of society. In his famous address "A Model of Christian Charity" (1630), the first governor of Massachusetts, John Winthrop, already delineates the spirit that longs to find meaning in social interaction that will captivate one Malachi Constant several centuries and space voyages into the future:

> We must delight in each other, make others' condition our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, our community as members of the same body. (Winthrop)

It is not hard to make a connection between Winthrop's proclamation and Constant's assurance that the purpose of human life is "to love whoever is around to be loved" (*SOT* 320). However, as the American experience progressed through the years, shifting social and political arrangements caused the original sense of true community to fade, generating a pervading sense of isolation and purposelessness as human needs for community and freedom became progressively diverted into consumer goods, television and the culture of instant gratification. Even the very American impulse to form and join groups and organizations[78] experienced a severe decline in the last decades of the twentieth century, a phenomenon analyzed by Robert D. Putnam in *Bowling Alone* (2000), where he explains how "Americans have been dropping out in droves, not merely from political life, but from organized community life more generally" (64), and establishes that this decline in civic participation is related to a similar decline in mental health (326). The ultimate altruistic and communitarian gesture of the Vonnegut antihero

[78] "Everybody who wants a club should have one. That's what America is all about," Vonnegut claims (*PS* 125), as he often ruminates about the benefits of organizations from volunteer fireman, who appear as a symbol of great civic commitment in many of his novels, to Alcoholics Anonymous, which he calls "the greatest contribution America had made to the world" (*MN* 53). The author believes that joining these collective associations is a response to our all-too-human longing for community and companionship, and explains that "you don't do that because you're crazy about bowling or about outboard motors or snowmobiles. You do it for the family, the artificial family" (qtd. in Shields 184).

is a means by the author to correct this trend, proffering that there is still hope for human beings to transcend alienation and selfishness and complete the apocalyptic journey "from solitude to selfhood in community" (Bradbury, *Modern* 141) in order to create the "perfectly cohesive human family" he prophesizes in *Galápagos*. Amid a "lonesome society that's been fragmented by the factory system" (*WFG* 241), the author assures that he has "a sunny little dream" that "[h]uman beings *will* be happier – not when they cure cancer or get to Mars or eliminate racial prejudice . . . but when they find ways to inhabit primitive communities again" (*WFG* 244), because people "become increasingly contended as they approach the simpleminded, brotherly conditions of a folk society" (181).

The concept of folk society is one that Vonnegut learned from Dr. Robert Redfield, under whom he studied cultural anthropology at the University of Chicago. In his investigations, Redfield contrasts modern urbanized societies with rural and primitive communities whose characteristics as "small, isolated, nonliterate, and homogeneus" (Redfield 293) societies create "a strong sense of group solidarity" (293).[79] These folk societies are simple communities in which each individual can feel fully realized by focusing all of his or her energies on the well-being of the whole group, which in turn imbues all of its members with a sense of meaningful purpose through the feeling of belonging and usefulness and the solace of being upheld by a cohesive human family. Forever longing for the carefree sense of community and familiarity he had experienced as a young boy among his multiple relatives in Indianapolis, Vonnegut was enthralled by Redfield's concept and, in his writing, adapts it into his ideal of the "extended family," the creation of which becomes the ultimate aspiration of his antiheroes. An extended family, the author explains, is "a support system far more dependable than anything the Government could put together, in sickness as in health, for richer or for poorer, whose bond was commonly held beliefs and attitudes" (*FWD* 77); an ideal whose sources stem as much from the old-time myth of small-town America, with its "ethic of neighborliness and mutual help" (Davis, *Crusade* 109), as from Vonnegut's own notions of cultural relativism. Time and again in his fiction, the author argues that the United States, with their illusion of cultural superiority, could benefit from the influence of less developed

[79] "The ways of living are conventionalized into that coherent system which we call 'a culture,'" Redfield writes in his original 1947 outline of the folk society (293). "Behavior is traditional, spontaneous, uncritical, and personal . . . Kinship, its relationship and institutions, are the type categories of experience and the familial group is the unit of action" (293).

countries, and the nourishing and humanizing experience of belonging to a folk society is one of the many lessons that he believes the inhabitants of the consumer paradise of urban America can take from those they disregard as belonging to "the backwater of civilization" (*PP* 22). In *Breakfast of Champions,* the author contends that Nigerian ambulance driver Eddie Key's "familiarity with a teeming past," which gives him the very real impression of being "afloat in a river of people who were flowing from here to there in time" (*BOC* 279), made life much more interesting and meaningful to him than to the lonesome and alienated American characters of the novel, including Vonnegut himself, all of whom he pictures instead as "pebbles at rest" (279), with no sense of belonging, purpose or direction.[80]

Amid the decline in civic solidarity and meaningful human connections that they identify as both a cause and symptom of the fundamentalist course taken by American society, Vonnegut's antiheroes determine that the only source of hope is a return to the kind of social arrangements in which people care for each other and find meaning in their interactions and shared experiences. In the absence of real meaningful family ties, a common trend in a fractured society descended from immigrants forced to leave their culture behind to start a new life in the United States (*WFG* 285), the only option left is to create those bonds by embracing the connectedness between all human beings and form artificial, extended families that may foster social change from the bottom, starting with the essential unit that initiated the American experience to begin with: the community of like-minded people. Like the counterculturalists that would follow his precepts, Vonnegut yearns for the creation of what Charles Reich labels "a form of community in which love, respect, and a mutual search for wisdom replace the competition and the separation of the past" (19), but one in which the quest for the common good does not result in a crippling homogenization, allowing instead the individual to "grow toward the highest possibilities of the human spirit" (20).[81] Extended families, hence, as the possibility of a social

[80] Vonnegut's notion of the extended family is informed by the strong family ties that he himself witnessed firsthand during his journey to Biafra in late 1969, merely days before the short-lived nation capitulated to Nigeria in January of 1970, after almost three years of blockade and war following its proclamation of independence. In a subsequent article for *McCall's Magazine* entitled "Biafra: A People Betrayed," the author praises Biafrans' remarkable capacity to endure in the midst of the terrible, dehumanizing circumstances of famine and war, and relates their stoicism to the fact that "[t]hey all had the emotional and spiritual strength an enormous family can give" (*WFG* 149).

[81] Vonnegut, nevertheless, is careful to distance his ideal of the extended families from the many communes that sprouted in the mid to late sixties. "For a community to work," the author argues, "you shouldn't have to wonder what the person next to you is thinking. That is a primitive society. In the communities of strangers that are being hammered together now, as young people take over farms and try to live

structure through which people relate to each other with the altruistic commitment of family members without the need to even be related, become the author's ultimate metaphor for a comic apocalyptic system of human-made meaning that can replace the tragic apocalyptic structures of fundamentalist dehumanization and survival-of-the-fittest capitalism dominant in the United States of the late twentieth century.[82] In their self-affirming spiritual quest to challenge the evils of society, all of Vonnegut's protagonists yearn for the creation of this kind of humanitarian structures and for the attainment of a feeling of living in harmony with others that may give meaning to their lives. Their ultimate wish is to be part of a human community that they can serve as the highest possible abstraction of God. From Malachi Constant to Eliot Rosewater and Billy Pilgrim, all of these characters undergo an apocalyptic transformation from detached complicity with the system to self-awareness, rebellion, and a final, wise and humane, acceptance of their role as cells in a living, breathing human organism. However, none take as long to attain this final peace as perhaps the greatest of all Vonnegut's antiheroes: Kilgore Trout.

4.7 "Society's greatest prophet": The apocalypse of Kilgore Trout

It is no coincidence that Kurt Vonnegut's most enduring character is a science fiction writer. Originally inspired by another science fiction author with a fish for his surname, Theodore Sturgeon (Shields 158), Kilgore Trout is, most importantly, Vonnegut's self-confessed "alter ego" (*TQ* xiii), a projection of all the fears and insecurities of the early years of his career condensed into a figure that represents, in the author's own words, "the lonesome and underappreciated writer I thought I might become" (qtd. in Shields 158). Trout first makes an appearance in Vonnegut's fifth book,

communally, the founders are sure to have hellish differences" (*WFG* 243). After his own son Mark had a mental breakdown at one of these "communities of strangers" in British Columbia in February 1971, the author attributed it to "the zeitgeist of the commune," explaining that "[p]eople who went in for deeply dramatic behavior were admired by their peers" (qtd. in Shields 289), a far cry from the kind of behavior he argues that the ideal extended family must foster.

[82] Vonnegut's fullest fictional realization of the extended family ideal can be found in *Slapstick* (1976), in which the main character and last president of the United States of America before they are dissolved into a series of independent republics and kingdoms amid a catastrophic end-of-the-world scenario, Wilbur Swain, creates a system to randomly assign each citizen a new surname and number. All of the Americans that share the same tag instantly become relatives and have the commitment to care for any members of their new extended family they may encounter. This arrangement, Vonnegut writes, makes Americans "happier than they ever had been, even though the country was bankrupt and falling apart" (*SS* 213) by bestowing them with dozens of new relatives that make their lives newly meaningful.

God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater (1965) as a bitter, totally unknown writer of short stories published only in pornographic magazines of whom "[n]o reputable bookseller had ever heard of" (*GBY* 20), and from then on he is featured in a total of six out of Vonnegut's fourteen novels, with significant cameos in *Slaughterhouse-Five, Jailbird* and *Galápagos,* and leading roles in *Breakfast of Champions* and *Timequake,* thus making him by far the most recurring character in Vonnegut's fictional universe.

In all of these novels, Trout functions as both Vonnegut's parody and his homage to science fiction, an incredibly fruitful author—"arguably the most prolific writer of short stories in history," as he is described in *Timequake* (45)—who "did not think of himself as a writer for the simple reason that the world had never allowed him to think of himself in this way" (*SH5* 169). This obscurity is well deserved, according to his own creator, who explains that "[l]ike most science fiction writers, Trout knew almost nothing about science" (*BOC* 127), and claims, "His prose was frightful. Only his ideas were good" (*SH5* 110). Still, it is precisely in the realm of ideas where Trout excels. Hailed as "the greatest idea man in the world" (*GBY* 259), the prophet-like Trout, who "never tried to tell anything but the truth" (268) is the definitive spokesman for Vonnegut's apocalyptic philosophy of literature as a means to incite thought and action; a writer who wastes no time in diversions such as characterization, dialogue or setting and gets straight to the heart of the matter: the transmission of deep, thoughtful, and meaningful ideas. "I don't write literature," Trout claims in *Timequake,*

> Those artsy-fartsy twerps next door create living, breathing, three-dimensional characters with ink on paper. . . . Wonderful! As though the planet weren't already dying because it has three billion too many living, breathing, three-dimensional characters! . . . If I'd wasted my time creating characters . . . I would never have gotten around to calling attention to things that really matter: irresistible forces in nature, and cruel inventions, and cockamamie ideals and governments and economies that make heroes and heroines alike feel like something the cat drug in. (62–63)

Trout, therefore, is an important writer who delves into matters which are significant for the well-being of humankind; a man on a mission who writes not for the craft, the fame, or the pleasure of creating skillful combinations of words on a page, but simply because he has to. Even if his utter lack of readership means that he is, essentially, preaching in the desert, Trout views writing as a social commitment towards his fellow

men and women in an age of growing apprehension; a call he cannot help but answer and devote his whole life to. In *Breakfast of Champions,* we learn that Trout's tombstone reads, "We are healthy only to the extent that our ideas are humane" (*BOC* 16), and so, as a sort of "postmodern prophet" (Simpson 264), his work becomes a reminder of humanity's most insidious facets and behavior, and a dire warning of the calamitous consequences that these could bring unless people realize the power of their own ideas to either abet the forces of chaos or bring forth a new creation. As such, Trout becomes the quintessential antihero through which Vonnegut voices his most urgent admonitions, even if the author recognizes that Trout's ideas do have something in common with the pornography along which they are published, in that both seem "fantasies of an impossibly hospitable world" (*GBY* 21). The general unavailability and lack of circulation and recognition for these ideas, however, is a commentary by Vonnegut on how, in Davis' words, "those who have stories to tell that may improve the life of humanity toil in obscurity and poverty, while those who rule the social and financial worlds spin narratives of injustice and inequality that destroy the human spirit" (*Crusade* 72). In a world where everything is a fiction, Vonnegut seems to imply, it is a shame that the humanist creations of Trout disappear into oblivion, while "stone-cold dead people" (*CC* 69) get to dictate the rules by which we live.

As much as through his own interventions as a character, Trout's presence is deeply felt in Vonnegut's novels through the plot outlines of his short stories which, in their recurrence even in books where Trout does not appear, such as *Palm Sunday* (1981) and *Hocus Pocus* (1990), create a sense of familiarity and continuity that lends the impression of a unified corpus to Vonnegut's whole oeuvre (Hume 233). These stories-within-stories, Jerome Klinkowitz explains, provide the author with "a Borgesian canon of unwritten yet eminently quotable works" (*Kurt Vonnegut* 18) that allow him "to amplify images and opinions while writing one book instead of two-hundred" (69), simply resorting to quote fragments of wisdom from Trout's seemingly unending back catalogue when he feels the need to do so. They also function as a sort of distancing device that allows Vonnegut to flaunt the gap between his own narratorial voice and some of the more extreme opinions and ideas of his character. Still, more than anything else, the summaries of Trout's short stories function in the same way as Bokonon's *foma* in *Cat's Cradle*. They are far-fetched hypotheses from the wild imagination of a science fiction practitioner which, nevertheless, in their clearly exposed fictionality, serve to

reveal uncomfortable truths and cut down to size many of the ideas we take for granted on a daily basis by exposing them as fabrications and illuminating an alternative path. Davis writes that "Any story produced by Kilgore Trout's pen is nothing more than a sermon offered up by Vonnegut to turn us from our destructive and unethical ways" (*Crusade* 115), but, instead of a moralizing exhortation, the way these sub-narratives are phrased and introduced parallel to the main action of the novels, allows them to function as a kind of detached commentary that exposes the absurdity and futility of situations that we otherwise assume as normal. Stories such as "How You Doin'?" in which an alien advertisement agency promotes peanut butter through campaigns that employ different national averages in order to prove that, whether above or below the average, everybody loves their product (*BOC* 173); or "The Gutless Wonder," about a murderous robot despised for his halitosis (*SH5* 168), are seemingly ridiculous in their science fictional flamboyance. However, the way these short interludes build up to an unexpected punchline actually conceal profound observations on the dehumanization we take for granted on a daily basis. Thus, when humans infiltrate the advertisement agency in "How You Doin'?" and inflate the figures of all the averages so that the aliens feel so substandard that they pose no resistance to a human invasion, or when the robot in "The Gutless Wonder" cures his bad breadth and is finally accepted by everyone without minding the fact that his job is to use "burning jellied gasoline on human beings" (*SH5* 168), the initial belly laugh is followed by reflection on the harsh truths Trout reveals about human nature; truths that we might not be willing to face otherwise.

Humor, therefore, is perhaps the most essential component for the rhetorical impact of Kilgore Trout's stories. Time and again in his novels, Vonnegut defends that "any subject is subject to laughter" (*TQ* 3) because "[l]aughter is a response to frustration, just as tears are" (*WFG* 257) and jokes can indeed "be noble" (*PS* 298). Just like he uses science fiction as a distancing device that can allow readers to contemplate human nature through a detached perspective devoid of moral judgments, humor, too, is a tool that allows the author to expose the horror of contemporary existence. Jokes do not disguise violence and inhumanity but indeed do quite the opposite: they help us to face our meaninglessness, our lack of control over existence, and the "absurdity of everyday events that constantly thwart our intentions to make sense of the world" (Davis, *Crusade* 57). Robert Scholes claims that "[c]omedy can look into depths which tragedy does not acknowledge" (204) as, instead of turning its head from chaos and disguising the awful

things it perceives, it "strengthens and comforts us to the point where such perception is bearable" (204) and readers are finally able to witness the cruel randomness of existence and, in consequence, can choose to "embrace the free play of life in an attempt to help humanity" (Davis, *Crusade* 57). Vonnegut, therefore, defends that "those of us who become humorists," like himself and Kilgore Trout, "feel free (as most people do not) to speak of life itself as a dirty joke, even though life is all there is or ever can be" (*FWD* 194), and praises those with a quick sense of humor as the "greatest student[s] of human nature" (*CC* 192), the ones who actually "get" what Vonnegut calls "man's cruel slapstick, yes and God's" (*SS* 259); the practical joke that life essentially is.

In essence, thus, humor conceals sadness, as Vonnegut explains that the "only way to get a belly laugh" is "to undermine a surface joke with more unhappiness than most mortals can bear" (*WFG* 120). Nevertheless, the author places his faith in what Scholes terms "the humanizing value of laughter" (145) and through the punchlines of Kilgore Trout's stories proposes laughing as "an analgesic for the temporary relief of existential pain" (Schatt 55). A good sense of humor is key to surviving the chaos of contemporary existence; an essential ingredient, along with community and humanism, to "lighten the burden of hopelessness" (Shields 259) in times of despair and uncertainty.[83] In a 1966 interview, Vonnegut reminisces about his childhood during the Great Depression and on how, during those most difficult of times, radio comedians provided people whose spirits were completely broken with "an amount of encouragement, an amount of relief" that "got everybody through three more days of Depression" (Scholes "A Talk" 111). These comedians taught a young Vonnegut the importance of "bargaining in good faith with destiny" (*SS* 2), a quality he builds into each of his antiheroes, and especially into Kilgore Trout. What is more, they also enabled him to understand humor as a humanizing weapon; a means not only to expose the emperor's lack of clothes but also to subtly open a debate on the actual implications of there being an emperor to begin with and enlighten possible alternatives to the current state of affairs, all under the disguise of innocent buffoonery. Paul A. Carter writes that "[e]ntrenched power (great or little) can easily shrug off moral indignation directed against it," while "satiric laughter, however, cuts it down to size" (176), and this is the ultimate intention of Kilgore Trout's humorous parables: to perform a revolutionary act through words; an act that manifests his own free will, his ability to

[83] In a letter to Aaron Spiegel from July 29, 1974, Vonnegut writes that "World War Three might well begin with someone's making a joke, and with a humorless person taking the joke as an intolerable threat and declaring war" (Wakefield, *Letters* 217).

become a character, think for himself, and resist the tragic apocalyptic path of history. An act of individual affirmation which, nevertheless, is ultimately directed at others, at inciting his fellow Americans to stand up in humanitarian protest against fundamentalism and realize their potential to work towards the creation of a fairer world.

The antiheroic path of Kilgore Trout is initiated in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, where he is presented as a man that "looked like a frightened, aging Jesus, whose sentence to crucifixion had been commuted to imprisonment for life" (*GBY* 162). The description of Trout as a Christ figure is appropriate, as the novel relates how his stories fulfill a function similar to Christ's parables for one Eliot Rosewater, who, as the author's only acknowledged devotee, celebrates Trout as society's "greatest prophet" (*GBY* 19) and is influenced by his ideas to perform the ultimate altruistic gesture of devoting his life and fortune to helping the poor people of Rosewater County, Indiana.[84] "I'm going to love these discarded Americans, even though they're useless and unattractive," Rosewater claims, "*That* is going to be my work of art" (*GBY* 44). The unsung science fiction writer appears only at the end of the novel, when he is conjured by the protagonist's father, Senator Lister Rosewater, after the former has a nervous breakdown, in an attempt to bring his son back to lucidity. Instead of reprimanding the wayward millionaire or trying to come up with an explanation to justify his deranged behavior, however, Trout praises Rosewater's acts, and explains that "far from insane," they were "quite possibly the most important social experiment of our time" (*GBY* 264) in how they handled the question of "[h]ow to love people who have no use" (264). As the mechanization of society implies that men and women progressively become superfluous in the production of goods, services, and even ideas, Trout ponders that "if we can't find reasons for treasuring human beings because they are *human beings*, then we might as well, as has so often been suggested, rub them out" (*GBY* 265) and contends that Rosewater's behavior illuminates such a humanistic path:

> It's news that a man was able to give that kind of love over a long period of time. If one man can do it, perhaps others can do it, too. It means that our hatred of useless human beings and the cruelties we inflict upon them for their own good need not be parts of human nature. (269)

[84] Stanley Schatt points to the Christian symbolism behind the name Kilgore Trout, explaining that "*Trout*, of course, is the name of a fish; and the fish was a symbol by which early Christians identified one another and of a religion based upon the need of human as well as divine love" (76).

Shields writes that, "[i]f Vonnegut's readers recall only a few things about his work, most of them appear in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*" (184). Far from a science fiction novel, but definitely an apocalyptic one, Vonnegut's fifth book, perhaps more than any other, openly exposes the three pillars of the author's philosophy: firstly, the virtuous potential of altruism and how we all have the power to improve life and help humanity to heal by treating others with kindness and decency; secondly, the notion that humanity is sacred and every person has dignity for the sole reason of being human; and lastly, the recognition of human contact and life in community as the best cure for the endemic alienation and loneliness of society. It comes as no surprise, then, that Kilgore Trout, as the Vonnegut antihero who best embodies these ideals, makes his first appearance in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*; a novel that ends with the apocalyptic proclamation of a hopeful new beginning. After Trout justifies Rosewater's behavior as an "individual, workable ethic" (Goldsmith 24) to enlighten a new, more humane era, in which people may finally start to "love whoever is around to be loved" (*SOT* 320) as a given, without having to go through an ordeal like Malachi Constant's in *The Sirens of Titan* to learn the lesson first, the book closes with Rosewater's final, messianic gesture. Ascertaining his decision to share his fortune with all the newborn babies of Rosewater County as his legitimate heirs, Rosewater makes the first verbal motion towards the creation of a new, better world by echoing the words of Genesis 1:28: "[T]ell them that their father loves them, no matter what they may turn out to be. And tell them . . . to be fruitful and multiply" (*GBY* 275).

Trout returns in Vonnegut's subsequent novel, *Slaughterhouse-Five,* as does Eliot Rosewater. In a small cameo, the altruistic millionaire shares a room with main character Billy Pilgrim at a mental institution and introduces him to the writings of his favorite science fiction writer. Trout's stories help the two characters in their attempt to "re-invent themselves and their universe" (*SH5* 101) after their experiences both at home and during World War II compel them to find life "meaningless" (101), and thus his words become an apocalyptic tool to stimulate the creation of a better reality for both. Some authors have categorized this process as injurious, claiming that "the ideas found in the science fiction novels of Kilgore Trout succeed in distorting the realities of Vonnegut's protagonists" (Simpson 262), but I disagree completely and believe that, far from a deleterious influence, Trout's fictions clearly allow the characters to embrace a more humane perspective by shedding light on the dehumanizing metanarratives upon which culture

and society are structured and suggesting more kindhearted, workable alternatives. Perhaps the best example of this is "The Gospel from Outer Space," Trout's science fictional re-imagining of the passion of Christ. The story deals with a visitor from outer space who, in his intent to uncover "why Christians found it so easy to be cruel" (*SH5* 108) concludes that "at least part of the trouble was "slipshod storytelling in the New Testament" (108):

> He supposed that the intent of the Gospels was to teach people, among other things, to be merciful, even to the lowest of the low.
>
> But the Gospels actually taught this:
>
> *Before you kill somebody, make absolutely sure he isn't well connected.* So it goes. (*SH5* 108–109)

The flaw in the story, the alien commentator reasons, is that Jesus Christ, despite looking like a common man, is indeed the son of God, a fact which, upon his crucifixion, leads people to think "Oh, boy—they sure picked the wrong guy to lynch that time!" (109) and its logical corollary: "There are right people to lynch" (109), namely those who are "[n]ot well connected" (109). Thus, the story's protagonist decides to offer a new Gospel to the people of Earth, a very similar story with the slight modification that, in his version, Jesus is indeed "a nobody" (109) who, nevertheless, "still got to say all the lovely and puzzling things he said in the other Gospels" (109) and was crucified for it, too. However, as Jesus is about to die on the cross, the voice of God comes down from Heaven and declares that he is adopting him as his son, and concludes by saying that "From this moment on, He will punish horribly anybody who torments a bum who has no connections" (110). And so, with just a small change, Kilgore Trout is able to completely alter the meaning of one of, if not the, most important myths in all of Western culture. His story calls attention to the narrative, dare I say fictional, construction at the heart of the New Testament, highlighting the fundamentalist connotation that has bred such violence and despair throughout the years, as the innocence of Jesus has been, in Simmons' words, "based on a system of hierarchy, which serves to enforce, rather than reject, the ideology behind crucifying and torturing human beings" (*Anti-Hero* 125). By proposing a more gentle and benevolent vision, Trout manages to operate a comic apocalypse of mind, to enlighten a radical shift to a new vision marked by a more humanistic paradigm, without recurring to the denial or vilification of Christianity, which

he recognizes as a historical pillar of Western thought and a meaningful narrative for millions of people. That humanizing capacity is ultimately the source of Kilgore Trout's status as Vonnegut's ultimate apocalyptic antihero.

In *Breakfast of Champions*, Vonnegut finally grants Trout the status of protagonist, even if it is in a bill co-headlined by Dwayne Hoover. This is the novel in which the science fiction writer more clearly follows the prototypical path of the Vonnegut antihero so far. After two books in which we have seen Trout write in absolute obscurity while earning his living in jobs that tie him to the very system he opposes in his writing, be it redeeming stamps in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, or coordinating newspaper deliveries in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, *Breakfast of Champions*, which presents Trout installing aluminum storm windows, is the novel in which the character decides to affirm his own stance as an individual and rebel against an equally superficial and oppressive social structure. Upon receiving an invitation to speak at the inauguration of the Midland City Arts Festival (at the behest, of course, of one Eliot Rosewater, the main benefactor of the festival), Trout decides to attend the event in order to show his elitist hosts "what nobody has ever seen at an arts festival before: a representative of all the thousands of artists who devoted their entire lives to a search of truth and beauty—and didn't find doodley squat" (*BOC* 37). From then on, the writer embarks on a mission to display to the world his condition as a "terribly wounded" (240) man who has tried his best to serve humanity, who has "dared to pass through the fires of truth to the other side, which we have never seen" and come back "to tell us about the other side" (240) and yet has never received any kind of recognition whatsoever for it. He wants to offer himself as a living, breathing example of the dehumanizing decline of American civilization who, nevertheless, perseveres in his efforts to enlighten his fellow men and women as if trying to prove Ihab Hassan's dictum that "the best novelists have always created out of defeat values by which reality in America can continually be redeemed" (*Radical* 55). However, as I explained in the previous chapter, halfway through the novel it is actually Vonnegut's own psyche that assumes the main focus of the novel, and it is ultimately the author himself who receives the apocalyptic epiphany that usually pertains to his main characters through the revelation delivered by Rabo Karabekian.[85] To prove this renewed sense of life, his peaceful acceptance of the nature of reality and his own human potential, in the epilogue of the novel Vonnegut grants free will to Trout, his most beloved character.

[85] Kabarbekian's revelation in *Breakfast of Champions* is analyzed in depth in epigraph 3.9.

"Arise, Mr. Trout, you are free, you are *free*," he declares (*BOC* 301), at which the science fiction writer, newly liberated into the chaos of the real world, robbed of the eternal existence of the printed page and newly contingent on the laws of life and death, cannot help but shed a tear and cry out to his creator, "Make me young, make me young, make me young!" (302).

Vonnegut would nevertheless soon refrain from his promise to free all of his past characters and not "put on any more puppet shows" (*BOC* 3), reclaiming Kilgore Trout for small roles first in *Jailbird* (1979—under the pseudonym Leo Fender) and then in *Galápagos* (whose narrator is Trout's son, Leon Trotsky Trout), but it is the author's final novel, *Timequake* (1997), that finally places the science fiction writer front and center and allows him to complete his path as Vonnegut's ultimate apocalyptic antihero. Although seldom mentioned in the same breath as his most famous novels, *Timequake* deserves to be acknowledged as one of Vonnegut's greatest accomplishments. An unexpected late-career triumph, *Timequake* stands as a quintessential coda for the author's career, offering a perfect summation of most of Vonnegut's trademark themes and ideas combined into one of his most daring, original and successful formal experiments with metafiction: a novel that, in Klinkowitz's words, "quite literally tells the story of its own being" (*America* 111). Described as a "stew" (*TQ* xii) by the author himself who, faced with a severe case of writer's block, decides to incorporate his inability to finish the book *into* the book itself, *Timequake* willingly bares the machine of fictional construction completely, exposing the mechanisms, doubts and tribulations of its creator in a work that becomes "a virtual autobiography of a novel" (Klinkowitz, *America* 9). Klinkowitz concludes that "[t]he term does not yet exist to describe *Timequake*" (105), a novel in which the author's process becomes the focus of attention as much as the plot itself, but Sumner proposes an accurate definition, calling it "a heroic, magnificent ruin, erected on a story that would not allow itself to be finished" (311); the result of a struggle that culminated in "the author's most audacious experiment in demolishing the boundaries between life and art" (311).

Praise to its formal innovations aside, *Timequake* does have a plot, and quite an interesting one at that, which deals with the anomaly of its title; a kind of skip in the expansion process of the universe which, starting on February 13, 2001,[86] causes time to

[86] Probably through no coincidence, the 56th anniversary of the firebombing of Dresden.

jump back ten years. During this reoccurrence of the previous decade, all human beings are forced to repeat their lives exactly as they were the first time around, totally unable to change their behavior, amend wrong decisions, or avoid terrible mistakes. Predictably, once the calendar arrives back at the starting date and the ten-year rerun suddenly comes to an end, total chaos ensues, as people, used to living in autopilot for so long, have forgotten how to exercise their free will, which causes numerous catastrophic accidents and results in a general state of what Vonnegut calls "post-Timequake apathy," in which people "stopped giving a shit what was going on, or what was liable to happen next" (*TQ* 99). In walks Kilgore Trout, living as a vagabond in the streets of Manhattan for the past fifteen years and who, due to the countless pratfalls and miscarriages of his past life which had already led him to question concepts such as free will and the sequential progression of time well before the Timequake, seems the only person not affected by the sudden change. Trying to shake a character called Dudley Price back into consciousness, Trout pronounces the words, "You were ill, but now you're well, and there's work to do" (*TQ* 167), which manage to bring Prince back from his catatonic state and subsequently become a sort of motto, dubbed "Kilgore's Creed" (169) which people whisper to those suffering from "post-Timequake apathy" in order to help them transcend their paralysis and recover their full awareness.

Once order is restored, Trout is hailed as a hero and invited to a writers' retreat in Rhode Island called Xanadu, where a clambake, attended by Vonnegut himself, is organized in his honor; a communal gathering that Trout describes as one of the "manmade epiphanies" that allow people to tolerate the "undeniably preposterous" nature of life (*TQ* 19). Through his spontaneous gesture of pure, unselfish grace, Trout fulfills his creator's humanistic ideal of the "amazing, inexplicable instance of civic responsibility" that is sometimes encountered "in the midst of chaos" (*HP* 296), as if echoing his hopeful proclamation at the end of *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* on how others should follow Eliot Rosewater's lead and devote themselves to nurturing the life of their fellow men and women, no matter if they are "bums" who have "no connections" (*SH5* 110), and making the world newly hospitable and comforting. Thus, closing the circle he initiated with his first appearance in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, Trout finally receives the ultimate prize that all of Vonnegut's antiheros long for: the solace of human contact and community, which, after six novels and over 30 years finally affords him the

reassuring feeling that "he was home at last, and a vital member of an extended family" (*TQ* 200).

Kilgore's creed, with its acknowledgement of chaos ("you were ill") and announcement of a new creation ("but now you're well") that will require effort and commitment ("and there's work to do") is a simple, condensed encapsulation of Vonnegut's apocalyptic philosophy for social change. The recipe for this "ethical modus operandi" (Goldsmith 24) has basically remained unaltered since *Player Piano*, and is described by Goldsmith as "nothing more than the work ethic mixed with early Christian love" (24). The significance of Trout's aphorism in the novel can be interpreted as Vonnegut's admonition to his readers not to live on a permanent state of autopilot, simply going through the motions of life and feeling that nothing matters as if they were experiencing a Timequake, because life certainly does matter. Whether motivated by the conformist assurance that everything is fine as it is or, conversely, by despair at our lack of power to influence the course of events, inaction and nihilism are dangerous because they lead to unquestioning acceptance, to the lack of criticism and self-reflection that allows for the proliferation of the fundamentalist narratives that prompt dehumanization and destroy the earth. Life, whatever its ultimate meaning, if there is indeed one, is real and important, and Vonnegut believes that it is our calling as human beings to transform trauma into hope and work for the progress of our society towards a more humane and solidary reality. "For Christ's sake," he writes, "let's help more of our frightened people get through this thing, whatever it is" (*TQ* 163), a call answered by all of his antiheroes, from the unsuccessful revolutionary Paul Proteus to the intergalactic expatriate Malachi Constant, the altruistic millionaire Eliot Rosewater, the optometrist that prescribes lenses for the soul Billy Pilgrim, and the humanist science fiction writer Kilgore Trout.

At the end of *Timequake*, during the clambake at which Trout is finally awarded the contentment of being honored as a valuable, respected member of an extended family, the dying science fiction writer (he will pass away peacefully shortly after, curiously at the same age as his creator: 84 years old) instructs Vonnegut to gaze up at the sky and reasons that human awareness is the only quality in the universe that can transcend the laws of physics, allowing a person to traverse the lightyears of distance between two stars at the blink of an eye. "Your awareness," Trout explains,

> That is a new quality in the Universe, which exists only because there are human beings. Physicists must from now on, when pondering the secrets of the Cosmos,

> factor in not only energy and matter and time, but something very new and beautiful, which is *human awareness*. . . . Let us call it *soul*. (*TQ* 213–214)

Kilgore Trout's last words, thus, like Kurt Vonnegut's whole oeuvre, are an attempt to use his own awareness, his words and his soul, to "honor human presence in the world" (Klinkowitz, *America* 116). In *Breakfast of Champions*, Trout had contended that the purpose of life is "[t]o be the eyes and ears of the Creator of the Universe" (68), and being able to contemplate the beautiful spectacle of life definitely seems more than enough justification for being alive; but there is even more to it. Vonnegut believes that our awareness allows us to transcend our role as mere spectators and empowers us to become co-creators in the perpetually ongoing process of the construction of reality by finding narratives that create meaning and purpose in life. We must only beware that the ideas behind said narratives are healthy and altruistic, that they "ennoble and serve the human spirit, not imprison it" (Davis, *Crusade* 74), and that they are intended at helping ourselves and others to safely traverse "the steeplechase ride of life" (Klinkowitz, *America* 111). In a hostile, violent world in which failure is often the norm and virtue is not always rewarded, these narratives must acknowledge chaos instead of denying it, as the recognition of our cosmic powerlessness is the only means to affirm a strictly human creation. If the United States wishes to truly "live up to its ideals of freedom and democracy" (Jowett 145), Vonnegut believes that there is certainly some serious work to do in order to achieve some "fundamental rearrangements of the terms of life in America, on a level higher and more inclusive than the simply political" (Klinkowitz, *Kurt Vonnegut* 61). This reorganization must place human worth front and center and seek to make the country newly habitable for all of its citizens, and what better candidates to initiate and disseminate this new American myth for the postmodern age than science fiction writers? Who else is better qualified to, as Klinkowitz puts it, "transform the work-a-day world of economic American into the Sermon on the Mount's Kingdom of the Blessed" (*Disruptions* 205) than Kilgore Trout and Kurt Vonnegut?[87]

[87] Klinkowitz claims that it was writers who originally helped create and extended the myth of the American Dream (*Kurt Vonnegut* 62). Who better, then, to disseminate this new apocalyptic philosophy of postmodern humanism for the atomic age than science fiction writers like Vonnegut and Trout. As Paul A. Carter writes, "Prophets, poets, and science fiction writers imagine the future. On occasion they accurately predict it; if they are eloquent they sometimes help to bring it about" (98–99).

4.8 Apocalypse in literature: Kurt Vonnegut's gift of creation

All of Kurt Vonnegut's antiheros, culminating with the science fiction author Kilgore Trout, ultimately function as an example to demonstrate the capacity of the individual to invent the purpose of his or her life, a process which finds its epitome in the act of literary creation that Vonnegut himself undertakes. If, essentially, reality can be approached, apprehended and interpreted solely through language, then the writer, as an artisan of words, is able to use his or her pen to affirm the power of human awareness, the "soul" Trout refers to in *Timequake,* and alter the course of human history for the better. Vonnegut understands that, in a universe determined by chaos, it is impossible to empirically prove the existence of the human soul, but to him that holds no relevance whatsoever, as the ultimate implication of chaos lies in how, by denying any claims to absolute truth and highlighting the provisional nature of all attempts to rationalize existence, it frees and empowers human beings to create their own purposeful narratives. Consequently, the author brandishes his prose as an apocalyptic weapon to honor human presence in the universe and try to make the world a more benevolent place through *foma*, the comforting lies that make up his novels and, he hopes, may alleviate the existential pain of his fellow men and women by advising them to look for reasons to live in the here and now; not in the heavens, but in each other.

Abraham Lincoln once said, "I hold that while man exists, it is his duty to improve not only his own condition, but to assist in ameliorating mankind" (qtd. in Cullen 94); Vonnegut, whose two greatest heroes were Lincoln himself and Mark Twain (Shields 413), firmly believes in the former president's words, and understands his craft as a commitment to serve humanity. "When a man becomes a writer," he has John, the narrator of *Cat's Cradle*, declare, "I think he takes on a secret obligation to produce beauty and enlightenment and comfort at top speed" (231), and that is the duty that Vonnegut accepts. The author believes that artists in general and writers in particular are some of the most important members of society, and that they should act as "agents of change" (*WFG* 237) and fulfill the double function of "responding symbolically to life" and "introducing new ideas into a society" (237); ideas that may empower humanity, promote change, and "bring light to a world of darkness" (Davis, *Crusade* 74). In his study of postwar American society, *White Collar* (1951), C. Wright Mills claims that, amid the escalating culture of conformity and consumerism, the "independent artist" is "among the few

remaining personalities presumably equipped . . . to unmask and smash the stereotypes of vision and intellect with which modern communications swamp us" (159). Vonnegut's whole career can be understood as a humanitarian protest against these grand metanarratives of contemporary American culture, as he continuously seeks to expose the tragic apocalyptic stories that people assume as true on a daily basis and which serve to perpetuate inequality, division and destruction. Hypothesizing over the ultimate fatal consequences that these narratives may have through his science fiction fables, Vonnegut intends to shock his readers into action, and by flaunting the fictionality of all human endeavors and exposing how the world can be accessed and conceptualized exclusively through language, he hopes that they will understand their own capacity to embrace only those fictions that can create a new, more inclusive and magnanimous vision, like the one he builds in his novels. Writers, he says, must devote all their efforts to the service not of specific countries, causes, or any other *granfalloon*,[88] but of the sum of humanity as their only "nation," and thus should be treasured as "alarm systems" (*WFG* 238) that warn of the missteps and evils of society.[89] To Vonnegut, for whom writing was, according to his son Mark, "a spiritual exercise" (*AIR* 1), the biological role of writers as "specialized cells" (*WFG* 229) within the huge, complex organism that is humanity is to "make mankind aware of itself, in all its complexity, and to dream its dreams" (*WFG* 229).

Vonnegut's fiction, therefore, ultimately obeys an activist and even pedagogical intent in its constant attempt to, in the author's own phrase, poison his readers minds with humanity (Scholes "A Talk" 109) in order to "encourage them to make a better world" (109). As a postmodernist, the author understands that literature not only reflects but also affects human experience, as we construct our reality through language and the inevitably fictional narratives we build with it; but, unlike other postmodernists, this notion does not lead Vonnegut to deny the possibility of finding essence, value and purpose in life. Instead, he understands the importance of literature as an apocalyptic vehicle which, as

[88] A *granfalloon*, in Bokononist terminology, is "a seeming team that was meaningless in terms of the ways God get things done" (*CC* 91). Examples of *granfalloons* include "the Communist party, the Daughters of the American Revolution, the General Electric Company, the International Order of Odd Fellows—and any nation, anytime, anywhere" (*CC* 91–92).

[89] The author develops this idea as what he calls his "Canary-in-the-coal-mine theory" (*WFG* 94). In it, Vonnegut argues that the extraordinary sensitivity of artists makes them useful to society in the same way as the birds that coal miners used to carry along in cages when exploring mine tunnels. These birds allowed miners to detect dangerous gases such as carbon monoxide, which would kill the animals before showing any effect on people and thus caution the workers of the danger in the tunnel and prompt them to leave. "They are supersensitive," Vonnegut says of artists, "They keel over like canaries in coal mines filled with poison gas, long before more robust types realize that any danger is there" (*WFG* 94).

Iris Murdoch writes, "has taken over some of the tasks formerly performed by philosophy" (30), and hence can allow people to "re-discover a sense of the density of our lives" (30). Reading and writing, Vonnegut argues, are "the most nourishing forms of meditation anyone has found so far" (*PS* 150), activities that "make one's soul grow" (*BS* 294) and transform us into "the freest of women and men" (149) by allowing us to "rise above [the] ordinariness" of everyday life (*WFG* xxv) and prompting us to create a better world. In consequence, the "comic-didactic" (Shields 126) novels of Kurt Vonnegut invite readers to laugh at the chaos that surrounds them and to think of meaninglessness not as a conclusion, but rather as the launchpad to find their own purpose in the creation of meaningful interactions with each other.[90] His novels, thus, pretend to create a new vision by inciting a comic apocalyptic process that will move his readers to transform their world. In *Slaughterhouse-Five,* the character of Eliot Rosewater says that "[e]verything there was to know about life was in *The Brothers Karamazov,* by Fyodor Dostoevsky," but laments how "that isn't *enough* anymore," and tells psychiatrists that they "are going to have to come up with a lot of wonderful *new* lies, or people just aren't going to want to go on living" (*SH5* 101). Vonnegut's whole oeuvre is an uncovering of these new narratives that can make life meaningful and valuable again in the midst of the atomic age; a search for soothing lies that may finally push us into "treasuring human beings because they are *human beings*" (*GBY* 265).

Of course, this new type of literary "lies" call for a brand new literary style that may adequately transmit Vonnegut's ideas to a large public, and a huge part of the author's appeal resides precisely in his unique voice as a writer. Hailed as "one of the most appealing and readable idioms to appear in America since the Second World War" (Goldsmith 42), Vonnegut's highly idiosyncratic use of short sentences, quick characterization, and heartfelt aphorisms disguised as comic punchlines—the author himself describes his books as "mosaics of jokes" (*PS* 103) built upon an alternating cycle of tension and release—is a reflection of the contradictory nature of his times. Juxtaposing wild science fiction fantasies with shockingly confessional autobiography and journalism, combining the extremely sad with the irresistibly hilarious, often within the same sentence, and never forgetting that, however complex and profound the ideas he is dealing

[90] It is no coincidence that, in *Galápagos*, after evolving into amphibious creatures with no semblance of culture, language or complex thought, the "human beings" of a million years into the future preserve only two aspects of current humanity: "People still laugh as much as they ever did, despite their shrunken brains" (*GP* 213) and "they still try to comfort those who are sick with soothing tones of voice" (246), as humor and altruism are the two most fundamental aspects of Vonnegut's humanism.

with may be, a writer is in essence an entertainer who must give his readers a rewarding and amusing experience, Vonnegut's style is so unlike that of any other author of his time that the *Chicago Tribune* once declared that "[t]o open one of Vonnegut's novels approaches the discovery of a new entertainment media" (qtd. in Shields 220). The ultimate appeal of Vonnegut's writing, however, probably resides in how, notwithstanding how radical the fictional experiment he is performing, how deep his philosophical inquiry into the nature of human existence, or how abstract the scientific concept he is trying to explain, his language always remains utterly simple, vernacular, and accessible. Well aware that writing is essentially a form of "practical joking" (*FWD* 137), since people are made "laugh or cry about little black marks on sheets of white paper" (*PS* 98) while they are "simply sitting someplace and nothing much is really going on" (*FWD* 137), Kurt Vonnegut never falls into a bloated sense of self-importance or into the snobbery of considering himself intellectually above his audience. Instead, he remains well aware of the popular audience he writes for and understands that "being provincial" allows him to "be universal" (Sumner 214).

Klinkowitz argues that Vonnegut's fiction is "in both shape and subject a challenge to familiar notions of what the American novel should be, but it is articulated in America's most commonly accepted terms" (*Kurt Vonnegut* 19), and adds that although his novels "may deal with the strange," they are nevertheless "crafted from materials in the storehouse of American culture" (20). Vonnegut's ultimate goal is to communicate his ideas as easily and effectively as possible, and thus he chooses to express them in terms familiar to his middle class American readership voiced in the very same language that these people use in their daily interactions, a style that Schatt labels "American colloquial" (103).[91] This deceptively simple style of writing—Vonnegut's former student at the Iowa Writer's Workshop, John Irving, signals the fallacy of thinking that "what is easy to read has been easy to write" (41)—is simultaneously the author's trademark and the source of some the harshest criticism towards his work. Clarity, Vonnegut often laments, "looks a lot like laziness and ignorance and cheapness" (*PS* 291) to critics who simply cannot tolerate his notion that "art is child's play, and can be discussed in plain, simple language" (qtd. in Sumner 284). However, that very simplicity becomes the key to his popular success in spite of the experimental nature of his writing.

[91] Schatt traces this style back to Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and says that its main characteristics are "its emphasis on shorter sentences, the removal of references to the historical and cultural past, and the extensive use of repetition" (103), all of which can be applied to Vonnegut's writing.

Avoiding self-aggrandizing visions of the artist as romantic hero as well as the alienating ornateness of some of his postmodernist contemporaries, both tendencies that ultimately isolate the writer from the common experience of humanity, Vonnegut's style, Klinkowitz and Somer conclude, is a return to a time when "artists were people" and wrote "for the people" (11).

In his 1981 "autobiographical collage" *Palm Sunday*, Vonnegut declares that "[s]implicity in language is not only reputable, but perhaps even sacred" (*PS* 69), and the clarity with which he always makes sure to express his ideas is vital for an apocalyptic author whose ultimate goal is to create a sense of intimate communication with his audience. Robert Scholes explains that "[o]ne naturally falls into the word 'speaks' in discussing his prose, which gives a strong sense of a voice behind the words" (159), and Vonnegut's close, familiar fictional voice undeniably transmits a strong feeling of personal intimacy and even friendship to the reader, who senses the presence of a real human being behind the page; a person with values, opinions, and flaws like any other, who manages to establish "a bond of trust and security that few contemporary artists have achieved" (Davis, *Crusade* 105). Lois Parkinson Zamora explains that the ultimate consolation afforded by the original apocalyptic rhetors is the "[s]ense of community created between the narrator and his audience," which affords those who read or listen to the apocalyptic text a means to rationalize crisis and chaos in order to "rise above the banality of evil" (15). Similarly, just as his antiheros ultimately find meaning and solace by creating or being integrated into an extended family, Vonnegut's writing, too, gives readers the consolation and reassurance of community. It is not difficult to encounter accounts of how his novels "made lots of people . . . less lonely" (Leeds ix), made his readers feel "like they belonged to a family of sorts" (Davis, "Flabbergasted" 3), or of how "[m]illions of lives were indeed touched by Vonnegut's works" (Klinkowitz, *America* ix). Vonnegut, indeed, gives his readership the message that so many people are desperate to receive in a lonesome society where people desperately long for meaningful human connections; namely: "You are not alone" (Sumner 319).

Of course, the closeness of Vonnegut's authorial voice is enhanced by the metafictional experiments of novels like *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Breakfast of Champions*, in which he directly inserts himself into the narrative as a character. As discussed in the previous chapter, this is a technique through which Vonnegut flaunts his role of creator and exposes the fictional foundations of his narratives, indirectly

unmasking the construed nature of any form of human discourse. However, it is also a means to invite the reader into the narrative as an active co-creator of meaning. Northrop Frye writes that all literary works are "like a picnic to which the author brings the words and the reader the meaning" (*Fearful* 427) and postmodernist novelists' baring of their authorial presence and the text's nature as an artifact is a means to openly acknowledge the creative role of readers and prevent the passive consumption of fiction. Klinkowitz writes that in metafiction "[t]here's no illusion and that's the beauty," (*America* 108), as he explains that, instead of being asked to suspend their disbelief, readers are "encouraged to augment the process by using their imaginations, making their own contributions to the work" (108), which is precisely what Vonnegut intends to do. Far from aiming to deliver preachy or dogmatic messages that must be assimilated in a completely literal way, Vonnegut, as a comic apocalyptic writer, is careful to deny any semblance of moral certainty in order to allow the reader the prerogative of judgment. His ultimate purpose is that his novels will stimulate readers positively, awakening their awareness so that they will be able to create their own truth, and to do this he avoids any dogmatic postures beyond the essential, humanitarian necessity to nurture life over death. Vonnegut, who according to his son Mark considers the reader's time and attention to be "sacred" (*AIR* 5) believes that the meaning of his novels is not so much in the words themselves as in peoples' experience of those words when they immerse in an active dialogue with the text, and places his faith in the potential for that experience to be, in Scholes' words, "satisfying and healthy" (161), hoping that, rather than provide answers, it will raise questions, and rather than extol himself as a great creator, it will reveal to readers their own transformative potential. In *Galápagos,* Vonnegut writes that the rhythms of the earth mean that, in time, all artists, from Shakespeare to Beethoven to himself, will prove to have written "with air on air" (*GP* 319). Thus, his intention is not for his novels or his reputation to endure, as any form of art is barely an attempt at "[m]aking the most of the raw materials of futility" (*HP* 14), but to foster moral stimulation, to awaken the kind of thoughts in his readers that may start a chain reaction and redirect the course of human history towards a more kindhearted future.

In *Timequake*, Vonnegut declares that "a plausible mission of artists is to make people appreciate being alive at least a little bit" (*TQ* 1), and that is perhaps the most consistent trend that can be found throughout his novels and the crux of his apocalyptic message: to incite people to find meaning in their day-to-day existence. Like American

performance artist Allan Kaprow once said, "The everyday world is the most astonishing inspiration conceivable" (qtd. in Levine and Papasotiriou 140), and Vonnegut's intergalactic fables and postmodernist experiments with the limits of fiction ultimately seek to empower humankind by unveiling our potential to find the enjoyment, realization and purpose right within our reach, and revealing how the meaning of life is not hidden in the confines of the cosmos or the promise of Heaven, but indeed lies in the moments of beauty, the meaningful interactions, and the laughing fits that are available to us on a daily basis. The only secret, the author believes, is to remain open to these kinds of "moments of grace" (Sumner 211), like he himself was taught to do by his Uncle Alex and his insistence that one should make a deliberate effort to "*notice* it" (*TQ* 12) when exposed to one of life's many transcendental moments:

> He was talking about simple occasions, not great victories: maybe drinking lemonade on a hot afternoon in the shade, or smelling the aroma of a nearby bakery, or fishing and not caring if we catch anything or not, or hearing somebody all alone playing a piano really well in the house next door.
>
> Uncle Alex urged me to say this out loud during such epiphanies: "If this isn't nice, what is?" (*TQ* 12)

In all of his novels, Vonnegut directs the readers' attention to these "manmade epiphanies" (*TQ* 19), shedding light on how, in the midst of crisis and chaos, we can still revel in details that make life worth living. Be it through Paul Proteus' pride in defeat, Malachi Constant's discovery of meaning in love, Rabo Karabekian's affirmation of the awareness that makes all of us sacred, the simplicity of the post-human existence in *Galápagos,* or Kilgore Trout's sense of belonging to an extended family before his death in *Timequake*, Vonnegut constantly illuminates how human beings have the capacity to create grace out of defeat, to carve purpose out of chaos, and to collectively move towards a more sustainable future through willful narratives that cherish human life as meaningful and sacred in their daily lives. As a self-confessed utopian thinker (Allen, *Conversations* 166), Vonnegut understands that, in Peter Richardson words, "the chief characteristic of all utopian practice the transformation of the everyday" (3), and the creed of postmodern humanism he develops in his novels is a means to empower humanity to enact this transformation, to undergo the comic apocalypse that allows them to reach New Jerusalem in life as a mental state of fulfilling grace available to all of us in our quotidian existence. In *Cat's Cradle,* the character of Julian Castle asks the narrator, "[w]hat makes

you think a writer isn't a drug salesman?" (*CC* 153), and even if that were true, if his writing was merely "a pain pill for the ills of the world" (Klinkowitz, "Crimes" 167), Vonnegut's self-professed goal to "give people the relief of laughing" (*AMWAC* 130) would still be achieved, thus fulfilling Don DeLillo dictum that art is "one of the consolation prizes we receive for having lived in a difficult and sometimes chaotic world" (DeCurtis 66). However, for Vonnegut literature is ultimately much more than that; it is not just a means to deal with the world, but a means to create the world.

Adela Yarbro Collins explains that the utmost "power of the Apocalypse" resides in its ability to deal with its audience's sense of crisis in an effective way through the "creation of a new linguistic 'world'" that allows believers to release tension in a process akin to the catharsis that Aristotle identified in Greek tragedy (165–166). In a similar way, Vonnegut, as an apocalyptic writer, turns to the creation of a new linguistic reality as a reaction to a world that does not seem reasonable or cohesive, that is molded by chaos and characterized by violence, inequality, and injustice. Faced by a reality that seems completely indifferent to human beings, Vonnegut acknowledges the potential of the human imagination as a constructive force and resorts to a creative act, constructing a body of literature that puts "man at the center of the universe, whether he belongs there or not" (*WFG* 167). By deploying mechanisms that openly flaunt the "unreal" nature of this pronouncement, such as science fiction and metafiction, however, the author exposes the essential artificiality of *all* human discourses and, paradoxically, allows for his "harmful untruths" to be embraced as a more humane credo that could replace the fundamentalist narratives that structure the American society of his time, as they are all equally construed through fictional mechanisms. As a postmodernist writer, he understands the potential of literature not only to critique and comment on history, but also to *make* history, and that is the ultimate intent he sets for his novels: to change the world not through a collective upheaval but through the inner, comic apocalyptic transformation of one reader at a time.

Scholes claims that "[w]e must see man as himself imagined and being re-imagined, and now able to play a role in the re-imagination of himself" (217), and the goal of Kurt Vonnegut's postmodernist science fiction is just that: to expose how, in a world of chaos where everything is a fiction, every single human being has the potential to create his or her own story and "turn civilization in the direction of integration and away from alienation" (Scholes 217). In his novels, Vonnegut aims to bear witness to the

existence of a sacred creative force within every human being, the awareness exalted by Rabo Karabekian and deemed "soul" by Kilgore Trout, and his final implication is that "[w]hether something sacred truly exists or is merely created with each stroke of Karabekian's brush or each word of some writer carries no weight" (Davis, *Crusade* 118), because the mere fact that this "soul" can be affirmed, created and exalted in writing is more than enough. The world *is* language, so anything that a writer creates with language is as *real* as anything else, and if a writer like Kurt Vonnegut can affirm the existence of human awareness and worship it as an abstraction of God, then so can we all, because our aptitudes for fiction are the instruments through which we make sense of the world. Just like an artist has the gift to "spatialize time" (Ketterer 328) in a manner similar to the Tralfamadorians, and select only the moments which, put together, "produce an image of life that is beautiful and surprising and deep" (*SH5* 88), so too can we all learn to rejoice in the miracle of existence and cherish the moments that make being alive meaningful, and create a more humane world by encouraging others to appreciate them, too. Literature, Vonnegut writes, is in essence nothing but "an insider's newsletter about affairs relating to molecules, of no importance to anything in the Universe but a few molecules who have the disease called 'thought'" (*BB* 210). Nevertheless, as the author claims in *The Sirens of Titan*, "in its finest sense," literature also makes readers "courageous, watchful, and secretly free" (132). As literature in its finest sense, Kurt Vonnegut's science fiction novels invite their readers to appreciate the marvel of being alive and empower them to exercise their freedom to create purpose by revealing that the ultimate sense of life is that it makes no sense, and therefore the only conclusive answer to the question of "What in hell are people *for*?" (*GBY* 22) is simply to "Live!" (*PP* 169).

So it goes. The possibilities are endless.

CONCLUSIONS

Much has happened in the fifteen years since Kurt Vonnegut's passing on April 11th, 2007 at the age of 84; a multiplicity of shocking events and developments which have concatenated to create an apocalyptic climate that certainly measures up to the author's time. The nuclear dread of the Cold War era may be (almost) buried, but the very real threat of global warming, the rise of a new wave of right-wing populism, and the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, among other circumstances, seem to be steering the course of history into dark corners akin to the wildest imaginings of science fiction. Nevertheless, before his death, Vonnegut was still able to witness and comment on what was perhaps the greatest paradigm shift in American politics and society since at least the end of the Cold War, and one in which we can find the source of many of our present anxieties: the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001.

Not only did the events of 9/11 demonstrate the fallibility of seemingly unshakable structures, be they physical or mental, shockingly proving how, in the words of Richard Gray, "even the most evidently solid artefacts can suddenly melt into the air" (55–56), but they also inaugurated a whole new era in international politics. Far from the commonplace conflicts between nations of yore, as epitomized by the Cold War's reimagining of the whole world as a checkerboard for the two superpowers to battle over global hegemony, the suicide attacks that brought down the Twin Towers introduced a new kind of threat: a "nonstate actor" which, as Levine and Papasotiriou explain, "crashed into the world of sovereign states and became the most serious actual threat to the security of the advanced world" (246). It is no wonder, then, that the events were soon phrased in clearly apocalyptic terms of global shock and irreparable change, as exemplified by the words of President George W. Bush, who claimed that, on the night of September 11th, "night fell on a different world—a world were freedom itself is under attack" (qtd. in Birkenstein 3).

The tragic apocalyptic rhetoric that ensued in the aftermath of the attacks threatened to make even the most ludicrous heights of Cold War manicheism pale in

comparison, as Bush openly expressed that "you are either with us or you are with the terrorists" (qtd. in Wilentz 440) and employed seemingly messianic terms by appealing to his ensuing "crusade" against the "evildoers" (440). The American media largely fed this dualistic rhetoric through the deliberate dehumanization of the new enemy of the innocently wounded United States: former US ally Osama Bin Laden and his hordes of Islamist radicals, as TV reports inexorably fit the events into "an interpretive scheme that connected the attacks with renewal, revenge, and deference to leaders who would attack the enemy and save us from other attacks" (Altheide 17). Thus, as the first American war planes began bombing Taliban targets over Afghanistan in early October, 2001 in what was labelled Operation Enduring Freedom, a not-so-implicit insinuation that only unquestioning loyalty to the US government and unilateral support of all its policies was commensurate with real patriotism flooded the country. Attorney General Ashcroft would go as far as to claim that critics "aid terrorists" and undermine national unity by giving "ammunition to America's enemies, and pause to America's friends" (qtd. in Altheide 19), an accusation Vonnegut himself would have to face, first when, during a vigil in honor of the New York City fire department, he praised the "many, many human beings" who were at that moment having to put out "many unwelcome fires" in Afghanistan (Donahue, "Vonnegut's Firefighters"), and later when, in a 2005 interview with David Nason for *The Australian*, he compared 9/11 to the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and, in his characteristic way, tried to understand the reasoning behind the attacks within the wider picture of American imperialism, explaining how the US had made millions of people worldwide feel "like [their] culture is nothing, [their] race is nothing, [they]'re nothing," to the point that some were willing to die "for their own self-respect" (Nason, "Darkness"). To the author, 9/11 and its consequences constituted a human tragedy which transcended national boundaries, but in times when compassion and rationality were seen as no less than treason, his statement was soon "widely reviled" (Klinkowitz, *America* 125), yet another sign of tragic apocalyptic fundamentalism engulfing the tenets of a nation built on the worship of freedom.

The controversy stirred by Vonnegut's words was just a sign of the fundamentalist turn to come. Soon, common sense and rational thinking seemed all but ruled out as "the pendulum between security and civil liberties swung violently towards the security end" (Levine and Papasotiriou 249) and Congress passed Bush's so-called Patriot Act, which allowed the government to access all kinds of private information about citizens, from

telephone conversations to library records, a violation of civil liberties which was justified by fitting it onto the overarching narrative of the "war on terror." As librarians were forcibly turned into informers and Afghanistan gave way to a new war in Iraq, a fan from Seattle sent Vonnegut a letter in which he wrote: "I feel like I'm in a world not even Kurt Vonnegut could have imagined" (*AMWAC* 107–108). The fact, nevertheless, is that the post-9/11 scenario of unreality actually seemed exactly like the worst of Vonnegut's dystopian scenarios turned into reality: a time in which, in the words of David H. Price,

> The US mixed torture with the values of public amnesia, denial of civil rights, the sanctification of consumer culture in a world where a collage of atrocities blur across national media backdrops, while those who contribute to this state of affairs find rewards of occupational advancement and secure credit lines. (168)

Starting in March, 2003, the Iraq War marked a complete departure from the principles of containment and deterrence that had determined US foreign policy since the Cold War. With its campaign to overthrow Saddam Hussein in Iraq, the Bush administration ignored a wave of international outcry and single-handedly condoned the use of a pre-emptive strike in order to neutralize a threat that finally proved to exist only in the imagination. The Weapons of Mass Destruction supposedly held by Hussein's regime were never found, but as Bush's Senior Advisor Karl Rode had claimed in 2002, "[w]e're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality" (qtd. in Lozada 79). In a twisted apotheosis of the principles of postmodernism, a blatant fiction served to create history, and the war in Iraq set an unsettling precedent whereby the US flaunted its right to embark on acts of war against threats that had not yet materialized, and to justify said prescient actions as an apocalyptic tool to extend "democracy, free markets, and security to every corner of the world" (Wilentz 442).

With an enemy as elusive as "Terror," there seemed to be no limits to how, when, or where Bush's new form of war would lead the United States. However, as the President's tragic apocalyptic rhetoric escalated to preposterous heights of fundamentalist cynicism that put even Ronald Reagan's most flagrant pre-millennial proclaims to shame, with US Army General William G. Boykin going as far as to declare that, in the war in Iraq, the US was "a Christian nation battling Satan," and that Bush himself had not been elected by his people but indeed "anointed by God" (qtd. in Bigsby 20), the actual monopoly over terror was debatable to say the least. Vice president Dick Cheney conceded that, when fighting terror, it is sometimes necessary to go to the "dark side"

(qtd. in Wilentz 442), a claim that was amply demonstrated by the US's willingness to ignore the Geneva Convention in a systematic exercise of abuse, torture, and slaughter of those it claimed to pretend to liberate, as evidenced by the revelation of the dehumanizing treatment of prisoners of war at the Iraqi prison of Abu Ghraib and at the Guantanamo Bay detention camp. Ultimately, the American presence in Iraq not only destabilized the country, which erupted into a civil war in 2013, but it also provided extremist Islamic groups such as Al Qaeda with "the best recruiting device imaginable" (Wilentz 448).

What is more, the war helped to consolidate the image of the United States as a warmongering, fanatical nation, much more dangerous to international stability than any of the supposed enemies of freedom it opposed. While the average citizens of the US, rechristened "the United States of Amnesia" by writer Gore Vidal (qtd. in Rubin 187), demonstrated a myopic denial to view the crimes of their country in perspective, once again flaunting the "inordinate opinion of themselves" as the self-proclaimed "only religious, enlightened, and free nation" that Alexis de Tocqueville had identified almost two centuries earlier (440), Kurt Vonnegut could not help but remark how

> [Americans] now present ourselves to the rest of the world as proud, grinning, jut-jawed, pitiless war lovers with appallingly powerful weaponry—who stand unopposed.
>
> In case you haven't noticed, we are now feared and hated all over the world as the Nazis once were.
>
> And with good reason
>
> In case you haven't noticed, our unelected leaders have dehumanized millions and millions of human beings simply because of their religion and race. We wound 'em and kill 'em and torture 'em and imprison 'em all we want.
>
> Piece of cake. (*AMWAC* 86–87)

Vonnegut wrote this in perhaps his most indignant political satire ever, *A Man without a Country*, issued in 2005 as a collection of essays originally written for the Chicago magazine *In These Times*, and which became an unexpected late-career touchstone for the author, who found himself topping best-seller lists again beyond the age of 80. Apart from unleashing his angst against the Bush administration's dehumanizing fundamentalism, in the book Vonnegut also anticipates some of the most

pressing issues of the subsequent decade, including the fuel crisis, global warming, and the 2008 financial collapse: "Don't spoil the party, but here's the truth," he writes, "[w]e have squandered our planet's resources . . . as though there's no tomorrow, so now there isn't going to be one" (45). This darkly cynical streak carries on to his last ever speech, delivered by his son Mark after the author's death, which he opens by claiming: "This is indeed the Apocalypse, the end of everything, as prophesied by Saint John the Divine and Saint Kurt the Vonnegut" (*AIR* 21).

The years since Vonnegut's death may not have been apocalyptic in the popular sense, as history certainly carries on, but they do fulfil the basic requirements for the traditional apocalyptic narrative as identified by Elizabeth K. Rosen: "a convergence of historical events with eschatological implications, a growing climate of fear regarding them, and an equally powerful sense that the paradigms by which we have tried to understand and interpret our world have come to seem inadequate, and perhaps unusable" (xvii). A time of dramatically worrying developments that have brought forth an inescapable feeling of crisis, these years have witnessed, to name but a few, the spread of radical Islamic terrorism and the rise of ISIS, the most serious worldwide financial crisis since the Great Depression, and the spread of a pandemic which has killed close to 5 million people worldwide and forced the pre-emptive lockdown of hundreds of millions. In the United States, perhaps the most conspicuous symptom of this new age of crisis was the election, in 2016, of business magnate and former TV star Donald Trump as the 45th president of the nation. Trump, who has been called "the first anti-American president" (Kendzior 14), renowned for a trademark style of arrogant demagogy where "bragging is breathing and insulting is talking, where repetition and contradiction come standard, where vengefulness and insecurity erupt at random" (Lozada 6), was the spearhead of a shift towards right-wing nationalism in global politics, and came to power after a campaign in which he openly scapegoated immigrants and minorities and famously claimed "I could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody and I wouldn't lose any voters" (qtd. in Bump, "If Trump").

During his four years in office, Trump commanded what Sarah Kendzior refers to as "an American autocracy, wrapped in a tabloid veneer" (9), as he led the country into the chaos that is the unescapable apocalyptic corollary of the crisis that had caused his ascent. Throughout that time, commentators and scholars alike struggled to fathom the forces that had landed the former host of *The Apprentice* at the White House. However,

as many tried to conceptualize Trump as "some inexplicable and crazy *new* American phenomenon" (Andersen 11) and "bookshelves emerged to warn that Trump was killing off the American experiment" (Lozada 8), others understood that, for all its surrealistic implications, the Trump presidency was no less than "the ultimate extrapolation and expression of attitudes and instincts that have made America exceptional for its entire history" (Andersen 11); precisely the kind of attitudes and instincts that Kurt Vonnegut had warned about during his whole career.

Back in 1972, Vonnegut had already reasoned that the two actual political parties in the United States were not Republicans and Democrats, but "Winners" and "Losers" (*WFG* 187) and that "the single religion of the Winners is a harsh interpretation of Darwinism, which argues that it is the will of the universe that only the fittest should survive" (188). Trump, who ironically is widely renowned for his fondness over the verb "win," was no less than the enactment of the darkest tragic apocalyptic instincts of a nation shaken by economic deprivation, marked by deeply engraved racial prejudice, and built upon the worship of competition. The millions who cast their votes for Trump in 2016 embodied the anger and disappointment with the ability of traditional politicians to enact real change concealed beneath the hopeful optimism of the Obama era, and they latched on to the charm of a plastic idol who enacted all the barren stereotypes of the American Dream as a capitalist ideal, willing to find in him an apocalyptic messiah who could pave their way to salvation by placing "America first." With his "patchwork of knowing falsehoods and sincerely believed fantasies" (Lozada 83), Trump is no less than the ultimate postmodern sublimation of the American myth of a God-ordained Promised Land; the apotheosis of the tragic apocalyptic narrative of the United States as God's own country, a rhetoric of pre-millennial zeal mixed with capitalist sheen and self-centered exceptionalism perhaps best summarized in televangelist Jim Bakker's remark: "Only saved people can love Trump" (Mazza, "Jim Bakker to Christians").

Ever since *Player Piano*, Kurt Vonnegut's novels had warned of this fundamentalist flaw in the American character, and throughout his oeuvre he labors to expose how it was progressively and deliberately exploited by the country's leaders in the context of Cold War dualism. Vonnegut's books uncover how, in the words of David Altheide, "Fear is the foundation for much of the dominant narrative of the last 50 years" (12), as they explore the fictional mechanisms behind the construction of official discourses that hold a claim to truth and how these have been fed to a nation "so reluctant

to laugh, so incapable of thought, so eager to believe and snarl and hate" (*MN* 160). Sarah Kendzior claims that, during Barack Obama's presidency, "there was more pain than the people in power were willing to admit" (10), and that the election of Donald Trump was the culmination of this pain. Long before, Vonnegut had identified the source of this pain by claiming that "the most pervasive American disease was loneliness" (*BB* 54); a loneliness endemic in a culture raised to worship competition, unquestioningly led to believe in its own exceptionalism, and numbed by the onslaught of superficiality and commercial slogans of television. The America that elected Trump is not far removed from the malaise-ridden society pictured in *Breakfast of Champions*; a book populated by people desperately willing to believe in some kind of narrative that will make their lives meaningful and significant.

Of course, the world of *Breakfast of Champions* was missing a ubiquitous element without which our current reality cannot be understood: the Internet. For all its many benefits, the Internet, especially through social media, has nevertheless proven to be the ultimate enactment of the prognostication, made by historian Daniel J. Boorstin in his 1962 book *The Image*, of a culture of "nothingness" (60) in which "the vacuum of our experience is actually made emptier by our anxious straining with mechanical devices to fill it artificially" (60). Originally intended to herald the democratization of information and the elimination of boundaries between people, social media actually promotes a culture of superficiality that kneels before the altar of image while giving free rein to the spread of fake news that foster radicalization and conspiracy. Kurt Andersen explains how the Internet "empowers real-seeming fictions," as "[a]mong the one million websites, believers in anything and everything can find thousands of fellow fantasists who share their beliefs, with collages of facts and 'facts' to back them up" until "all the fantasies look real" (9). Opening up a new era of credulity and providing a shield against meaningful social interaction and empathy by reducing people to a stereotypical image, expression to a 280-character blurt and friendship to a number, social networks provided the ideal tool for the dissemination of Trump's demagogically patriotic and flagrantly dehumanizing discourse. In Trump's rhetoric, illegal immigrants, black Americans, and the underprivileged are denied their humanity and viewed as disposable; mere stereotypes that embody all the evils of the present, and stand as an obstruction for the salvation of what he considers the "real" Americans. Social networks and online communities of the

like which Vonnegut argued "build nothing" (*AMWAC* 61) proved to be the most fitting channel for the spread of this misleading discourse of hate.

It can be no coincidence that, as Donald Trump took office, George Orwell's *1984* escalated to the top of the book sales ranking at Amazon (Lozada 9). The books a society reads are a telling indicator of how people feel at a given point in time and, at the disquieting dawn of the Trump era, it seemed like only science fiction was prone to provide answers. Throughout this dissertation, I have endeavored to prove that science fiction is important literature, and that far from a fanciful exercise of the imagination, it stands as a meaningful and complex sociopolitical commentary on the present and on how current circumstances could be translated into plausible future scenarios. With its cosmic scope and its incessant exploration of the nature of change, I purport that science fiction is the quintessential apocalyptic genre. In its exploration of space, be it outer or inner, as the last human frontier, I hold that it is one of the most fitting literary offshoots of the foundational American spirit. In its reflection of the radical spatial, temporal, and mental dislocations of the postmodern era, I argue that it stands as maybe the purest form of postmodernist writing. As a science fiction author attuned to the cultural traditions and political turmoil of his country, keen on interrogating the nature of reality and the human capacity to enact change, and responsible for opening up of the genre to the stylistic and thematic innovations of postmodernism, I hold that Kurt Vonnegut is one of the most important American authors of his time. He may never have gotten his due recognition for being too science fictional for academia and too academic for science fiction, but it is precisely this ambivalence, his denial to adapt to any particular niche and instead follow his own rules, which makes his literature so appealing, so human, and as relevant today as it ever was.

Vonnegut wrote about how the past gave birth to the present and of how the concatenation of both would result in the future. Now that we are living in the future, his work can disclose much about how we got here, and reveal to us the nature of what is to come. When journalist Sarah Kendzior writes about the disorienting experience of living amid the chaos of the Trump era; of being "trapped in a reality TV autocrat's funhouse mirror, a blurred continuum of shock and sorrow that exhausts our capacity for clarity of thought" (Kendzior 18) and where one's previously unquestioned sense of time and reality are blurred, a novel like *Slaughterhouse-Five* seems particularly appropriate to conceptualize such traumatic disruption of experience and explain how to overcome it.

Faced with a world governed by autocrats and plutocrats for whom "the future is not a right but a commodity" (Kendzior 7), to the point that climate change, human suffering, and fanatical violence are ignored, even endorsed, as means to increase the power of an elite minority, the ideas exposed in *The Sirens of Titan* and *Cat's Cradle* stop seeming like otherworldly fantasies and take on a newfound prescience that may enlighten a way to defeat the dangerous lies of those for whom "a depopulated world is not a tragedy but an opportunity" (8). When a self-acknowledged apologist of chaos as a cleansing tool such as Trump[92] holds the reins of the most powerful country in the world, an author like Kurt Vonnegut is prone to open a space for debate that explains how we ended up here and, most importantly, illuminates a glimmer of hope for the future.

In the course of this dissertation, I have argued for the notion that literature is not just a reflection of history but an arena in which history is created, as history, just like any other form of discourse, is a narrative constructed out of fictional devices. Thus, I have set out to prove that Vonnegut's literature is of tremendous value as a historical record of the second half of the twentieth century as told from the eyes and ink of a regular, middle-class American citizen. This record extends from the beginning of the Cold War to the aftermath of 9/11, which is why I argue that Vonnegut's whole oeuvre should be given equal weight as a of body of complementary works that establish an enriching dialogue with one another. To prove this point, I have attempted to right the commonplace critical assumption that his best work belongs to the first half of his career by giving as much importance to novels like *Galápagos* or *Timequake* as to the immensely popular *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Cat's Cradle.* Throughout, I have argued that Vonnegut may be heralded as the quintessential American novelist of his time because his work constitutes an ongoing commentary on the sociopolitical and cultural developments of his time as experienced firsthand by a figure who partook in some of the nations' turning points, such as the Great Depression and World War II, worked hard to keep his family afloat through the early years of the Cold War, and rose to prominence during the critical paradigm shifts of the sixties and seventies, finally establishing himself as a respected critical voice through to his passing in 2007. Above all, however, the indelibly American character of

[92] In a 2014 interview with Fox News, Trump declared: "You know what solves it? When the economy crashes, when the country goes to total hell and everything is a disaster. Then you'll have a [chuckles], you know, you´ll have riots to go back to where we used to be when we were great" (qtd. in Kendzior 16). The future president's scenario of renewing catastrophe seems eerily similar to Winston Niles Rummford's scheme to orchestrate a destructive Martian invasion after which humanity will be afforded an apocalyptic tabula rasa in *The Sirens of Titan.*

Vonnegut's novels stems from the fact that they are written by an author who is clearly invested in what can be called the American experiment, who believes in the foundational values of his country and engages in a complex philosophical enquiry over the nation's and his own problematic relationship to those ideals it claims to embody.

Willingly or not, Vonnegut's literature encompasses many of the paradoxical complexities associated with the American character and culture, from its constantly conflicting pull between individualism and society, determinism and free will, reality and fiction, to its molding of complex ideas into accessible and attractive wholesale-ready packages, its investigation of the dangerous pitfalls concealed behind the siren call of new technologies, or its exploration of the tendency of utopian dreams to degenerate into dystopian realities. The greatest paradox at the heart of Vonnegut's work, however, remains the same as the inescapable contradiction at the core of the traditional apocalyptic myth, with its prophecy of the destruction of the world as the only way to save it, and this is the constant tug of war between the deadpan realist who records the decline of his culture and the incorrigible optimist who believes in humanity's potential to attain salvation. Although many critics have claimed that the former impulse overcomes the latter, my dissertation has endeavored to ascertain that it is Vonnegut the optimist who ultimately prevails. Tom Wolfe writes that there is a "[l]ittle gold ball of tribute at the heart of every parody" (*New* 23), and Vonnegut's darkly hilarious depiction of the plight of the human race and the misguided course of the United States is indeed a love letter to a comically flawed animal who had the hilarious misfortune of developing the faculty of thought, but still has the chance of building something meaningful and good with it. In spite of his "dark and mordant depiction of humanity," as Todd F. Davis concludes, Vonnegut "relentlessly and tirelessly crusades for the human race" (*Crusade* 53). Willingly acknowledging the contradictory nature of reality, Vonnegut understands that life is utterly meaningless and yet, at the same time, it is endlessly meaningful, too.

The most fundamental claim behind this dissertation has been that Vonnegut's literature obeys a comic apocalyptic impulse. Contrary to the popular stereotype of apocalypse as a hopeless vision of destruction and despair, apocalyptic literature is indeed "fundamentally concerned with our human relations to the changing forms of temporal reality" (Zamora 13). Thus, the apocalyptic feeling is nothing new or exclusive to our times but a natural human impulse that allows us to conceptualize and interpret the nature and implications of change and place our present circumstances in the overarching

narrative of history. Such impulse ineluctably arises in times of crisis (itself more a way of conceptualizing a moment than an intrinsic property of the moment itself) as a tool to attempt to make sense of events and changes that seem to overwhelm human dimensions and escape the limits of reason. Stephen D. O'Leary identifies the two prototypical apocalyptic responses to this sense of crisis as tragic and comic; tragic implying a stern acceptance of humanity's deserving of divine judgment and punishment before those considered worthy can be entitled to salvation, and comic acknowledging humanity's capacity to correct its path so that each individual may eventually reach that same salvation through his or her own means. In its survey of US society during the second half of the twentieth century, Vonnegut's literature identifies a progressive move away from the original comic source of the American myth as a new beginning for humanity to get to the Promised Land in life and towards the dangerously tragic rhetoric of the Cold War. Against this pre-millennial narrative of moral absolutes and purifying destruction, the author proposes a comic credo that praises the human imagination as capable of ascertaining self-made meanings that make life worth living and allow people to find salvation in the everyday.

In order to reveal this innate aptitude for self-salvation, Vonnegut's literature illustrates a path akin to that of traditional apocalyptic narratives: emerging from a context of crisis, the author investigates the essential chaos at the core of existence, and claims that only an acceptance of the meaninglessness of experience may unlock the path to accomplish a meaningful new creation. The Gospel from Outer Space is a postmodern humanist philosophy that uses the cosmic scope of science fiction, the renovating spirit of postmodernism, and a pinch of satirical insolence to claim that all human narratives and endeavors, from religion to politics, art, and philosophy, are nothing but fictional constructs. The tragic apocalyptic rhetoric that led the United States through the myriad tragedies of the Cold War, and, later on, to 9/11 and the Trump presidency, is a construct, too, and by exposing its nature as such, Vonnegut manages to defeat it and achieve the salvation of a New Jerusalem understood as spiritual allegory. His comic apocalyptic project is to use his creation of a new literary universe to incite other people to follow his example and embark on their own acts of apocalyptic creation.

Once all the great metanarratives which hold a claim to absolute meaning are proven to be flawed, meaning and purpose themselves exposed as no less than illusions, humanity may stop asking about the meaning of life and start creating it. In order to do

so, Vonnegut argues, people must reach inward instead of outward and find purpose not in the pursuit of unattainable grand ends, but in the simple joys of life, in the values which Yarbro Collins identifies as the "criteria for the political stance and relational tone of the Apocalypse," namely "humanization, justice, and love" (167). So as to avoid the fundamentalist dangers of grand narratives, Vonnegut openly displays the fictional construction of his philosophy and how this humanist credo is merely an act of faith, with no way to demonstrate its veracity. In a universe governed by chaos, however, the point is that there is no way to effectively prove any kind of philosophy, but if this particular one allows people to live in such a way that they minimize the harm to the earth and each other, if its result is a kinder world with even an ounce less of suffering, loneliness, and social injustice, then the author is more than willing to suspend his disbelief and partake in an illusion.

Thus, Vonnegut's comic apocalypse denies the eschatological fatalism commonly associated with the apocalyptic paradigm and instead becomes a celebration of life, a summons to believe in the possibility of change and improvement, even amid the darkest of times. In one of his most famous speeches, actually a summary of his project for a thesis on cultural anthropology at the University of Chicago, Vonnegut liked to draw graphs illustrating the plots of stories, with a vertical G-I axis symbolizing the shift between good fortune and ill fortune, a horizontal B-E axis representing the passing of time form beginning to entropy, and a line depicting the main characters' plight. The most common plot that the author identified in Western literature is what he labelled as "Somebody gets into trouble, gets out of it again" (*AMWAC* 25), in which the line described a descending and then ascending movement through the G-I axis—with slight variations on its fluctuation along the way depending on whether the story at hand be a "Man in Hole" scenario, a "Boy Meets Girl" story or *Cinderella*, among other variations (25–31). This theory illustrates, in an extremely simplified form, Vonnegut's comic apocalyptic philosophy of how the descent into chaos can always be amended by a new creation, and how that process is a personal transformation available to all human beings. To Vonnegut, the apocalypse is not a singular historical event in the near future that will signal the end of human history, but a process that every individual can undergo, even several times during a lifetime, in order to view life anew and create a reason to go on living amidst the inescapable pain and drama of existence. The only requisite for this process is to acknowledge that nothing and everything is real at once, that our own minds

dictate the terms of reality, and that, ultimately, we really should not take life all that seriously.

Hence, Vonnegut's conception of apocalypse differs radically from the conception of history as a straight line with a beginning and an end as presented in tragic apocalyptic narratives, and becomes more akin to a circle which allows for a new start whenever the cycle is complete. Michael Pinsky writes that "[t]he apocalypse is the return of Odysseus, the fulfillment of the origin" (45), as the ending becomes the beginning and history continues unfolding far beyond our limited scope as human beings. As a student of anthropology, Vonnegut was well aware of the prevalence of the apocalyptic myth throughout human history, of how the myth's most significant trait is perhaps that perdurability that entitles every single generation to firmly believe it is living in apocalyptic times even if the end of the world stubbornly insists on failing to materialize. As an American, surrounded by paradox since birth, he knew that, in its obstinate perseverance in bringing forth death, apocalypse is ultimately a means to affirm life. As a postmodernist, he also understood how all of these myths and narratives are stories we tell each other in order to pretend that we understand, to make sense of what is essentially senseless. As a humanist, he firmly believed that these stories could be useful, because just as reality is ultimately a story, stories are the fabric that make up reality, too, and so writing good stories that emphasize the infinite potential of the human imagination can contribute to the creation of a better reality by facilitating other fellow humans' unavoidable daily showdowns with life. Finally, as a comic apocalypticist, he had faith in the fact that a growing accumulation of these daily transformations could gradually change the world into a less violent, more humane place to live in.

Nowadays, as we find ourselves in the midst of difficult times in which we are "surrounded by rhetoric presenting complex scenarios of disaster and salvation that contradict and combine with one another" (O'Leary 215); as the earth turns hotter every year, thousands of people die of hunger while tons of food are wasted on a daily basis, and a virus we are too self-centered to overcome destabilizes the most solid structures of Western society; as the ghosts of racism and fundamentalism linger on even after Donald Trump's defeat in the 2020 presidential elections in the form of the fanatical zealots charging into the Capitol, the images of the last American planes fleeing Kabul airport as the Taliban siege the city evoke the worst nightmares of the Vietnam war, and the cry of "black lives matter" still needs to be chanted in streets paved with blood, Kurt Vonnegut's

apocalyptic philosophy stands out as a source of hope, reminding us of how, in the face of the erratic nature of history and of the perishable nature of all human endeavors, our imagination still entitles us to transform chaos into creation. Like Billy Pilgrim, we may be hapless tools of huge forces beyond our reach, but like him, too, we can find ways to make our lives meaningful even in the face of the most despairing chaos.

Vonnegut often liked to quote how his pediatrician son Mark once told him "Father, we are here to help each other get through this thing, whatever it is" (*AMWAC* 66), a truth that the author had his most lasting character, science fiction writer Kilgore Trout, discover when, after allowing his imagination fly through time and space in order to witness things no man or woman had ever dreamed of, he was finally able to find solace back on Earth, in the comfort of caring friends who helped him to discover that the human soul is the most wondrous quality in the whole universe. "If this isn't nice, what is?" (*TQ* 12).

It is undeniable that a dissertation with a scope as large as this one, extending over a half century in the history of a country and the life and work of an author, is prone to have its limitations. Once it has been proven that the apocalyptic impulse is clearly a unifying trend that underpins Kurt Vonnegut's literature and unifies his philosophy, a claim which, as far as I am aware of, had not been previously developed, future lines of research could perhaps attempt to address this fault by centering around the investigation of the apocalyptic implications of certain Vonnegut works, ideas or motifs to an even deeper extent. Also, as my dissertation defends that the ultimate purpose of Vonnegut's writing is to influence his readers' view of life and stimulate their own creative endeavors, maybe it would be interesting to investigate how this influence not only has translated into other authors who have openly acknowledged his influence, such as John Irving, Salman Rushdie, and Jonathan Safran Foer, to name but a few, but also into artists whose creative work pertains to completely different artistic mediums, from film directors to comedians, musicians, and comic book artists, and explore how they have adapted Vonnegut's apocalyptic message to suit their craft.

Furthermore, having argued that Vonnegut can be declared the quintessential American novelist of the second half of the twentieth century, another interesting line of research would be to debate who, if anyone, may be said to have inherited that title in our present day, researching whether there is a current novelist whose work establishes a similarly deep commentary on the sociopolitical reality of the United States during the

first quarter of the twenty-first century. Finally, this dissertation is largely grounded on two grand assumptions: that apocalypse is a misunderstood phenomenon and that Kurt Vonnegut is not unanimously considered a science fiction writer, as I argue he should be. I have raised questions and proposed extensive answers as to why these two claims may be so recurrent, but concerns of extension together with the aim not to deviate too far from my main argument leave me with the feeling that both hypotheses remain open to much more in-depth investigation. Therefore, they might stand as interesting areas for some illuminating future research in their own terms.

Nevertheless, I believe that the most compelling and immediate path to continue the research undertaken during this dissertation would be a practical application of some of its findings with a pedagogical intent, which is a project I have already undertaken. This year I have studied a master's degree in secondary education with a specialization in English, and, as my master's thesis, I have designed a didactic proposal to use *Slaughterhouse-Five* in English as a Foreign Language lessons through a Project-based learning methodology within the context of Content and Language Integrated Learning. CLIL, which is at the core of European Union policy on bilingualism, is a pedagogical approach based on the study of a foreign language using contents from other subjects taught in the target language, and my intention is to use Vonnegut's literature in order to enhance Spanish learners' communicative skills and cognitive development in English. As I have argued throughout this dissertation, accessibility is one of the most characteristic aspects of Vonnegut's style, and as such, I believe that his works would be perfectly suited for Spanish teenagers developing their readings skills in English. What is more, my intent is to use Vonnegut's work to challenge the prevailing negative stereotypes among young learners about what literature is and how it should be taught, presenting *Slaughterhouse-Five* as a springboard for students to start reflecting on issues related to human values, morality, history, culture, and philosophy. The ultimate aim of the project, which I expect to apply in a real academic context during the coming course, is to challenge traditional teacher-centered pedagogical approaches and motivate students to create their own meanings and interpretations in dialog with the text and their peers by transforming the class into what Piera Carroli designates a "hermeneutic inquiring community" (17).

Authors such as Paul Ramsey have already investigated how Vonnegut's work "has been found to be particularly attractive to young people" (210) and how it can be

used in classroom contexts to "enliven the school curriculum and to foster students' civic awareness and engagement" (207). I believe that combining such prospects with Vonnegut's novels' potentiality as an entry point into reading literature in English may open a fruitful educational pathway that has not been explored yet in Spanish secondary education. Art, as Landon Beyer remarks, has the capacity to "connect what are often considered more distant moral imperatives and the real-life, flesh and blood experiences of young people" (143), and a pedagogical approach that helps adolescents to develop their civic awareness, critical thinking, and imagination would be a practical application of Vonnegut's comic apocalyptic philosophy much more in line with the actual intent of the writer than any form of academic research.

Fifteen years after his death, Kurt Vonnegut's books and ideas remain as relevant as ever. His philosophy is simple but powerful, and it is his combination of humane, relatable, and comforting ideas delivered through accessible, original, engaging, and funny literature that gives Vonnegut's message its lasting power and makes it appealing to the new generations whose responsibility it is to usher in the apocalyptic transformation that may make this world a kinder place for all of those forced to inhabit it. No matter how much time goes by, Vonnegut's Gospel from Outer Space will always endure and find an audience, as it is a discourse that tells ultimately allows us to reflect on how to live today. More than any other writer I know, Vonnegut incites us to build upon his legacy; to take his literature and do something positive with it. His novels encourage us to ask why, but also to ask, how can I help? They stand as a summons to believe in a better future, in our potential to enact change, and in the unlimited power of the imagination. In *A Man without a Country*, the last and most bitter of his books, the author claims that "[t]he America I loved still exists, if not in the White House, the Supreme Court, the Senate, the House of Representatives, or the media . . . [it] still exists at the front desks of our public libraries" (103), those sacred temples filled with books that make us "the freest of men and women" (*PS* 150). As long as young people can find Vonnegut's books in such places, this true American spirit will live on in words that incite us to be creative, to be grateful, to be kind, and to "[l]ive so that you can say to God on Judgment Day, 'I was a very good person, even though I did not believe in You'" (*PS* 152).

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ANNEX A: CHRONOLOGY

The six decade charts in this section link Vonnegut's life and works to the major sociopolitical events and literary landmarks of his time, providing a useful framework of reference for the whole dissertation, in particular chapter 2: Crisis.

1950s

Year	Vonnegut's life	Vonnegut's works	Sociopolitical events	Literature
1950	Resigns from General Electric after publication of "Barnhouse"	- "Report on the Barnhouse Effect" (*Collier's Weekly,* Feb. 11) – First published story. - "Thanasphere" (*Collier's,* Sep. 2) - "EPICAC" (*Collier's,* Nov. 25)	• Red Scare: Joseph McCarthy comes to national prominence. • NSC-68 militarizes containment policy. • June: President Truman orders military support for South Korea – start of Korean War. • Nov: Truman assassination attempt.	- Ray Bradbury, *Martian Chronicles* - Isaac Asimov, *I, Robot* - David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd* -Nobel Prize for lit. awarded to William Faulkner
1951		- "All the King's Horses" (*Col,* Feb. 10) - "Mnemonics" (*Col,* Apr. 28) - "The Euphio Question" (*Col,* May 12) - "The Foster Portfolio" (*Col,* Sep. 8)	• Feb: 22nd constitutional amendment limits presidency terms. • April: General McArthur relieved after criticizing Truman's limited war efforts. • October: Mutual Security Act – foreign aid to contain the spread of communism.	- J.D. Salinger, *The Catcher in The Rye* - James Jones, *From Here to Eternity* - Albert Camus, *The Rebel*
1952		- "Any Reasonable Offer" (*Col,* Jan) - "The Package" (*Col,* July 26) - ***Player Piano*** (August – 7600 copies printed) - "The No-Talent Kid" (*Sat EP,* Oct 25) - "Poor Little Rich Town" (*Col,* Oct 25) - "Souvenir" (*Argosy,* Dec)	• June: McCarran-Walter Act: regulation of immigration to US. • Nov: Presidential election – Republican Dwight D. Eisenhower defeats Adlai Stevenson.	- Ernest Hemingway, *The Old Man and the Sea* -Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* - John Steinbeck, *East of Eden*

		- *Tomorrow the Stars* (collection of edited by Robert A. Heinlein including "Report on the Barnhouse Effect")		
1953	Kurt and Jane join Great Books course and Barnstable Comedy Club. Advance for second novel. Starts writing *Cat's Cradle.*	- "Tom Edison's Shaggy Dog" (Mar) - "The Cruise of *Jolly Rodgers*" (*Cape Cod Compass,* April) - "D.P." (*Ladies' Home Journal*, August) - "Unready to Wear" (*Galaxy Science Fict*)	• April: Watson and Creek publish first paper on the molecular structure of DNA. • June: Trial and execution of the Rosenbergs. • July: End of Korean War. • CIA overthrows nationalist Mossadegh regime in Iran.	- Arthur Miller, *The Crucible* - Arthur C. Clarke, *Childhood's End* - Ray Bradbury, *Farenheit 451*
1954	October 4: Nannette born (third kid). Work for *Sports Illustrated.*	- "The Big Trip Up Yonder" (*Galaxy SF*, Jan) - "Custom-Made Bride" (*Sat. Evening Post*, March 27) - "Adam" (*Cosmopolitan*, April) - "Ambitious Sophomore" (*Sat EP*, May) - "Bagombo Snuff Box" (*Cosmo,* Oct) - "A Present for Big Nick" (*Argosy*, Dec) - ***Utopia 14*** (paperback reprint of *PP* by Bantam)	• April-July: Geneva conference attempts peace in Indochina. • May: Brown v. Board of Education - Supreme Court declares segregation in schools unconstitutional. • June: Army-McCarthy hearings – McCarthy discredited. • June: Operation PBSUCCESS – CIA removes Guatemalan President Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán. • September 8: USA joins SEATO. • Nov 23: Dow Jones at all-time high.	- William Golding, *Lord of the Flies* - J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring* - Aldous Huxley, *The Doors of Perception* - Nobel Prize for lit. awarded to Hemingway.
1955	February: Family moves to West Barnstable. Bad situation (no inspiration, economic trouble)	- "Unpaid Consultant" (*Cosmo,* Mar) "Deer in the Works" (*Esquire,* Apr) - "Next Door" (*Cosmo,* Apr) - "*Der Arme Dolmetscher*" (*Atlantic Monthly,* July) - "The Kid Nobody Could Handle" (*Sat. EP*, Sep)	• Start of civil rights movement (death of Emmett Till in August). • First McDonald's and Disneyland opened. • Nov 21: Eisenhower deploys first military personnel to Vietnam.	- Norman Mailer, *The Deer Park* - Flannery O'Connor, *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*

			• Dec 1: Rosa Parks arrested – Montgomery Bus Boycott.	- James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*
1956	September 30: Death of KV, Sr. – Kurt spends inheritance money in opening a Saab dealership in Cape Cod (financial failure)	- "The Boy who Hated Girls" (*Sat. EP*, March 31) - "Miss Temptation" (*Sat. EP,* Apr 21)	• Oct-Nov: Hungarian Revolution suppressed by Soviet tanks (US refuses to partake) • Nov 6: Presidential election – Eisenhower beats Stevenson.	- Allen Ginsberg, *Howl and other poems* - Eugene O'Neill, *Long Day's Journey into Night* - John Barth, *The Floating Opera*
1957		- "Hal Irwin's Magic Lamp" (June) - "A Night for Love" (*Sat EP,* Nov 23)	• Jan: Eisenhower Doctrine (aid to prevent communism) • Sep 4: Little Rock Integration Crisis (Governor Faubus sends National Guard to prevent integration in a high school) • Sep: Civil Rights Act. • Oct 4: Soviet Union launches *Sputnik* – Space Race begins. • Dec 2: Atoms for Peace program.	- John Cheever, *The Wapshot Chronicle* - Jack Kerouac, *On The Road* - Noam Chomsky, *Syntactic Structures* - Neville Shute, *On the Beach*
1958	September: Jim Adams dies in a train accident in Newark. A few days later Alice dies of breast cancer. K and Jane take care of their four sons.	-"The Manned Missiles" (*Cosmo,* July): only short story sold in 1958 (two the previous year) – magazine market moribund.	• Jan 31: *Explorer 1* – first US satellite launched. • Jul 29: National Aeronautics and Space Act.	-Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* - Truman Capote, *Breakfast at Tiffany's* - Nabokov's *Lolita* published in US

	Meets Theodore Sturgeon at Cape Cod (model for Kilgore Trout)			
1959	Peter (youngest of Alice's sons) taken to live in Alabama with Jim's cousins. Attempt at playwriting: *Something Borrowed* (humorous retelling of Odysseus' return to Penelope)	***-The Sirens of Titan*** (October - written in a few months when Knox Burger asks him about new ideas at a NY party after establishing the line of paperback originals at Dell Publishing) - 2500 copies, few reviews. Hugo award nomination.	• Jan 3: Alaska becomes 49th state of the Union. • Feb 16: Fidel Castro proclaimed Cuban president. • July 8: First two American casualties in Vietnam. • Aug 21: Hawaii becomes 50th state of the Union.	- William Burroughs, *Naked Lunch* - Terry Southern, *The Magic Christian* - Philip Roth, *Goodbye, Columbus*

1960s

1960	-"Long Walk to Forever" (*Ladies Home Journal*, Apr)	• Widespread civil disobedience acts to protest Jim Crow laws. • May 1: U-2 CIA spy plane shot down flying over USSR. • May 6: Civil Rights Act to secure black vote. • Nov 8: Election – Democrat John F. Kennedy defeats Richard Nixon and becomes the youngest President in US history. • FDA approves sale of Enovid as birth control pill.	- Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird* - John Barth, *The Sot-Weed Factor* - John Updike, *Rabbit, Run* - Edward Albee, *The Zoo Story* - Paul Goodman, *Growing Up Absurd*
1961	- "Find Me a Dream" (*Cosmopolitan*, Feb) - ***Mother Night*** (Feb - Fawcett paperback, unreviewed - flop) - "Runaways" (*Sat EP*, Apr) - ***Canary In A Cathouse*** (September – first short story collection) - "Harrison Bergeron" (*The Magazine of Science Fiction*, Oct) - "My Name Is Everyone" / "Who Am I This Time?" (*Sat EP*, Dec)	• Jan 3: US breaks diplomatic relations with Cuba. • Jan 17: Eisenhower warns of the "military-industrial complex" in his farewell address. • Feb 7: Embargo against Cuba. • Apr 17-19: Bay of Pigs invasion. • May 5: Alan Shepard pilots the *Freedom 7* to become the first American in space. • May 25: JFK proposes the Apollo program to put man on the moon. • Aug 13: Berlin Wall built.	- Joseph Heller, *Catch-22* - Richard Yates, *Revolutionary Road* - Robert A. Heinlein, *Stranger In A Strange Land* - Stanislaw Lem, *Solaris* - Allen Ginsberg, *Kaddish*

1962	Works as teacher in Hopefield Riverview (private school for developmentally delayed or behavior-disturbed boys). Uses the money to build a studio in his house, were he writes *Cat's Cradle.*	- "2BR02B" (*Worlds of If*, Jan) - "Hole Beautiful: Prospectus for a Magazine of Shelteredness" (*Monocle*, Jan – with Karla Kuskin) - "The Lie" (*Sat. EP*, Feb) - "Go Back to Your Precious Wife and Son" (*Ladies Home Journal*, July)	• Feb 20: John Glenn orbits the Earth. • Jun 25: *Engel vs. Vitale* decides it's unconstitutional to require the recitation of public school prayers. • Mid-year: US soldiers in Vietnam escalate up to more than 11,000. • Oct 14-27: Cuban Missile Crisis threatens nuclear war. • SDS issues Port Huron Statement.	- Ken Kesey, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* - Philip K. Dick, *The Man in the High Castle* - Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire* - Doris Lessing, *The Golden Notebook* - Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy* - Nobel Prize for literature awarded to John Steinbeck
1963		- ***Cat's Cradle*** (April - Nominated for Hugo Award. 6000 copies, not big seller but more reviews than usual – Terry Southern) - "Lover Anonymous" (*Redbook*, Oct) - "The Hyannis Port Story" (intended for publication in *Saturday EP* but canceled after JFK's assassination)	• Apr: Birmingham campaign protest launched by Southern Christian Leadership Conference – MLK arrested. • June 10: Equal Pay Act signed to prevent sex-based wage disparity. • Aug 28: March on Washington – MLK delivers "I have a dream" speech in front of over 200,000. • Sep 15: 16th Street Baptist Church bombing in Birmingham, Alabama. • Oct 27: Atomic Test Ban Treaty. • Nov 1: Military coup overthrows Diem regime in South Vietnam.	-Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* - Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar* - Thomas Pynchon, *V* - Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*

			• Nov 22: JFK assassinated in Dallas – Lyndon B. Johnson becomes President • Dec 17: Clean Air Act signed.	
1964	*Esquire* list of "every living Am. author of the slightest merit" – Kurt not in it. After finishing *GBY* he starts to write about his Dresden experience – problem of perspective.	-"You've Never Been to Barnstable?" / "Where I Live" (*Venture-Traveler's World* – Oct)	• Feb 7: The Beatles arrive in the US – perform on Ed Sullivan on Feb 9. • May 22: LBJ proposes the Great Society social reforms. • Jul 2: Civil Rights Act outlaws segregation and discrimination – Freedom Summer (3 murdered in Mississippi) • Aug 2: Gulf of Tonkin resolution leads to expansion of US military involvement in Vietnam. • Nov 3: Election – Lyndon B. Johnson defeats Barry Goldwater (largest percentage of popular vote ever) • Dec 10: MLK receives the Nobel Peace Prize (youngest person ever)	-Saul Bellow, *Herzog* - Hubert Selby, Jr., *Last Exit to Brooklyn* - Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths* - Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*
1965	Visits Bernard V. O'Hare to try to develop his Dresden book (encounter with Mary O'Hare). Fall: starts teaching at University of Iowa Writer's	- ***God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater, or Pearls Before Swine*** (January – more attention and reviews than previous novels) - "Everything Goes Clockwork" (*NY Times Book Review*, June – review of	• Feb 21: Assassination of Malcolm X. • March 2: Operation Rolling Thunder – 184,000 US troops in Vietnam.	- Truman Capote, *In Cold Blood* - Alex Haley, *Autobiography of Malcolm X* - Norman Mailer, *An American Dream*

	Workshop (Robert Lowell was forced to cancel at last moment) – close relationship with other authors and a break from family life at the Cape. Submits anthropology thesis to Univ. Of Chicago, "Fluctuations Between Good and Ill Fortune in Simple Tales" – rejected.	Friedrich Dürrenmatt's *Once A Greek*) - "Headshrinker's Hoyle on Games We Play" (*Life*, June – review of Eric Berne's *Games People Play*) - "Infarted! Tabescent!" (*NY Times BR*, June – review of Tom Wolfe's *The Kandy-Colored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby*) - "Second Thoughts on Teacher's Scrapbook" (*Life*, Sep – review of Bel Kaufman's *Up the Down Staircase*) - "Science Fiction" (*NY Times BR*, Sep 5) - "The Unsaid Says Much" (*NY Times BR*, Sep – review of Heinrich Böll's *Absent Without Leave*) - "Hello, Star Vega" (*Life*)	• Apr 25: First major demonstration against the Vietnam War in Washington DC (over 25,000) • Jul 30: Social Security Amendments establish Medicaid and Medicare (Great Society programs) • Aug 6: Voting Rights Act. • Aug 11-17: Watts riots in Los Angeles (34 dead)	- John Fowles, *The Magus* - Frank Herbert, *Dune* - Robert Coover, *The Origins of the Brunists*
1966	Edie goes to live with Kurt in Iowa. Affair with Lorelee Rackstraw. "Harrison Bergeron" reprinted in *National Review* (intellectual magazine) – reputation and popularity growing.	- "Don't Take it Too Seriously" (*NY Times BR*, Mar – review of *Prize Stories 1966: The O. Henry Awards*) - "Money Talks to the New Man" (*NY Times BR*, Oct – review of Goffredo Parisse's *The Boss*) - "The Latest Word" (*NY Times BR*, Oct – rev. of *The Random House Dictionary*)	• Robert C. Weaver becomes the first Afro American to hold a cabinet-level position (US Secretary of Housing and Urban Development) • May: Mao initiates the Cultural Revolution. • Jul 14: Freedom of Information Act signed. • Riots spread in inner cities and crime begins long-term rise.	- Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* - Truman Capote, *In Cold Blood* - Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation* - John Barth, *Giles Goat-Boy* - Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*

	Syracuse University offers to collect his papers – V accepts only in exchange of a job and is rejected. C.D.B. Bryan argues that V is a "serious but often misread author" in *The New Republic.* After reading his *Random House* review, Seymour Lawrence (Dell) offers Kurt a new publishing contract and regains the rights to his previous works to reissue his whole corpus under the Delacorte imprint.	- "The Fall of a Climber" (*NY Times BR*, Sep – review of Richard Condon's *Any Good Will Do*) - "Brief Encounters on the Island Waterway" (*Venture*)	• Ronald Reagan elected governor of California. • National Organization of Women and Black Panther Party founded.	
1967	After two years, V leaves Iowa. He arrived broke and unpublished and leaves as the Workshop's most popular author. Article on *Chicago Tribune:* V's novels as "a new entertainment media"	-"Teaching the Unteachable" (*NY Times BR*)	• June 12: *Loving v. Virginia* – Supreme Court overrules prohibition of interracial marriage. • June: Six Day Arab-Israeli war. • Summer of Love. • Oct 2: Thurgood Marshall becomes first African-American to serve on Supreme Court.	- Donald Barthelme, *Snow White* - Harlan Ellison (ed.), *Dangerous Visions* - Richard Brautigan, *Trout Fishing in America* - John Barth, "The Literature of Exhaustion"

	Robert Scholes' *The Fabulators* discusses V's novels at length. Guggenheim grant to visit Dresden with Bernard O'Hare.		• Oct 21: 100,000 march on the Pentagon to protest the war in Vietnam.	
1968	Begins to write about himself in the introduction to *GBY* and the new preface to *MN*. Jane discovers Transcendental Meditation and embraces the hippie lifestyle – quarrels. Public speaking career starts at Notre Dame University's Literary Festival, minutes after learning the news of MLK's death – manages to make people laugh in spite of the tragedy. Consciously starts to cultivate his look – character aside from novels. Jane becomes co-chairman of the Mid-Cape Citizens for McCarthy.	- "Welcome to the Monkey House" (*Playboy*, Jan) - *Welcome To The Monkey House* (August) - *Fortitude* (*Playboy*, Sep) - "Yes, We Have No Nirvanas" (*Esquire*)	• Jan 30: Tet Offensive. • Mar 16: My Lai massacre. • Apr 24: MLK assassinated in Memphis – riots in major cities cause 36 deaths. • Jun 5: Robert Kennedy killed while campaigning for President in the Ambassador Hotel, LA. • Jul 1: US signs Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. • Aug 25-29: Riots during the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. • Nov 5: Election – Republican Richard M- Nixon defeats Hubert Humphrey and independent George Wallace. • Dec 21: Apollo 8 – First manned spacecraft to leave the Earth's orbit.	- Norman Mailer, *The Armies of the Night* - Tom Wolfe, *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* - Philip K. Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* - John Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse* - Steve Katz, *The Exaggerations of Peter Prince*

1969	*Newsweek* interview, "A campus Orwell." *SH5* serialized in *Ramparts* (intellectual New Left mag.) before its publication. Address to American Physical Society in NY (Feb 6). Hailed as a liberal prophet and guru to the young generation (does not correspond with his real image). Public figure – Edie: "the big ka-BOOM." Hippie pilgrimages to his house.	- ***Slaughterhouse-Five, or The Children's Crusade: A Duty Dance with Death*** (March - Nominated for Hugo and Nebula Awards. Sells out first pressing and rises to the top of *NY Times* best sellers list. Rave, extensive reviews) - "Excelsior! We're Going to the Moon! Excelsior!" (*NY Times Magazine*) - "Good Missiles, Good Manners, Good Night" (*NY Times*) - "There's a Maniac on the Loose Out There" (*Life*) - Address to the American Physical Society, NY - "Carols for Christmas 1969: Tonight If I Will Let Me" (poem in *NY Times Mag*, Dec 21)	• Mar 18: Operation Menu – US starts bombing Laos and Cambodia. • Jun 29: Stonewall riots in NY – start of gay liberation movement. • Jul 20: Apollo 11 moon landing. • Aug 9: Manson Tate-LaBianca murders. • Aug 15-19: Woodstock Festival. • Oct: Weathermen 'Days of Rage' • Nov 3: Nixon appeals to 'silent majority' on televised speech. • Nov 15: Moratorium to End the War in Vietnam congregates over 500,000 in Washington DC (largest ant-war protest in US history). • Dec: US troops in Vietnam reach peak level at 541,000. • Dec 6: Altamont Festival.	-Philip Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* - Robert Coover, *Pricksongs and Descants* - Ronald Sukenick, *The Death of the Novel and Other Stories* - John Fowles, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*

1970s

1970	Trip to Biafra (about to fall to Nigeria). Fall: Leaves the family house in West Barnstable and moves to Manhattan. Receives anthropology master's degree from Chicago University for *Cat's Cradle*. Teaches creative writing at Harvard. Meets Jill Krementz (commissioned to photograph him for *Life*)	- *Happy Birthday Wanda June* (opens on October in NYC) - "Why They Read Hesse", *Horizon* - "Oversexed in Indianapolis", *Life* - "The Mysterious Madame Blavatsky", *McCall's* - "Biafra, A People Betrayed", *McCall's* - Address to graduating class at Benington College ("Up Is Better than Down", *Vogue*)	• US land forces invade Cambodia. • Apr 1: Census counts over 200 million people living in the US (in 1920 there were only 100M) • Apr 22: First Earth Day celebration. • Apr: High school teacher fired in Montgomery, Alabama, for using a short story from *Welcome to the Monkey House* in her literature classes. • May 4: Kent State shootings. 4 dead in Ohio – 4 million students strike in protest. • May 15: Jackson State shootings. 2 dead in Mississippi.	- Hal Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth* - Donald Barthelme, *City Life* - Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* - Joan Didion, *Play It as It Lays*
1971	Feb. 11: Oldest son Mark has a mental breakdown at his commune in British Columbia.	- "Torture and Blubber", *New York Times* - Address to National Institute of Arts and Letters ("The Happiest Day in the Life of my Father", *Proceedings of*	• Apr 1: Public Health Cigarette Smoking Act bans tobacco advertisements on radio and TV. • Jun 12: *The New York Times* publishes the *Pentagon Papers* on Vietnam, leaked by Daniel Ellsberg – Plumbers unit created in the White House.	- E. L. Doctorow, *The Book of Daniel* - Bernard Malamud, *Tenants* - Charles Bukowski, *Post Office*

	Shooting for George Roy Hill's adaptation of *Slaughterhouse-Five.* Writers' block - visits a therapist that prescribes Ritalin and starts sessions with Martha Friedman. Failed meeting with Jefferson Airplane to brainstorm ideas for their new LP.	*the Am. Academy of Arts & Letters*)	• Jun 17: War on Drugs – Nixon declares drug use 'public enemy number one' • Jun 30: Supreme Court denies government argument of unconstitutionality and allows publication of *Pentagon Papers.* • July 1: Twenty-sixth amendment lowers voting age from 21 to 18. • Aug 15: Nixon shock ends gold standard in US. • Sep 13: Attica prison riot (bloodiest in US history) ends with 43 dead. • Kissinger secretly visits China.	- John Updike, *Rabbit Reddux*
1972	Inner struggle – misconceptions about him by his readers vs. his real personality – for a time buys into his own character and becomes his alter-ego: famous writer performing for New York elite. Following a question during a speech at the Library of Congress, Kurt decides to quit	- May: "The Big Spacefuck" published in Harlan Ellison's sci-fi short story anthology *Again, Dangerous Visions* - Oct: *Between Time and Timbuktu, or Prometheus-5: A Space Fantasy* (script for Fred Barzyk's TV film based on various Vonnegut works, telecast on March 13 as a *NET Playhouse* special)	• Feb 21-28: Nixon visits China after 25 years of isolation. • Mar 30: Easter offensive in Vietnam. • May 26: SALT I Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty signed at Moscow Summit. • Jun 17: Five men arrested for burglary of the Democratic National Committee headquarters at Watergate, Washington, D.C. • Jun 23: Education Amendments of 1972 ban gender-based discrimination of educational institutions. • Nov 17: Nixon reelected to second term defeating George McGovern by a landslide. • Dec 14: Apollo 17 – last human spaceflight to the moon.	- Ishmael Reed, *Mumbo-Jumbo* Hunter S. Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* - John Barth, *Chimera* - Isaac Asimov, *The Gods Themselves*

	public speaking to concentrate on writing (until spring 1977) 11 Nov: Turns 50.	- "Reflections on my own Death", *The Rotarian Magazine* - "In a Manner that Must Shame God Himself", *Harper's Magazine* – report on August Republican convention at Miami Beach.	• Dec 18: Operation Linebacker II – last major US bombing campaign in North Vietnam.	
1973	Jan: Participates in six-hour vigil at Cathedral of St. John protesting Nixon's second-term inauguration. Fall: Moves to New York (East 48th St.) and takes Anthony Burgess' place as Distinguished Professor of Eng. Prose at City University, New York (doesn't last). Nov: Copies of *SH5* burnt in a Drake, North Dakota high school.	-July: ***Breakfast of Champions, or Goodbye Blue Monday*** (adapted as a film in 1999) - "Thinking Unthinkable, Speaking Unspeakable", *New York Times* - Address at Dedication of Wheaton College Library ("America: What's Good", *Vogue*) - "Invite Rita Rait to America!", *NY Times Book Review* - Address to P.E.N Conference in Stockholm - "A Political Disease", *Harper's Magazine* - *Playboy* interview.	• Jan 22: Roe vs. Wade - Supreme Court deems abortion before 24 weeks constitutional. • Jan 23: Paris Peace Accords end direct US military involvement in Vietnam after some 58,000 deaths. • May 14: NASA launches space station Skylab. • May 17: First hearing of the US Senate Watergate Committee. • Oct 6-25: Yom Kippur War. • Oct 10: Vice President Spiro Agnew resigns after being charged with tax evasion, extortion and conspiracy. • Oct 20: Saturday Night Massacre – Nixon fires top three legal advisers over the disposition of secret tapes. • Oct: Oil crisis – gasoline prices quadruple, fueling high inflation. • Dec 6: Gerald Ford becomes Vice President.	- Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow* - J.G. Ballard, *Crash* - Tom Wolfe, *The New Journalism* - Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence* - Brian Aldiss, *Billion Year Spree: The True History of Science Fiction*

1974	Confesses his creativity is running dry because he cannot explain the 'forces at work' in America in a letter to Jane.	- ***Wampeters, Foma & Granfalloons (Opinions)*** - Review of J. Heller's *Something Happened, NY Times Book Review* - Graduation speech at Hobart & William Smith colleges, Geneva, NY	• Jun 30: House Judiciary Committee votes to impeach Nixon over Watergate scandal. • Aug 9: Nixon resigns (first and only President in US history) – Gerald Ford sworn in as President. • Sep 8: Ford publicly pardons any crimes Nixon might have committed.	- Carl Bernstein & Bob Woodward, *All the President's Men* - Stephen King, *Carrie* - Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*
1975	Philip José Farmer publishes *Venus on the Half-Shell* under the pseudonym Kilgore Trout – controversy. Testifies before in a Congress subcommittee to revise copyright laws after a California film student shoots an adaptation of 'Fortitude' without his permission. July: Death of Uncle Alex.	- Introduction to *Write If You Get Work: The Best of Bob and Ray* - [Mark Vonnegut, *The Eden Express: A Memoir of Insanity*]	• Jan 27: Church Committee established to investigate illegal activities of CIA, NSA and FBI. • Apr 4: Bill Gates founds Microsoft Corporation. • Apr 30: Fall of Saigon ends the Vietnam War. • Jul 15: Apollo-Soyuz Test Project – first joint US-Soviet space mission begins in Kazakhstan. • Aug 1: Helsinki Accords attempt to improve relations between Communist bloc and Western nations. • Sep 5: Manson Family member Lynette Fromme attempts to kill President Ford in Sacramento.	-Saul Bellow, *Humboldt's Gift* - E. L. Doctorow, *Ragtime* - Robertson Davies, *World of Wonders* - Samuel R. Delany, *Dhalgren*
1976	Bad reviews of *Slapstick* (second critical flop in a row –	- Oct: ***Slapstick, or Lonesome No More!*** (first novel published	• Apr 1: Steve Jobs founds Apple Inc.	- Raymond Carver, *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*

	his reputation starts to decline)	without the 'Jr.' – publisher mistake) - Speech at dedication of new library at Connecticut College, New London - Introduction to deluxe edition of *Slaughterhouse-Five*	• Jul 2: Gregg v. Georgia – Supreme Court determines that death penalty does not violate Eighth Amendment. • Jul 4: US Bicentennial. • Sep 9: Mao Zeodong dies. Arrest of Gang of Four ends Chinese Cultural Revolution. • Oct 19: Copyright Act signed into law. • Nov 2: Georgia Governor Jimmy Carter becomes President after defeating Gerald Ford.	- Robert Shea and Robert Anton Wilson, *Illuminatus!* - Alex Haley, *Roots*
1977	Spring: Returns to public speaking circuit (attempt to blow on the embers of his reputation)	-Self-Interview in *The Paris Review*	• Jan 21: Jimmy Carter pardons 10,000 Vietnam draft evaders. • May: *Star Wars* brings science fiction to the masses, becoming the highest-grossing film in US history until 1982. • Jul 13: NYC blackout results in looting and disorder for 25 hours. • Sep 7: Torrijos-Carter Treaties relinquish US control of the Panama Canal. • Sep 21: 15 nations (including US and USSR) sign nuclear non-proliferation treaty. • Oct: Release of Commodore PET, the first personal computer for retail sale.	- Robert Coover, *The Public Burning* - David Mamet, *American Buffalo* - Stephen King, *The Shining* - Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon*
1978	Divorce agreement with Jane after 8 years of separation (deep downward mood swing).	-Graduation speech at Freedonia College, NY	• Mar 3: First article on the possibility of human cloning printed by the New York Post. • Sep 18: Camp David Peace Accord between Israel and Egypt.	- John Irving, *The World According to Garp* - Sam Shepard, *Buried Child* - Alasdair Gray, *Lanark*

	Named chairman of a committee to make a list of 250 American books of 'lasting value' to be exposed at 1979 Moscow Book Fair.		• Nov 18: Jonestown Massacre – mass suicide of the Peoples Temple cult led by Jim Jones in Guyana (918 dead) • Nov 27: Harvey Milk and mayor George Moscone murdered by Dan White in San Francisco. • Deng Xiaoping starts economic reforms in China. • Lech Walesa starts to organize the first Polish trade union.	
1979	Purchases a summer house in Sagaponack with Jill (formerly painter Frank Stella's). Nov 24: Marries Jill.	- Sept: ***Jailbird*** - Speech before American Civil Liberties Union - Speech at banquet in honor of Irwin Shaw - Speech at James T. Farrell's funeral - Speech at 100th anniversary of completion of Mark Twain's Hartford house	• Feb 11: Fall of Shah's regime in Iran. • Mar 28: Three Mile Island Accident in Pennsylvania, worst commercial nuclear power accident in US history. • May 25: Crash of American Airlines Flight 191 – 271 killed in deadliest aviation accident in US soil. • June: Jerry Falwell founds Moral Majority. • Nov 4: Iran hostage crisis – 52 hostages held at US embassy in Tehran for 444 days. • Dec 24: Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (start of 10 year war)	-Norman Mailer, *The Executioner's Song.* - Italo Calvino, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* - Gilbert Sorrentino, *Mulligan Stew* - Douglas Adams, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* - Joan Didion, *The White Album*

1980s

1980		- Speech at Cornell. - "Aflonbladet" (Swedish newspaper) - Essay on Literary Style for International Paper Company - Speech at First Parish Unitarian Church in Cambridge, Mass. - Speech at meeting of the Mental Health Association in Morristown, NJ. - Palm Sunday speech at St. Clemen's Episcopal Church, NY - *Sun Moon Star* (children's book illustrated by Ivan Chermayeff)	• Mar 21: Moscow Summer Olympics US boycott to protest invasion of Afghanistan. • Apr 24: Operation Eagle Claw – 8 soldiers killed in a collision during attempt to rescue Tehran embassy hostages. • May 18: Eruption of Mount St. Helens (Washington) kills 57 people. • Jun 1: CNN founded. • Nov 4: Ronald Reagan elected President defeating Carter. • Republicans regain control of Senate after decades of Democratic rule but Democrats retain control of House. • Dec 8: John Lennon killed in NYC.	- John Kennedy Toole, *A Confederacy of Dunces* - Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose* - Sam Shepard, *True West* - John Barth, "The Literature of Replenishment"
1981	Declares he is "sick" of cult author label. Jane diagnosed with ovarian cancer (she had married Adam Yarmolinsky)	- ***Palm Sunday: An Autobiographical Collage*** - *The Chemistry Professor* (script for Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde musical) - Introduction to Penguin paperback editions of Céline's last three novels.	• Jan 20: Algiers accords – Iran releases the 52 hostages after 444 days of capture (same day as Reagan's swearing in) • Mar 30: John Hinckley attempts to murder Reagan in Washington DC. • Apr 12: Space Shuttle Columbia launched (first reusable spacecraft). • Aug 1: MTV begins to air. • Aug 4: Reaganomics –Kemp-Roth tax cut signed into law, increase in defense build-up.	- John Updike, *Rabbit Is Rich* - Raymond Carver, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*

			• Nov 16: Reagan signs NDSS 17, authorizing CIA support of contra rebels in Nicaragua.	
1982	Letter to Martin Amis: "The only way I can regain credit for my early work is to die." Nov: 60th birthday. Dec 18: Kurt and Jill adopt Lily Vonnegut.	- Oct: ***Deadeye Dick*** - "Avoiding the Big Bang" (*NY Times*, June) - "Fates Worse Than Death" - Lecture at St. John the Divine, NYC (May 23) - [David R. Slavitt, "Looking for Mr. Vonnegut" – attack on Vonnegut published in *Philadelphia* magazine]	• Deep recession ends era of high inflation. • Jun 12: 1 million protest the nuclear arms race in Central Park, NYC. • Aug 25: Multinational intervention in Lebanon to oversee the withdrawal of the Palestine Liberation Organization after Lebanese Civil War. • Nov: Highest unemployment rate recorded since 1940 (over 11 million) • Nov 13: Vietnam Veterans Memorial dedicated in Washington DC.	- Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*
1983	Extensive public speaking tours (the 'ghost of him' filling his shoes in auditoriums). Dec: Leaves the premiere of *Scarface* arguing that movies lie about death from gunshot.		• Mar 23: Reagan proposes the Strategic Defense Initiative (Star Wars) • Apr 18: US embassy in Beirut bombed by the Islamic Jihad Organization, killing 63. • Oct 23: IJO suicide bombers hit Beirut US barracks in Lebanon, killing 241 Marines. • Oct 25: Operation Urgent Fury – 1,900 military deployed in invasion of Grenada (Caribbean) to depose Marxist regime.	- Gore Videal, *Duluth* - William Kennedy, *Ironweed* - Jim Dodge, *Fup*
1984	Problems with Jill (family life = flytrap, arguments over distribution of inheritance).	- Dec: *Nothing Is Lost Save Honor: Two Essays* ("Fates Worse Than Death" and "The Worst Addiction of them All")	• Apr 23: HTLV-III announced as the virus that causes AIDS. • May 8: Soviet Union (later followed by most Eastern states) announces boycott of LA Summer Olympics.	- Joan Didion, *Democracy* - David Mamet, *Glengarry Glen Ross*

	March: Suicide attempt? (18 days at hospital after combining alcohol with sleeping pills and antidepressants). Upon leaving hospital, he moves to an apartment on his own.		• Jul 18: San Ysidro McDonald's massacre (CA) – 22 killed and 19 injured (deadliest mass shooting at the time) • Nov 6: Reagan reelected against Walter Mondale by a landslide.	- William Gibson, *Neuromancer*
1985	Returns home to Jill and Lily. Oct: Cameo in Rodney Dangerfield's *Back To School.* Dec: Appears with Norman Mailer on William F. Buckley's *Firing Line* – accusation of being 'anti-American'.	- Oct: ***Galápagos: A Novel*** - "A Dream of the Future (Not Excluding Lobsters)" (*Esquire*) - Speech at MIT (*FWD*)	• Nov 19: Reagan-Gorbachev meet in Geneva, Switzerland (first summit in 6 years) • Nov 20: First version of Windows released. • Dec 11: General Electric buys RCA for $6.28 billion – largest corporate merger ever (outside of oil industry) • Dec 12: Arrow Air Flight 1285 carrying US Army personnel to Egypt crashes in Newfoundland, Canada, killing all 256 passengers.	- Don DeLillo, *White Noise* - Paul Auster, *City of Glass* - Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* - Bret Easton Ellis, *Less than Zero* - Orson Scott Card, *Ender's Game*
1986	Aug: Speaks before subcommittee of Senate Foreign Relations Committee	- "He Leadeth Us From Porn: God Bless You, Edwin Meese" (*The Nation*)	• Jan 20: First MLK day observed. • Jan 28: Challenger disaster kills crew of 7.	- Gore Vidal, *Lincoln* - Richard Ford, *The Sportswriter*

	reviewing McWarran-Walter act of 1952. Public reputation as grouch. Dec 19: Jane dies.	- Introduction to *The Demolished Man* by Alfred Bester - Dec: "Requiem: The Hocus Pocus Laundromat" (*North American Review*) - Lecture in Rochester, NY (*FWD*)	• Apr 15: Operation El Dorado Canyon – US air strikes against Libya following Berlin discotheque bombing. • May 19: Firearm Owners Protection Act. • May 25: Hands Across America raises awareness of hunger and homelessness. • Oct 22: Tax Reform Act. • Nov 3: Iran-Contra Scandal: Lebanese magazine *Ash-Shiraa* reveals that the US had sold arms to Iran in exchange of hostages, with profits diverted to fund contra rebels in Nicaragua – largest crisis in Reagan's tenure.	- Robert Coover, *Gerald's Party*
1987	Oct: Publication of Jane's posthumous book, *Angels Without Wings* (Kurt doesn't allow his name to be used−Karl−and refuses to contribute a foreword)	- Oct: ***Bluebeard: The Autobiography of Rabo Karabekian (1916-1988)*** - *Requiem* (with music by Edgar David Grana) - "Can Great Books Make Great Movies? 7 Writers Just Say No!" (*American Film*) - Introduction to Nelson Algren's *Never Come Morning*	• Jun 12: Reagan's "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall" speech during visit to Berlin. • Oct 19: Black Monday stock market crash – Dow Jones drops 22.6% in a single session. • Hearings on Iran-Contra result on Reagan firing his top aides and weakened popularity. • Dec 8: US and USSR sign the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty– de-escalation of arms race.	- Toni Morrison, *Beloved* - Tom Wolfe, *The Bonfire of the Vanities* - Alan Moore, *Watchmen*
1988		- Speech before American Psychiatric Association (*FWD*) - "Letter to the People of 2088" (*Time*)	• Aug 30: Space Shuttle Discovery launched. • Nov 8: Vice-President George H. W. Bush defeats Michael Dukakis in presidential election.	- Don DeLillo, *Libra* - Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time* - Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*

		• Dec 21: Pan Am Flight 103 from Frankfurt to Detroit bombed, killing 270. Investigation reveals Libyan ties.	
1989	Visits Mozambique to report on the Civil War.	• Jan 6: Report of largest economic growth in 4 years and lowest unemployment in 14. • Mar 24: Exxon Valdez spills over 11 million gallons of crude oil in the Gulf of Alaska. • Jun 4: Tiananmen Square Massacre in Beijing. • Nov 9: Fall of the Berlin Wall. Communist regimes in Eastern Europe collapse. • Dec 3: Malta Summit – Bush and Gorbachev agree that the Cold War is coming to an end • Dec 20: Operation Just Cause – US invasion of Panama removes Manuel Noriega and restores democratic government.	- John Irving, *A Prayer for Owen Meany* - Amy Tan, *The Joy Luck Club* - Dan Simmons, *Hyperion*

1990s

1990	June: Bernard V. O'Hare dies of throat cancer and tuberculosis.	- Sep: ***Hocus Pocus*** - New introduction to Easton Press edition of *The Sirens of Titan* - *NY Times* essay (*FWD*) - Speech at National Air and Space Museum, DC: "The Legacy of Strategic Bombing"	• Apr 24: Hubble Space Telescope is put in orbit by Discovery. • Jun 1: Chemical Weapons Accord signed between US and USSR. • Aug 2: Saddam Hussein's Iraq invades Kuwait – UN trade embargo. • Oct 3: Reunification of Germany. • Nov 15: Clean Air Act signed into law.	- Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* - John Updike, *Rabbit At Rest* - E. L. Doctorow, *Billy Bothgate* - Jim Dodge, *Stone Junction*
1991	May: Adaptations of three short stories aired on *Showtime.* Low morale: Jill has an affair with economist Stephen M. Dubrul and asks Kurt for divorce – isolation.	-Sep: ***Fates Worse Than Death: An Autobiographical Collage***	• Jan 17: Operation Desert Storm – US leads coalition of 34 countries to liberate Kuwait. • Feb 28: Bush announces cease fire. • Mar 31: Violent breakup of Yugoslavia results in Croatian War (1991-1995) • Jul 31: START I signed by US and USSR. • Dec 26: Gorbachev's resignation completes the dissolution of the Soviet Union and signals the end of the Cold War.	- Bret Easton Ellis, *American Psycho* - Don DeLillo, *Mao II* - Art Spiegelman, *Maus*
1992	March: Induction into the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. May: 'Humanist of the year' award by American Humanist Association.	- Feb 21: "One Hell of a Country" (*The Guardian*) - Sep 12: "America: Right and Wrong" (*The Montreal Gazette*) - "Why My Dog Is Not a Humanist" (*The Humanist*)	• Jan 26: Boris Yeltsin announces Russia will stop targeting US cities with nuclear weapons. • Apr 6: Start of Bosnian War (1992-1995) • Apr 29-May 4: Rodney King riots in L.A. (over 50 deaths and $1 billion in damages).	- Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* - Cormac McCarthy, *All the Pretty Horses* - David Mamet, *Oleanna*

	George Plimpton approaches Kurt to write a new libretto for Stravinsky's 'L'Historie du Soldat' 70th birthday		• Aug 16: Hurricane Andrew hits Florida (65 deaths, $26 billion in damage). • Nov 3: Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton becomes President by defeating Bush.	
1993	Love affair with a woman in East Hampton.	*-L'Historie du Soldat* (reworked libretto that tells the tale of WWII Private Eddie Slovik, first US soldier executed for desertion since the Civil War)	• Jan 3: START II signed by US and Russia. • Feb 26: World Trade Center Bombing – truck bomb in garage kills 6 people, injures 1,042. • Feb 28- Apr 6: Waco Siege of the Branch Davidians results in 76 deaths (18 children). • Apr-Oct: Great Flood of 1993 (48 deaths) • Oct 3: Battle of Mogadishu – 18 US military killed during Operation Gothic Serpent – Clinton orders withdrawal from Somalia. • Nov 30: 'Don't ask, don't tell' policy prohibits openly gay from serving in the military. • Dec 8: North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) signed by US.	- Jeffrey Eugenides, *The Virgin Suicides* - Irvine Welsh, *Trainspotting* - Nobel Prize for Literature awarded to Toni Morrison
1994	Reconciliation with Jill (shock to everyone).	-"Why We Need Libraries" (*Utne Reader*)	• Jan 17: Northridge earthquake (LA) kills 57 and causes $20 billion in damage. • Clinton's bill for a national health system is defeated in Congress. • Jun 17: O. J. Simpson arrested.	- William Gaddis, *A Frolic of His Own* - Joseph Heller, *Closing Time*

			• Sep: US deploys military force to Kuwait to stop Iraqi threat. • Nov 8: Republican Revolution – Reps gain control over both chambers of Congress in one of the largest shifts in party balance in US congressional history.	- Tim O'Brien, *In the Lake of the Woods* - Jonathan Lethem, *Gun, with Occasional Music*
1995	Visits Joe Crone's tomb (model for Billy Pilgrim): "that closes the book on WWII for me"		• Apr 19: Oklahoma City terrorist attack kills 168 outside Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building. • May 11: 170 nations decide to extend the Nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty indefinitely. • Dec 14: Bosnian War ends with NATO intervention.	- Benjamin Barber, *Jihad vs. McWorld* - T. C. Boyle, *The Tortilla Curtain* - Barack Obama, *Dreams from my Father*
1996	Sep: Exhibition of his pen-and-ink sketches at an art gallery in Denver. Oct: Premiere of *Mother Night* film.	-Foreword to *The Vonnegut Encyclopedia: An Authorized Compendium*	• Jun 25: Islamic terrorists bomb Khobar Towers, headquarters of US military force in Saudi Arabia, killing 20. • Jul 5: Dolly the Sheep cloned in Scotland. • Jul 27: Centennial Park bombing during Atlanta Olympic Games (2 deaths, 111 injured) • Aug 22: Congress passes Clinton's Welfare Reform Act. • Nov 5: Clinton defeats Republican Bob Dole and independent Ross Perot in election. • Dec 5: Alan Greenspan warns that irrational exuberance is causing run up of stock prices.	- David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest* - Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club*

1997	Apr 25: Death of Bernard Vonnegut. Kurt continues his speaking tours.	-Sep 22: ***Timequake***	• Mar 4: Clinton bans federal funds from being used in human cloning research. • Oct 29: Iraq threatens to shoot down UN U-2 surveillance planes.	- Don DeLillo, *Underworld* - Thomas Pynchon, *Mason & Dixon* - Philip Roth, *American Pastoral* - J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*
1998	July: *Slaughterhouse-Five* ranked 18th on Modern Library's list of the 100 best novels of the Twentieth Century. Launch party for Norman Mailer's *The Time Of Our Time*. Kurt: "We all would like to have died as young as F. Scott Fitzgerald, but we didn't manage it"	-Jan 4: "Bernard Vonnegut: The Rain Maker" (Obituary published in *The NY Times*) - May 28: "The Work To Be Done" (*Rolling Stone*) - Nov 30: "Old Fashioned Gadgets" (*Forbes*)	• Jan 26: Start of Monica Lewinski scandal. • Feb 23: Osama Bin Laden publishes a fatwa announcing Jihad against Jews and Crusaders. • Aug 7: Attacks on US embassies on Tanzania and Kenya kill 224 and injure over 4,500. • Aug 13: US launches missile strikes against Al-Qaeda camps in Afghanistan in response. • Sep 29: Congress passes Iraq Liberation Act to remove Saddam Hussein from power. • Oct 6: Gay student Matthew Shepard brutally murdered in Wyoming hate crime. • Dec: House votes in favor of impeaching Clinton.	- Richard Powers, *Gain* - Omar Pamuk, *My Name Is Red* - Philip Roth, *I Married a Communist*
1999	Sep: Sells his papers to Indiana University.	- Jan: "Last Words for a Century" (*Playboy*)	• Feb 12: Senate acquits Clinton 55-45. • Mar 29: Dow Jones closes above 10,000 for the first time (economic boom)	-Susan Sontag, *In America: A Novel* - Colson Whitehead, *The Intuitionist*

	- Aug: ***Bagombo Snuff Box: Uncollected Short Fiction*** - Oct: ***God Bless You, Dr. Keborkian*** - *Like Shaking Hands With God: A Conversation About Writing* (two 1998 talks between V and Lee Stringer)	• Apr 20: Columbine High School Massacre. • Mar-Jun: NATO intervenes in Kosovo war. • Oct 31: Pilot deliberately crashes EgyptAir Flight 990 over Nantucket, killing 217. • Dec: Preparation for the possible effect of Y2K bug in computers on New Year's Eve.	- J. M. Coetzee, *Disgrace*

2000s

2000	Jan: Fire in his New York house – hospitalized. Fall: Teaches creative writing with a visiting fellowship at Smith College, Northampton, Mass.	-Oct 10: Foreword to *A Saucer of Loneliness: The Complete Stories of Theodore Sturgeon*	• Apr: Census enumerates a population of 281,421,906 – 13.2% increase since 1990. • Oct 12: Al Qaeda bombs USS Cole in Yemeni waters, killing 17 US Navy sailors. • Nov 7: Presidential election followed by court battle over Florida votes. • Dec 12: Supreme Court votes in favor of George W. Bush, who defeats Al Gore.	- Michael Chabon, *The Amazing Adventures of Cavalier and Clay* - E. L. Doctorow, *City of God* - Philip Roth, *The Human Stain* - Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone*
2001	Unpublished letter to *Rolling Stone*: "George W. Bush is an evolutionary throwback."	-Apr: Foreword to *At Millenium's End: New Essays on the Work of Kurt Vonnegut*	• Jan 20: Inauguration of George W. Bush. • Sep 11: 9/11 terrorist attacks against the Twin Towers and Pentagon. 2,996 die. • Sep 18: Anthrax attacks kill 5 and infect 17 through the mail system. • Oct 7: Start of 'War on Terror' - US invades Afghanistan. • Oct 26: Patriot Act approved by Senate. • Nov 12: American Airlines Flight 587 crashes in Queens, killing 265. • Dec 2: Energy giant Enron declared bankrupt after massive false-accounting comes to light.	- Jonathan Franzen, *The Corrections* - Richard Russo, *Empire Falls* - Amy Tan, *The Bonesetter's Daughter* - Neil Gaiman, *American Gods*

2002	Controversial declarations: “Too much talk about 9/11 attacks and not enough about the crooks on Wall Street and big corporations”		• Jan: Bush’s state of the union address speaks of an ‘axis of evil’ formed by Iraq, Iran and North Korea. • Jul: Tensions escalate between UN and Iraq. Bush addresses UN saying that Iraq poses a grave danger to the world. • Jul: Telecoms giant WorldCom’s multi-billion dollar accounting fraud is revealed – biggest business failure in US history. • Oct 2-22: Beltway sniper attacks kill 10. • Nov 8: UN resolution forces Iraq to disarm or face serious consequences. • Nov 25: United States Department of Homeland Security is created. • Seven former Soviet nations join NATO.	- Jeffrey Eugenides, *Middlesex* - Jonathan Safran Foer, *Everything Is Illuminated* - Haruki Murakami, *Kafka on the Shore* - Stephen A. Carter, *The Emperor of Ocean Park*
2003		- Jan 27: “Kurt Vonnegut Vs. the !&#*!@” (interview with Joel Bleifuss published in *In These Times*) - Feb-April: “Dear Mr. Vonnegut” (3 publications in *In These Times*) - May 9: “Strange Weather Lately” (*In These Times*) - Nov 6: “Knowing What’s Nice” (*ITT*)	• Feb 1: Space shuttle Columbia explodes upon reentry to Earth. Crew of 7 killed. • Mar 19: US-led coalition invades Iraq. • May 1: Bush declares that the main part of the war in Iraq is over. • Oct: Arnold Schwarzenegger elected governor of California. • Dec 13: Capture of Saddam Hussein.	- T. C. Boyle, *Drop City* - Don DeLillo, *Cosmopolis* - Jonathan Lethem, *The Fortress of Solitude* - David Maraniss, *They Marched into Sunlight* - Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code*

2004		- Feb 5: "State of the Asylum" (*ITT*) - Mar 24: "False Advertising" (*ITT*) - May 10: "Cold Turkey" (*ITT*) - Aug 6: "I Love You, Madame Librarian" (*ITT*) - Oct 5: "Requiem for a Dreamer" (*ITT*) - Oct 29: "The End Is Near" (*ITT*) - Nov 24: "Have I Got A Car For You!" (*ITT*) - Dec 23: "American Christmas Card 2004" (*In These Times*)	• Feb 4: Facebook is launched. • Mar 2: MER-B Opportunity sends data of former water formations on Mars. • Guerrilla resistance complicates war in Iraq. • Jul: Senate report says US went to war in Iraq over 'lawed information' concerning weapons of mass destruction. • Nov 1: Associated Press reveals tortures and inhuman treatment at Abu Ghraib. • Nov 2: Bush reelected president against John Kerry by a clear margin. • Dec 26: Southeast Asian tsunami kills 290,000.	- Philip Roth, *The Plot Against America* - Michael Moore, *Farenheit 9/11* - Toni Morrison, *Love* - Roberto Bolaño, *2666*
2005	Interview with David Nason of the *Australian* 'justifying' terrorists: "It is sweet and honourable to die for what one believes in" – controversy. Mark has to intervene to explain his father's words.	- Mar 3: "Susan Sontag and Arthur Miller" (*In These Times*) - Sep 15: ***A Man Without A Country*** - Dec 12: "Your Guess Is As Good As Mine" (*In These Times*)	• May 31: Former FBI second in command W. Mark Felt confirms he was Deep Throat. • Aug 23-30: Hurricane Katrina strikes Gulf Coast, flooding New Orleans and causing 1,800 deaths and $81 billion damage. • Oct 26: Elections and referendum over constitution in Iraq amidst Sunni insurgency.	- Cormac McCarthy, *No Country for Old Men* - E. L. Doctorow, *The March* - Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking* - Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*
2006			• Feb 22: one billionth song downloaded from iTunes – shift in retail industry.	- Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* - Thomas Pynchon, *Against the Day*

			• Oct 17: US population reaches 300 million – debates of immigration policy and protests against criminalization of illegals. • Nov 7: Mid-term elections give both chambers of Congress to the Democrats. • Bush replaces Donald Rumsfeld with Robert Gates for his policy in Iraq.	- Al Gore, *An Inconvenient Truth* - Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope*
2007	Indianapolis declares 2007 'The Year of Vonnegut'. Apr 11: Death.	-Apr 27: Speech at Clowes Hall, Indianapolis (*AIR*)	• Jan 10: Troop surge of 21,500 to adopt the new counterinsurgency strategy in Iraq. • Apr 16: Virginia Tech Massacre, 33 killed. • Jun 2: Four terrorists arrested with plans of bombing JFK airport in New York. • Dec: Financial crisis begins.	- Don DeLillo, *Falling Man* - Michael Chabon, *The Yiddish Policeman's Union* - Junot Diaz, *The Brief Wondrous World of Oscar Wao*
2008		-Apr 1: ***Armageddon In Retrospect and Other New and Unpublished Writings on War and Peace***	• Jul 11: Oil prices hit record in US: $147 per barrel. • Sep 1-14: Hurricane Ike kills 100 in Texas and contributes to raising oil prices. • Sep 14: Major Wall Street investment bank Lehman Brothers collapses, creating panic of a global economic collapse. • Oct 3: Congress passes the Emergency Economic Stabilization Act, which	- Peter Matthiessen, *Shadow Country* - Roberto Bolaño, *2666*

		rescues the banking system with $700 billion. • Nov 4: Illinois Senator Barack Obama becomes the first African-American US president after defeating John McCain.	
2009	-Oct 20: ***Look at the Birdie: Unpublished Short Fiction***	• Feb: Grassroots anti-big government Tea Party movement emerges. • Jun 11: H1N1 virus (the swine flu) declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization. • Oct 31: Economic recession continues as unemployment rises above 10%. • Health care reform is stalled in Congress. • Dec 1: Obama announces a surge of 30,000 additional troops to Afghanistan.	- Barbara Kingsolver, *The Lacuna* - Philip Roth, *The Humbling* - Jonathan Lethem, *Chronic City*