

Intertextuality, Autobiography & the Politics of Narrative Self-Fashioning in Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*

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Kurt Vonnegut's extensive use of intertextual references in his seminal 1969 novel *Slaughterhouse-Five: Or the Children's Crusade. A Duty Dance with Death* is essentially postmodernist in appeal. The traditional practice of reference-drawing in fiction derives mainly from the power of contextualization which the reference or citation exercises on the narrative world-view bracketed in the text. Postmodernist practice of textual references and citations is intertextual in the sense that it is an effect of textuality itself. Intertextual references operate collectively as a signifying textual paradigm instrumental in the shaping of the epistemological world-view of the novel and the narrative logic which fashions it (Allen 53-6, 133-44).

Slaughterhouse-Five is typical of this as it entertains a wide and diversified range of references and citations that make up a signifying intertextual structure. Charles B. Harris handsomely sums up the range and diversity of these intertextual references as follows :

'low fiction,' 'criticism,' 'documentary studies,' 'High-level realistic fiction,' 'poetry,' 'science fiction' – one could add light opera (*The Pirates of Penzance*), movie scripts, prayers, hymns, professional journals, newspapers, the Bible, drama, classical odes, dirty limericks, past popular songs ('That Old Gang of Mine,' 'Leven Cent Cotton'), speeches, political propaganda (Campbell's memograph), pornographic magazines, forwards to books, six Kilgore Trout novels, and references to writers of various ages and genres (Blake, Goethe, Schaherazade, Darwin) (qtd. in Hinchcliffe 185).

It is curious that this magnificent web of intertextual references in *slaughterhouse-Five* has taxed very little critical attention of any worth. Apart from the brief treatments scattered here and there in chapters and essays, the ever-expanding Vonnegut bibliography boosts no single work of any length on this issue. This is probably due to the fact that this novel, and in spite of the

avalanche of critical studies produced on it, still poses many interpretive challenges to its critics. A quick survey of Vonnegut's bibliography would show that most of the items listed still wrestle with issues of interpretation. This explains the relative absence of criticism of the technical aspects of the novel such as the use of intertextual references and citations. This also account for the

absence of a wholistic reading of these intertextual references and citations in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. They are read fragmentarily in the act of interpretation as some of these references and citations are utilized individually, and deliberately, in critical readings produced on this novel to illustrate their interpretive points.

However, any assessment of the intertextual references in *Slaughterhouse-Five* must start with the basic issue of the relationship of these references to the over-all design of the novel's narrative structure. Because *Slaughterhouse-Five* is not a homogeneous narrative, these intertextual references cannot be said to constitute one textual paradigm. They are, rather, a plurality of paradigms with varying textual functions. Narratologically, *Slaughterhouse-Five* is a blending of two distinct narrative modes: autobiography and fiction, each employing a distinct narrator/focalizer. The autobiographical first chapter of the novel and the last few pages of the last ninth chapter are narrated in Vonnegut's own voice. It details the difficulties the author encountered in writing the story of the bombing of Dresden in World War II which he witnessed as a war prisoner. Whereas the remaining part of the novel, which is the fictional part proper, is concerned with Vonnegut's fictional counterpart Billy Pilgrim. It details his experience in the same war, his capture by the Germans, his subsequent success as an optometrist and businessman. Interwoven within these events are his secret time and space adventures on Planet Tralfamadore.

It is logical, therefore, to assume that the intertextual references in *Slaughterhouse-Five* comprise two distinctive sets according to the narrative part of the novel where they occur. Although each set of references is designed to fulfil a specific function in the novel, the intertextual references of the autobiographical narrative are far more

important than those of the fictional part of the novel as measured in terms of quantity and quality. The effect of intertextuality in the fictional narrative is limited to Billy and his fictional world. Apart from the author's innovative and radically postmodernist intertextual references to characters and settings from his own former novels, intertextuality in this part of the novel serves largely its traditional ends via highlighting aspects of Billy's experience through recontextualization in the symbolic frames of the textually cited work by investing an atmosphere of irony and disillusionment in Billy's war experience. Vonnegut makes intertextual references to such works as Alexander Dumas's *The Three Musketeers* (1844), Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), and the fairy tale of Cinderella to sharpen his anti-war sentiments in the book. He also makes intertextual references to various political speeches and historical documents, like Harry Truman's speeches, to ground his narrative in historicity and temporal reality in order to secure the story a contemporary relevance. Lyrics and communal songs are also used in an intertextual way to approach the unapproachable in Billy's life in a way similar to the free association technique in psychology. Vonnegut employs the emotional depth of the lyrical moment to induce such unconscious association as when he uses the string of songs called the Barbershop Quartet songs to bring Billy in direct confrontation with his effaced memory of the destruction of Dresden.

While these uses of Intertextuality in the fictional part of *Slaughterhouse-Five* remain limited in effect and scope to the narrative of Billy's life, the autobiographical narrative of this novel privileges intertextuality with the status of a textual paradigm far more important to the novel as a whole. In fact, the intertextual references of this part of the novel offer to mediate between the two narrative modes of autobiography and

fiction by constructing a textual space where authorial presence converges with the fictive experience of his construct. This sense of convergence is Vonnegut's textual strategy to fashion the reader as an active participant in his narrative. The novel, here, departs from the genre of war fiction in that its reader is no longer the conventional passive witness of painful experience but an active recipient of this pain. Billy, like his creator, never face his painful Dresden experience directly in the novel but manages to edge it. Both manage to do this through the help of intertextuality at the level of narrativity.

However, these intertextual references do not only develop Vonnegut's struggle to give creative expression to his Dresden experience but also provide the reader with the necessary epistemological ground to approach Billy's fictive experience. In a sense, it is possible to say that the intertextual space of the autobiographical narrative operates as a frame of reference to the fictional narrative. Intertextual references provide philosophical models for the fictional narrative which is, in many ways, an extension and a stratification of these references.

The intertextual fashioning of Billy's perplexed world-view with Vonnegut's own experiential perspective is really the core of a larger textual process of self-fashioning which holds the center in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Billy's desperate attempts to rationalize his chaotic world through an alien perspective of time and outer space traveling finds its inception in Vonnegut's own search for an aesthetic form to rationalize his Dresden experience in the autobiographical narrative of the novel. Vonnegut's name for this process of self-fashioning in *Slaughterhouse-Five* is self-reinvention. He sheds lights on the nature of this process in one of the key scenes of the novel. Upon his return home from war, Billy checks himself into a ward for

nonviolent mental patients in a veterans hospital in the spring of 1948. He shares a room with Eliot Rosewater, the central character of Vonnegut's previous novel *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* (1965) who turns to alcohol because of his inability to free himself from the burden of his war experience. So both men, according to Vonnegut, were dealing with similar crises:

They had both found life meaningless, partly because of what they had seen in war. Rosewater, for instance, had shot a fourteen-year-old fireman, mistaking him for a German soldier. So it goes. And Billy had seen the greatest massacre in European history, which was the fire-bombing of Dresden. So it goes (76) .

Consequently, the authorial voice comments that "they were trying to re-invent themselves and their universe" (73) . It is quite obvious that this would never be less accurate if applied to Billy and Vonnegut. Apart from marked differences of personality and temperament, both share the same war experience and have the same psychological and moral burden that attends such experience. Both try also to affect a release from this burden through desperate attempt to rationalize their war experience and the reality they are "trapped in the amber of the moment. There is no why" (55) . It is this desire to rationalize and make sense of chaotic reality that Vonnegut conceptualizes as self-re-invention. Susan Veas-Gulani, who applies the methods of psychiatry to Billy's split personality, makes it clear that Vonnegut's own personal war experience constitutes the frame of reference for Billy's problems of adjustment. (175-77) Billy's attempt to rationalize reality is essentially Vonnegut's for Billy's narrative is therapeutic in effects to the author as it is instrumental to a release of his traumatic experience of Dresden.

This search for an approach through the investigation of various works in an intertextual way is, therefore, part of Vonnegut's attempt to fashion this traumatic experience in an aesthetically executed narrative form. Vonnegut himself provides some ground for this interpretation when he states in an interview with John Casey and Joe David Bellamy that:

I came home in 1945, started writing about it, and wrote about it and wrote about it, and WROTE ABOUT IT. This thin book is about what it's like to write a book about a thing like that. I couldn't get much closer. I would head myself into my memory of it, the circuit breakers would kick out; I'd head in again, I'd back out. The book is a process of twenty years of this sort of living with Dresden and the aftermath (Bellamy 203) .

It is clear that Vonnegut feels that the book dramatises the problem of writing, of how to approach both an event and its memory. He figures his method of composition as a form of *manoeuvre* involving a process of approach and retreat in which the event itself seems to occupy a peculiarly inaccessible part of his memory - "I'd head in again, I'd back out."

The search for an approach in chapter one is, therefore, a search for a form or pattern which would give a coherent meaning to the Dresden experience in the subsequent nine chapters. Each one of the intertextual references in the first chapter of the novel is carefully designed to be an integral part of this process of approach-finding. This makes these intertextual references and citations a sort of textual signals that give an insight into the nature of this experience and its philosophical implications.

This sense of the search for an approach to the Dresden experience attends almost all the intertextual references and citations made in the first chapter of the novel. This can be seen, for instance, in the case of the limerick and the nonsense song which Vonnegut cites in full early in the first chapter of the novel. Musing on how useless, but quite tempting to overlook, the Dresden part of his memory, Vonnegut recalls a famous limerick and the nonsense song "Yon yonson":

There was a man from Stamboul,
Who soliloquized thus to his tool:
"You took all my wealth
And you ruined my health,
And now you won't pee, you old fool" (2) .

Most critics tend to overlook the limerick either because it is vulgar or because of the lack of a clear connection between its content and the Dresden memory that prompts it. T.J. Matheson alone finds any significance in this limerick. He is right to relate the limerick's theme of penile dysfunction to Vonnegut's growing sense of the loss of potency as a result of growing old. But he hastily concludes that "in the very irrelevance of the memory recalled, Vonnegut is making a subtle point about the fallibility of the human memory and its inability to retain a sense of perspective or stay on subjects of great importance for any length of time" (231) . The irrelevance of this conclusion to the former observation of the relevance of the limerick's theme to the authorial persona stems, in a sense, from Matheson's misunderstanding of the causes of Vonnegut's complaining about the uselessness of his Dresden memory. Vonnegut, it should be understood, is not complaining of his inability to remember what happened in Dresden as an eye-witness. He is rather complaining of his inability to rationalize

his experience of this incident on paper. So it is not a failure of memory but a failure of creative expression. We have seen earlier that Vonnegut spent some twenty years trying to put his Dresden experience in an aesthetic form but with no success. Thus when he came home in 1945, he started, as he said later in an interview, "writing about it, and wrote about it and *wrote about it*, and WROTE ABOUT IT" (Bellamy 203). One can but imagine, here, the speaker's despair of creative impotency. It is at this level the limerick echoes the failure of the Dresden memory to materialize aesthetically. The limerick's suggestion that penile dysfunction is a consequence of excessive sexual activity metaphorically echoes the atrophied state of the author as a result of his prolonged futile obsession with the Dresden part of his memory. Creative dysfunction, in other words, is a consequence of excessive memory activity. The implied failure of reproduction, whether physical or creative, highlights the failure of the politics of representation. Dresden, the eye-witness's experience, remains a memory unopened to the metaphysics of human logic. It can exist only on the level of orality in such songs as that of "Yon Yonson.":

My name is yon yonson,
I work in Wisconson,
I work in a lumbermill there,
The people I meet when I walk down the street,
They say, "What's your name?"
And I say,
"My name is Yon Yonson,
I work in Wisconson..."
And so on to infinity' (2).

Given the endlessly repetitive nature of this song, it is designed to highlight the reader's awareness of Vonnegut's dilemma of being trapped in an impasse of

irrelevance and repetition ad absurdum. Vonnegut, in this respect, is like Yon Yonson. According to James Lundquist, he is also caught in the same impasse as that of the song (76-77). During the twenty years or so he spent working on this book Vonnegut used to give the same reply to the frequent question people used to ask concerning what he is working on currently. The answer is "a book about Dresden" (2). He is, therefore, like Yon Yonson is doomed to repeat the same answer endlessly. The futility of the answer and the agency of repetition ad infinitum he is caught in epitomize the creative impotence he suffers due to the his prolonged living with such a traumatic experience as that of Dresden without being able to give vent to it through creative expression.

Furthermore, the song, in particular, suggests the circularity and self-referentiality of the narrative structure of the fictional part of the novel. The song's repetitious structure echoes the logos of futile repetition Billy's life is caught in through his uncontrollable fits of time travel back and forth in his life span. But these time travels never come through the one central event which is that of the bombing of Dresden. Instead, they hover around it in such a way as to reflect the unapproachable nature of this event and its stature as a traumatic experience for Billy which alludes representation. This is why traditional plot-structures fail to encompass the far-reaching implications of this event as in the case of the outline he makes with his daughter's crayons for the novel: "The Destruction of Dresden was represented by a vertical band of orange cross-hatching, and all the lines that were still alive passed through it, came out the other side" (4).

Vonnegut had to abandon this plot-structure because the destruction of Dresden was an enormous event which can never be contained within the textual boundaries of traditional war narrative. The moment of re-orientation is yet

provided by another intertextual space. Vonnegut visits his old war buddy Bernard V. O'Hare to recall former war experiences for his book. He, however, is given a cold reception by O'Hare's wife Mary, who scold both of them : "You'll pretend you were men instead of babies, and you'll be played in the movies by Frank Sinatra and John Wayne or some of those glamorous, war-loving, dirty old men. And war will look just wonderful, so we'll have a lot more of them. And they'll be fought by babies like the babies upstairs" (11). Mary O'Hare's condemnation of current romantic war movies raises two issues in this passionate outburst. First, wars are fought by babies, i.e., green youngsters. Second, Mary protests that Vonnegut's book is just another romantic depiction of war as a glamour affair, like that of Hollywood war movies. This, she concludes, is going to cause more wars and send more children to death in these wars. Vonnegut, at this point, comes to a new awareness which brings him to experience a crucial re-orientation in his attitudes and aesthetic outlook. He promises Mary that "there won't be a part for Frank Sinatra or John Wayne"(11). Consequently, *Slaughterhouse-Five* changes from a traditional war romance narrative into an anti-war novel.

In order to authenticate this re-orientation, Vonnegut turns to historiography to negotiate war as a discursive cultural practice. He promises Mary to subtitle his book "The Children Crusade." This distances the specific historical event of the bombing of Dresden into its larger historical and cultural perspectives. Once again, Vonnegut enlists the space of intertextuality to concretize this act of textual distancing by turning to Charles Mackay's book *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of the Crowds* for information on "The Children Crusade." He discovers that this crusade, which began in 1213, was the idea of two

corrupt monks to raise an army of children and sell them as slaves in North Africa. They enlisted some 30,000 volunteer children from the slums and back streets of French and German cities. However, most of them perished in shipwrecked. Few of them arrived, by mistake, at Genoa, where there were no ships reported for duty. They were treated kindly by the people of Genoa.

Vonnegut's selection and placing of specific quotations from chapter nine of Mackay's book play a double focus which opens the whole business of the crusades and its romantic rhetoric into the assault of history and textuality:

History in her solemn pages informs us that the crusaders were but ignorant and savage men, that their motives were those of bigotry unmitigated, and that their pathway was one of blood and tears. Romance, on the other hand, dilates upon their piety and heroism, and portrays, in her most glowing and impassioned hues, their virtues and magnanimity, the imperishable honor they acquired for themselves, and the great services they rendered to Christianity (Italics in original) (12) .

This questioning of romance as a false historiography echoes the contemporary theories of Hayden White's *Metahistory* which foretels the subversion of historicity in the act of narrativization (1-48). However, Vonnegut's ultimate aim is to undermine traditional war romances but also to deconstruct their negative cultural productivity as continued in Hollywood movies of John Wayne and Frank Sinatra.

Consequently, this polemic would ultimately position Vonnegut's subsequent "fiction" in the subversive practices of metahistoric narrativity. The moment of recognition of this truth becomes a moment of textual ambivalence when boundaries dissolve between the factuality of the

autobiographical narrative voice and the fictionality of Billy's story because the original illumination into the Children's Crusade business is essentially Vonnegut's but now it is rediscovered epiphanically by Billy. The text is decentered and truth is pluralized at such a moment when Billy, or Vonnegut, midway in the fictional part comes to a sudden tragic illumination: " We had forgotten that wars were fought by babies. When I saw those freshly shaved faces [of the war prisoners], it was a shock.' "My God, my God-" I said to myself, "It's the Children's Crusade" ' (76-77) .

Furthermore, the fictional part of *Slaughterhouse-Five* is anything but a heroic narrative. The novel is a metafictional questioning of such heroic romances. This is basically done through the disruption of the conventions of this genre as, for instance, in the foregrounding of the representation of Billy Pilgrim as an heroic "universal man-child", a theme which Vonnegut underscores repeatedly throughout the novel (Waugh 127-9) . The critic Peter J. Reed has investigated this affinity between men at war and children in *Slaughterhouse-Five* in depth. He concludes that: " Young of face,gawky of stature and childishly perplexed, Billy Pilgrim, who like the crusader starts out on a holy mission as chaplain's assistant, makes the perfect representational figure for this conception of war" (183) . One consequence of this projection of the child-like Billy in an absurd world is dark comedy. But Billy is not comic figure per se. He is, rather, reminiscent of Shakespeare's clowns. The schlemiel-like naivety of Billy is not in comic contrast with his absurd world but also betrays deep philosophical reflections on the absurdity of this world, which is essentially that of Vonnegut himself.

Vonnegut, once more, recruits the power of intertextuality to position the reader in this philosophical frame of

reference of Billy and his world. Without this frame the reader would not be able to perceive a meaningful pattern in Billy's life and its relation to the multiplicity of the roles and worlds he is forced to live and oscillate among them. Thus, during his visit to Dresden with Guggenheim money back in 1967, Vonnegut took with him two books to read on the plane. One is *Words for the Wind*, a volume of poetry by the American poet Theodore Roethke. He quotes the following lines from a poem in this volume called "The Waking":

I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.

I feel my fate in what I cannot fear.

I learn by going where I have to go (Italics in original) (15).

Evidently, these lines look forward to Billy's "time travels." Waking and sleep do not stand for death and life, as Peter J. Reed assures us, but rather stands for two different and differing states of awareness or personal perception of existential reality (200) . The series of paradoxes that makes up this stanza are meant to chart Billy's exceptional life as an act of memory that is textualized as a paradigm in the novel. The fictional part of the novel commences with a declaration of this aspect of Billy's life:

Listen:

BILLY PILGRIM has come unstuck in time.

Billy has gone to sleep a senile widower and awakened on his wedding day. He has walked through a door in 1955 and come out another one in 1941. He has gone back through that door to find himself in 1963. He has seen his birth and death many times, he says, and pays random visits to all the events in between (17) .

This exchange of the usual spatial pattern of textualization with a radical temporal dislocating pattern heightens the experiential structure of Billy's perception of a fragmented reality. The

act of memory is thus archived around a temporal point which is the destruction of Dresden. The narrative actualization of such a textual paradigm would establish the due centrality of the Dresden affair or else it would remain a mere colored line in Vonnegut's original plan of the novel which he draws with the crayon of his daughter. The model of spatial plotting can never allow the Dresden affair such centrality. It would remain a mere event in the plot.

Furthermore, the narrative realization of such textual paradigm as that outlined above and substantiated in Roethke's verses aligns Vonnegut's narrative with the Tralfamadorian time and fiction theories. The Tralfamadorian apprehend temporality in a circular way. For them:

All moments, past, present, and future, always existed, always will exist. The Tralfamadorians can look at all the different moments just the way we can look at a stretch of the Rocky Mountains, for instance. They can see how permanent all the moments are, and they can look at any moment that interest them. It is just an illusion we have here on Earth that one moment follows another one, like beads on a string, and that once a moment is gone it is gone forever (19-20) .

Moreover the circularity of Tralfamadorian system of existence and their ability to visit any moment in their four-dimensional world nullify the finality of death and suffering. Existence becomes a deterministic Eden according to Leonard Mustazza (299-312) . So the most important thing that Billy learned on planet 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." (p.19) But still, Billy's time travels are so deterministic that he has no control over where he is going next. He is "in a constant state of fright...because he never knows what part of his life he is going to

have to act next' (17). Such deterministic view and the state of uncontrolled travel are well expressed by the third line of Roethke's stanza: " I learn by going where I have to go", Which is aptly summarized in the ritualistic refrain "so it goes" which is repeated hundreds of times in the novel in Billy's and Vonnegut's commentary on human affairs.

Billy, however, is not a consistent Tralfamadorian. Unlike them he keeps visiting painful moments in his life. The Tralfamadorians avoid unpleasant moments. They visits only happy moments in their lives. Billy is doing just the opposite for death and suffering color the moments of his life he visits involuntarily. It is this aspect of *Slaughterhouse-Five* that puts Vonnegut in affinity with the French novelist Louis-Ferdinand Celine (1894-1961).

Such affinity is developed in the intertextual space of Erika Ostrovsky's *Celine and His Vision* that Vonnegut reads in his second visit to Dresden in 1967. The impact of Celine on Vonnegut is far-reaching especially in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Vonnegut subtitles his novel as "A Duty-Dance with Death" a phrase which he takes from Celine. This subtitle applies to Billy and his creator equally but its true significance can only be grasped in the context of the two passages Vonnegut quotes from this book and from a Celine novel. These two quotations illustrate Celine's philosophical outlook on death and time which proves crucial for the shaping of *Slaughterhouse-Five* as a work of art.

Vonnegut is fascinated with Celine's obsession with death. Celine is so fatalistic as he declared that "the truth is death. I've fought nicely against it as long as I could...danced with it, festooned it, waltzed it around...decorated it with streamers, titillated it..." (15). Subsequently, death plays a central position in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Celine's words applies aptly to Billy's journey in

the novel. He lived with death ever since his childhood and his mature life is full of deaths and corpses. He witnessed the greatest massacre in the history of the world which is the fire-bombing of Dresden. He himself narrowly escaped death in a chartered plane crash. The critic Stanley Schatt remarks in this respect that "just as money is a central character in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, death serves that role in *Slaughterhouse-Five*." (81) As a consequence, Billy adopts the Tralfamadorian philosophy because it presents him with a peaceful and comforting solution to the problem of death:

'When a Tralfamadorian sees a corpse, all that 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 of 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"' (Quotation marks in original) (20) .

It is this pacifist philosophy that enable Billy to accept his assassination as something inevitable and normal although he foresaw it long ago in his life and was even able to re-live that moment of death several times in his time travels.

Because Billy is the narrative transcription of his creator's actual war experiences, death enters the text of *Slaughterhouse-Five* as the power of thanatos which presupposes the existence of its counterpart the eros. It is only through the transcendence of art and creativity that the death could be atrophied. Vonnegut speaks to this effect when he quotes Celine saying that "No art is possible without a dance with death" (p.15). The metaphor of dancing applies to both Billy's ritualistic dancing with death and to Vonnegut's own dancing with the Dresden memory which evades

textual domestication. Because the novel derives its significance from the author's war experience, the metaphor of dancing looks back to its classical roots as one that denotes war and warriors. In Classical literature war is represented as a dance: Ares dances "in the dance that knows no music"(Euripides, *Phoenissae* 791) and warriors are the "dancers of Enyo"(Nonnus 28.275). But Peace is also "queen of the dance" (Aristophanes, *Peace* 976) (Ferber 50-51).

Because the novel revolves around a massacre and mass death, Vonnegut, like his mentor Celine, seems to have in mind a 'dance of death' in its medieval literary sense. It was during the Middle Ages that the "dance of death" or *danse macabre* became a popular theme, probably in response to the bubonic plague or "Black Death"; in it Death leads a dance of people of all ranks to the grave. Scott sets "The Dance of Death" at Waterloo: on the eve of the battle "phantoms wheeled a revel dance / And doomed the future slain"(57-58). Beddoes ends his play *Death's Jest-Book* with a death dance. The dance of death figures prominently also in the poems of Goethe and Anatole France and a play by Strindberg. All these works carry the title *The Dance of Death*. This tradition of the dance of death resurges in the literature inspired by World War II as in Paul Celan's famous poem "Death-Fugue," about the German death camps, which was first titled "Death Waltz" (Ferber 55) .

Art and the wish to creativity is the only antidote to death in in *Slaughterhouse-Five* and, hence, the subtitle of the novel "A Duty-Dance with Death". The novel itself as work of art becomes Vonnegut's defense in the face of the nihilism of death in the modern world. This therapeutic function of *Slaughterhouse-Five* to Vonnegut has been openly expressed by its author when he stated to an interviewer that this novel "was a therapeutic thing. I'm a different person now. I got rid of a lot of crap" (qtd. in McGinnis 56) .

Moreover, the fatalism of art as a necessary duty-dance with death looks back

at the intertextual reference to Mary Endell's book *Dresden, History, Stage and Gallery* which was published in 1908. This book, which Vonnegut discovers during his visit to the O'Hares, posits Dresden as the ultimate example for this co-existence of death and art in human culture and nature as well. Vonnegut's politics, here, utilizes the gaze and spectacle as its agency. The title of the book being intertextualized is a good clue to this textual strategy. The distancing of Dresden in historicity assumes the shape of a spectacle, an object where the gaze of the reader materializes. The word "stage" of the book's title connotes the idea of performance where this act of writing of the book becomes a "duty-dance with death." The word "gallery" do direct the gaze to this dance and the historical stage where it is performed. Vonnegut's quotations from Endell's book point clearly to this direction. His quotations are all on the famous art gallery of Dresden. This gallery is really what makes Dresden the ultimate expression of human aspiration for the immortality of art as an antidote to the death wrought by war. *Slaughterhouse-Five*, at this moment, becomes itself a spectacle as it fashions its narrative around this historicity of the actual gallery. It becomes a stage for Billy's, and by implication Vonnegut's, "duty-dance with death" in this city. The first moments of Billy's first entrance in Dresden as a prisoner of war ushers this duty-dance in a highly ironic way. He was enchanted by the artistic perfection of the city. His gaze openly parades his fascination with the beauty of the city: "Merry amoretti wove garlands above windows. Roguish fauns and naked nymphs peeked down at Billy from festooned cornices. Stone monkeys frisked among scrolls and seashells and bamboo" (109). Apart from its superior aesthetic quality, this description is carefully chosen to convey a fusion of colors and scenes that shows the cultural refinement of human life from its basic animalism. Animal images are elevated from their naturalistic context and given the mystical elevation of art.

But this perfection of art is not without its inherent destructiveness for evil in

inherent in human nature. Billy reflects on this beauty with the eye of predestination for he, "with his memories of the future, knew that the city would be smashed to smithereens and then burned-in about thirty more days. He knew, too, that most of the people watching him would soon be dead. So it goes" (109). This play with the temporal perspective is very crucial for this co-existence of art and death in the symbolic Dresden. The word "memories" is normally used with the past but Vonnegut, here, uses it for the future to indicate that tenses fuses and time becomes meaningless in a world governed by the absurdity of nemesis and human fatalism. This has its reverberations in the text of the novel. Vonnegut comments on the German people watching the parade of Billy and other American war prisoners as they are led into Dresden are highly ironic: "Here were more crippled human beings, more fools like themselves. Here was light opera" (109). This comment epitomizes two important thematic leads that run throughout *Slaughterhouse-Five*: The hollowness of humans caught in the grip of war and fate and the idea of dancing. Billy is used to further this idea of art as duty-dance with death. Billy, we are told, "was the star. He led this parade" (109). Billy's physical dancing does not only look back to the title of the book but also the gaze of his German spectators and the reader as well. Vonnegut's distancing of Billy's physical dancing at the stage of Dresden in the perspective of art and death functions as an interpretational focalizer for the reader to see the book in its proper symbolic significance as a textual appropriation of this dancing stage/spectacle for its ideological ends.

Furthermore, the reference to Goethe in this quotation brings Vonnegut's Dresden in affinity with Yeats' Byzantium. Dresden is constructed in this intertextual space as a configuration of Yeats' Byzantium, a place where the soul can attain the perfection and durability of art. Vonnegut mimics Yeats' mystical voyage to Byzantium through his quotation of Endell's description of Goethe's

visit to Dresden after the siege of the city in 1760:

And therefore I have sailed the seas and come
To the holy city of Byzantium.
O sages standing in God's holy fire
As in the gold mosaic of the wall,
Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre,
And be the singing-masters of my soul.
Consume my heart away; sick with desire
And fastened to a dying animal
It knows not what it is; and gather me
Into the artifice of eternity (lines 13-22) .

But the city of art that Goethe voyages to is a historical moment subject, like humanity, to the laws of temporality. The city he finds is no more than "sad ruins" (12) . The gallery is devastated in the siege of the city by the Prussians. Vonnegut's tactics at this point aims at producing the effects of Brechet's *Verfremdungseffekt* and *ostraneniye* (defamiliarization and estrangement) in order to shock the reader out of his couzy perspective on the reality being reconstructed here (Hume 209-214) . He quotes Goethe's response to the devastated city in its German original without any translation. This is part of Vonnegut's employment of the shock tactics to move his readers out of their roles as passive recipients of the action. This quotation must have triggered in the minds of Vonnegut's original readers that this is the language of the Nazi Germans. So the linguistic space is used suggestively to echo this temporal co-existence of art/Goethe and Death/Nazi war in the minds of his readers both at the level of cultural discourse and at the level of the text itself as a literary response to this heurmantic condition of human existence. The war experience of the author which the text traded acquires at this point a contemporary and universal significance. Billy simultaneously becomes Vonnegut himself and a universal Everyman in search for salvation and knowledge.

Having fashioned Dresden, and the novel itself, as a spectacle for the act of writing, and that of the gaze, as a duty-

dance with death and the assault of historicity, it remains for Vonnegut to point out alternatives that philosophy and literary imagination can afford. One such alternative is presented once again by Celine. Vonnegut says that Erika Ostrovsky's *Celine and His Vision* reminds him of an amazing scene from Celine's novel *Death on the Installment Plan* (1936) where Celine wants to stop the bustling of a street crowd. Celine, says Vonnegut, "*screams on paper, Make them stop...don't let them move anymore at all...There, make them freeze...once and for all...So that they won't disappear anymore!*" (16) (Italics in original) .

Vonnegut's appropriation of this intertext to the narrative of *Slaughterhouse-Five* has evoked two different sets of responses. Matheson takes Celine's desire to stop the crowd on the street as a "metaphor for time as perpetual flux" (238) . Such a metaphor, undoubtedly, expresses the writer's personal desire to extricate himself from the movement of the present events into the irretrievable past. Given the impossibility of the self's recoil into temporality, the word 'freeze' would, therefore, be internalized as a psychological mechanism where "time is suspended in one's own consciousness to keep it from being lost forever" (238) . The only possible model for this static concept of time is expounded in the Tralfamadorian time theory. But the Tralfamadorean configuration of temporality is four-dimensional. It supercedes the limits of human awareness of reality which is fixedly three-dimensional. Humans, however, are capable of suspending the flow of time only through the act of memory. *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and especially its autobiographical part, are deeply involved with the recovery of the author's effaced memory of Dresden. The failure of memory haunts *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

Vonnegut acknowledged this failure several times in the first chapter of the novel. Vonnegut opens this chapter thusly: "ALL THIS HAPPENED, more or less" (1) . When he came home from war he thought that the

business of writing this book would be easy. He would just need to recall things he witnessed and write them down on paper. But, much to his dismay, he discovered that "not many words about Dresden came from my mind then...and not many words come now, when I have become an old fart with his memories and his Pall Malls, with his sons full grown" (2). External evidences are also available to support this preoccupation with memory and its failure. In an interview with David Standish Vonnegut acknowledged that for some time he was unable to remember the actual bombing of Dresden: "[T]here was a complete forgetting of what it was like[. . .] the center had been pulled right out of the story" (qtd. in Cacicedo 360). Not until that failure of memory is made good can Vonnegut write *Slaughterhouse-Five*. So the novel becomes a testimony to this recovered memory and the historical moment it inscribes in textuality.

While Matheson defines this temporal fixation in a highly semiotic context, Wayne D. McGinnis adopts a more formalistic approach to Vonnegut's intertextual appropriation of Celine's contention with temporality. He takes Celine's "freeze" literally and, therefore, finds it quite paradoxical because "stopping the flow of time is at once a solution and no solution" (58). He believes that Celine demands a sort of 'fixity' that would prevent the flow of time and the constant encroachment of death for time means change and the cycle of growth and decay and is clearly equivalent to death. But this business of temporal fixity is paradoxical because it is just another face of death for the stopping of death does not mean permanence in terms of human immortality. It rather becomes an effacement of the human in favour of the material. McGinnis draws on Vonnegut's intertextual reference at the end of the first autobiographical chapter of the novel to the Bible to support his argument. Biblical Intertextuality provides the classic example of Lot's wife. She experience a moment of temporal fixity when death and life are atrophied. God, the Old testament Jehovah,

turns her into a "pillar of salt" in punishment for her disobedience. She defies God's warning not to look back on the burning cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Vonnegut quotes in full her story as stated in the *Gideon Bible* (Genesis 19:23 KJV):

The sun was risen upon the earth when Lot entered into Zoar. Then the LORD rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the LORD out of heaven; And he overthrew those cities, and all the plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and that which grew upon the ground. But his wife looked back from behind him, and she became a pillar of salt (16).

Lot's wife transcends the telos of the christian death in its Biblical form of "from dust to dust." She is no longer subject to temporality like all other mortals. But she loses her human substance, much like Lucifer, through the act of divine damnation and hence the paradoxical status of death and no-death.

Because McGinnis questions the process not the motivation of both Celine's and Vonnegut's desire to freeze the flow of time, his reasoning seems to be beside the point. Vonnegut's intertextual reference to Lot's wife is actually meant to problematizes the concept "human" in a self-fashioning context. He is less fascinated by the divine miracle than by the act of human defiance on the part of Lot's wife: "And Lot's wife, of course, was told not to look back where all those people and their homes had been. But she did look back, and I love her for that, because it was so human" (16). Lot's wife, here, does not experience the pains of the Biblical fall but she is invested with the Promethean spirit of defiance which defines here humanity for to look back is not motivated only by the power of human curiosity but also it becomes a gesture of human sympathy. A transcendence is being affected here for Lot's wife's death is inscribed in the act of language as no-death at least in the space of intertextuality. Vonnegut's re-writes the biblical text and at the same time interpellates it to himself. He

is not verbally "fascinated" with her but also fashions his authorial figure after her act of defiance. He looks back on his Dresden experience and gives it testimony much to the opposition of the collective memory of his generation. Right at the end of his autobiographical narrative he states, quite depreciatingly, that this book about Dresden is "a failure, and had to be, since it was written by a pillar of salt" (16).

Probably, this statement can best be appreciated if seen in the light of Vonnegut's questioning of the raid on Dresden and the official silence imposed on its details and results. The autobiographical first chapter sheds important light on this issue. He writes the Air Force for details about the raid but he is told that such details are top-secret. People, like the movie-maker Harrison Starr and the University of Chicago professor, either mock his efforts to write an anti-war novel or try to marginalize his questioning. Bertrand Rumfoord even asks him to leave the history of Dresden raid as nearly forgotten as possible.

What is at stake here is the interplay of power and resistance at the level of what Foucault calls the "archive" and the archontic power inherent in it (129). The archive acquires the powers of divinity for the community and Vonnegut's defiance of its archontic power outlaws him and his work. People like O'Hare, who is himself an intertext from Vonnegut's earlier novel *Mother Night* (1961), chooses not to look back on Dresden in their quest to be normal social beings but at the expense of their humanity. When Vonnegut asks his help to remember stuff about war and the raid of Dresden he was unenthusiastic and said he couldn't remember much (3-4). Unlike his war buddy Vonnegut, he chooses to forget the atrocities of war and the raid on Dresden in order to maintain a healthy life. Much to the opposition of the archive and the power of what Louis Althusser calls "state apparatus" (170-86), Vonnegut "looks back" on, i.e., questions what happened in Dresden and is, therefore, turned into a "pillar of salt", i.e., a dissenting voice and an unconforming social being. His work

becomes a "failure" in terms of the cultural hegemony that the archontic power of the archive fashions as the ultimate standard of aesthetic judgement. No wonder that Vonnegut offers a low and gloomy appreciation of his book: "I would hate to tell you what this lousy little book cost me in money and anxiety and time" (2). But "failure" as cultural death and psychotic annihilation is really the threshold to the redemption of humanity much like the phoenix. Vonnegut, however, looks back on Dresden and his own trauma and the result is not only redeeming his humanity but also writing *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

Now the intertextual enclosure of narrativity is complete and Vonnegut has found a voice, a dissenting authority, to question the archive. Intertextuality, in a sense, grants him the status of a "storyteller." He is now ready to transform his own personal experience into the demise of collective cultural memory. The story he writes is never an act of pure memory. It is a testimony which Paul Ricoeur casts as "the fundamental transitional structure between memory and history" (21). This is why the upcoming fictional narrative is not about Vonnegut but about Billy Pilgrim because the latter is not just a mere fictional counterpart or extension of the authorial self but rather an ideologized agency, a textual mediation between the reality of Vonnegut's war experience and the archival paradigms of cultural geography.

But Vonnegut is still in the grip of intertextuality. The final words of the autobiographical narrative are yet an intertextual reference but this time to the upcoming fictional part.

It begins like this:

Listen:

Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time.

It ends like this:

Poo-tee-weet? (16).

The text quotes itself in what can be termed as self-intertextuality both to presuppose the fictional narrative and to place its referentiality in the authority of the

factuality of the autobiographical narrative. By quoting the opening and concluding words of the fictional narrative, i.e., the novel per se, he invests his narrative with the powers of divinity. What really matters is the power of the word for "in the beginning was the word" and then God started creation. By invoking this authorial-divine power, Vonnegut confers authority on his act of linguistic creation, i.e., the book itself. Only then he can enter and re-enter his narrative and freely shifts spatial and temporal perspectives. A legitimacy is obtained and the ex-prisoner is now all transformed, as if by a miracle, into a creator, a divinely-endowed storyteller.

Intertextuality, then, becomes a textual strategy successfully employed to transcend the facticity of the autobiographical narrative by investing the essentially monologic personal war narrative of the author with the plurality of the dialogic in such a way as to fashion the personal into the cultural and, hence, the far-reaching interpretive potentials of *Slaughterhouse-Five* as a text for all times.

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