

Become Who You Are:

Vonnegut and Nietzsche on Becoming, Affirmation, and the Importance of Art

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Introduction

Friedrich Nietzsche and Kurt Vonnegut are confrontational. Through their writing, they speak to *me*. They speak to me in a way that I'm not accustomed to being spoken to through the written word. As I read, I hear their laughter, see their mischievous smiles, and sense their pleasure at getting a rise out of me through their fables and hyperbole and one-liners. They are pleased with their outrageousness, glad to have achieved their goal of provoking me. And just as my image of them is more full than the image of most writers I've read, their image of me is likewise complex. They address a me that is often hidden, even from myself: the me that inhabits a realm spinning with chaos, the me that wonders where all this crap came from, the me that questions how I should live my life. To that end, I'd like to explore two issues that are central to both writers' work—in shorthand, *becoming* and *affirmation*—specifically as they relate to both Nietzsche's and Vonnegut's views on the role of art in our lives.

By *becoming*, I mean something like development or flourishing, the activity of making something of ourselves in the face of the inevitable difficulties that will arise. Our lives are a series of moments, some flowing smoothly together, some utterly random and confounding. Our day-to-day experience, in other words, is often the experience of chaos. Some goals are achieved easily, while others elude us for years. Some plans seem destined to be thwarted, while others seem determined to succeed. Add to that the fact that we can rarely tell the difference, and that the future is impossible to predict with any certainty. Given this situation, one is faced with a choice: do I throw up my hands and try to escape the difficulties and minimize my pain? Or do I embrace the chaos and attempt to make something of myself in spite of it? An apt metaphor for the latter is that of the committed artist, someone who spends his or her time and energy and resources to create, someone who is not motivated by profit or fame, but by their own humanity. Creating a work of art is perhaps the ultimate embrace of *becoming*, an act of humanity that, in Vonnegut's metaphor, separates us from the machines, which can neither become nor truly create.

By *affirmation*, I mean to invoke Nietzsche's radical idea that we ought to affirm our lives down to the smallest detail, rather than ever denying or attempting to escape them. In his words, *amor fati*, we must, with open eyes, love our fate—even the unpleasant and the painful parts. This is a position that Vonnegut did not address directly, but which I could see him embracing, especially because of the *joie de vivre* evident even in his bleakest writing and because he did directly espouse *becoming*. The two—*becoming* and *affirmation*—are deeply

related: both require an attitude of accepting the things that we cannot change, but *affirmation* demands more. To affirm our lives in Nietzsche's sense, we must never deny even a single moment. We must never feel regret or resentment, must never wish that anything had ever been any different. We must, in other words, fully embrace *becoming* in every moment of our lives. Extending the metaphor of the artist, we must live our lives as artists create their works. Knowing the futility of so many of our activities, we must strive to create ourselves. Vonnegut and Nietzsche want us to love our fate, and to embrace that chaos, because that is the source of creativity. Art, the product of that creativity, teaches us to do so.

I will discuss these issues in three sections. The first deals primarily with *becoming*. In it, I will discuss the similarities in Vonnegut and Nietzsche's approaches to writing. Both attempt to portray the chaos inherent in human experience by shaking us out of our orderly way of viewing ourselves and the people around us. By portraying the chaos inherent in human life, rather than attempting to order it, they draw our attention to the fact that we are engaged in the process of *becoming*, presumably to teach us to embrace it.

The second section deals primarily with *affirmation*. In it, I will discuss Nietzsche's views on music in relation to those of his predecessor Arthur Schopenhauer, who pessimistically advocates pursuing attempts to escape the pain of being alive by divorcing ourselves from the world. Early in his life—and early in his personal and philosophical development—Nietzsche fervently promoted Schopenhauer's ideas. Later, he couldn't do enough to distance himself from them. The source of this disagreement, Nietzsche's insistence that we affirm our lives (the good parts as well as the painful ones) and “love our fate,” informs all of Nietzsche's philosophy.

I will conclude by discussing the relationship between the two central ideas (*becoming* and *affirmation*) and art. I will argue that Nietzsche and Vonnegut value art because of its ability to teach *becoming* and *affirmation*. To that end, they believe that art (of any form) so enriches our lives as to justify—and even sanctify—our existence.

On Becoming: Embracing Chaos

“I tell you: one must have chaos within oneself, to give birth to a dancing star.”

-Friedrich Nietzsche (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*)

“Let others bring order to chaos. I would bring chaos to order, instead, which I think I have done.”

-Kurt Vonnegut (*Breakfast of Champions*)

We witness a kind of becoming when we encounter a work of art. This is especially true in the case of music. The famous four notes that open Beethoven's Fifth Symphony give birth to every glorious measure of music that follows. From them, a symphony develops, unfolds, *becomes*, and we the audience, spectators though we are, are participants in that becoming as well. This also holds in the case of narrative. Characters, generally speaking, are not fully formed, just as you and I are not fully formed. They exist so that they may become, so that we readers may witness their becoming.

Both Vonnegut and Nietzsche see *becoming* (in Nietzsche's phrase, "becoming what one is") as central to human life and as something to be cherished. This attitude is evident even in stylistic choices that they make. These two writers work to draw their readers' attention to the chaotic nature of human life by presenting works that appear to be themselves chaotic. Both Vonnegut and Nietzsche, each in his own way, allow their works to unfold before us as symphonies do, and they invite us to participate in that *becoming*. They do so because a central message of their work is that we ought to fully participate in our own *becoming*, a lesson they teach through their art. The activity of reading their texts mirrors and encourages our own *becoming*, and Nietzsche and Vonnegut structure their texts accordingly.

In the section of *Human, All Too Human* that begins, "*What is perfect is supposed not to have become*," Nietzsche writes:

The artist knows that his work produces its full effect when it excites a belief in an improvisation, a belief that it came into being with a miraculous suddenness; and so he may assist this illusion and introduce those elements of rapturous restlessness, of blindly groping disorder, of attentive reverie that attend the beginning of creation into his art as a means of deceiving the soul of the spectator or auditor into a mood in which he believes that the complete and perfect has suddenly emerged instantaneously (§145).

Nietzsche draws our attention to the idea that a work of art is born in chaos, and suggests that artists allow some of this "rapturous restlessness" to seep into the work so that it might have a profound effect on its audience. When we encounter a work of art—or a text—for the first time, we often forget that the work itself has had to *become*, has been "work-shopped" and revised and reviewed, and instead believe that it just came about, all of a sudden, right before our eyes.

We are entranced by the work and become engrossed in the process of being a spectator, and we see the work progressing, *becoming*. Indeed, the act of observing a work of art is a twofold exercise in *becoming*. First, the work and our perception of it *become*: they develop. Symphonies gradually unfurl their final climactic moment from the very first bar, and listeners quiet themselves so that they don't miss a single detail of the journey from the beginning to the

end. The smallest details in a painting or sculpture reveal themselves gradually, sometimes years after our first viewing, and observers take the time to carefully study them in order to bring about this change. Our relationship with a work of art develops over time, be it the time it takes to perform the symphony or the preponderance of years, throughout which we have enjoyed one work over and over again.

Second, we learn something from art: it adds to our own personal *becoming* by giving us lessons in topics as various as morality, history, beauty, and so on. Some of these lessons are superficial, such as the historical lessons present in some novels and plays, and the life lessons available in parables and proverbs. Others are much more deep. Works of art also teach us about ourselves: giving us new eyes with which to see ourselves and encouraging us to look. To that end, works of art draw our attention to our own humanity.

These lessons in introspection are perhaps the most profound that we learn from art, because they are lessons in humanity. Observing a work of art, we become entranced by the lives and concerns of other people, be they the characters in story, the subject of a portrait, or the mind of a composer. This amounts to an exercise in empathy, practice putting myself in someone else's position. It also teaches me to look at myself from outside, to wonder how I would behave if I were in that story or how I would look to an artist painting my portrait. Observing a work of art, then, is complex: we witness the *becoming* of the work itself and simultaneously we ourselves engage in a process of *becoming*. Observing a work of art is also fully engrossing: we are so busy witnessing the *becoming* of the work and *becoming* ourselves that we tend to see the work itself as spontaneously emerging right before us. This is a reaction that, according to Nietzsche, artists seek to bring about in their audience, and they do so because the spontaneity that we feel in their works facilitates our *becoming*.

Sensing the chaos, the "blind groping of disorder" that has occasioned the work's creation maximizes our twofold *becoming*. Works that are seeped in chaos make us feel spontaneity in the work not only the first time we encounter it, but every time. Beethoven's blind groping is somehow present every time those familiar four notes are played. The presence of chaos in works of art also makes the act of observing (or in the case of literature, reading) into a creative act. The spectators of such works, like their artists, have to face chaos, have to engage in the difficult task of interpreting the work as they participate in its *becoming*.

This is true of Nietzsche's own writing, which is appropriate given that he considered philosophy to be a form of art. Nietzsche's embrace of chaos is evident in his form. Though he addresses philosophical concerns, he produced very little work that looks and feels like philosophy. Rather than long treatises with carefully enumerated arguments, Nietzsche gives us fragments and aphorisms and fables. And his language, rather than being precise and scientific, is, above all, artful. This has led to what some philosophers call the "Nietzsche Wars."

Numerous books and articles on Nietzsche are published every year, many of which contradict one another on very basic elements of Nietzsche's philosophy. This is the case because Nietzsche does not espouse unified theories that fit neatly together. Instead, he attempts to shake us to the core by suggesting that such consistency and systematizing does not simplify and clarify as it seems to, but rather misrepresents and falsifies. Human life, according to Nietzsche, is too complex and chaotic for such limited ways of thinking. So instead of presenting well-ordered, passive arguments, Nietzsche confronts his reader with exuberant bursts of thought, not to persuade, but to portray his own thoughts and to inspire others to "try them on," if only briefly. In that sense, Nietzsche injected his writing with the chaos that attended its creation by rejecting the impulse to provide artificial order to his thinking, instead presenting seemingly raw fragments as a spur to get his readers thinking. In this way, Nietzsche's writings are works of art like those that he discusses in the passage above. They are written in a style that deliberately embraces chaos and focuses his readers on *becoming*.

Similarly, Vonnegut invites his readers' attention to *becoming*. Like Nietzsche, Vonnegut embraces the chaos of human life and portrays it to his readers. This is perhaps most evident in their form, which is, in Vonnegut's words, "jumbled and jangled." Most don't follow a linear timeline and many contain digressions, brief journeys into territory that seems unrelated to the main theme of the work, but that often prove quite insightful.

One example of such a digression occurs in Vonnegut's 1973 novel *Breakfast of Champions*. Vonnegut has his alter ego, Kilgore Trout, walk through a creek that has been polluted with plastic. As he walks, his bare feet become increasingly coated in the plastic, which dries and adheres each time he takes a step. In the midst of this story, Vonnegut, true to his classic form, diverts his attention to a graphical representation of the plastic molecule and the professor who taught him to draw it. These molecules are evidently made up of long chains of repeating sequences, so the edges of such a diagram are marked with the Latin abbreviation, "etc," in vulgar English, "and so on." This diversion, as all of Vonnegut's diversions, is a way portraying the chaotic nature of our experience of everyday life.

But Vonnegut goes on, diverting, as it were, the diversion in order to talk about his own strategies as a writer.

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, should be that same abbreviation ["etc."]. . . And it is in order to acknowledge the continuity of this polymer that I begin so many sentences with "And" and "So" and end so many paragraphs with "...and so on." (228)

Life, in other words, continues in its chaotic complexity. Any attempt to end a story neatly would be artificial, a misrepresentation of life as we know it. Think of how abrupt the "The

End” tacked on to the end of the fairy tale sounds once we’ve grown up a little. Perhaps “etc.” is the best we can do. Similarly, the “Once upon a time” at the beginning of the fairy tale is equally false. Why not begin with “And” or “So”?

Vonnegut writes this way in order to portray life more accurately, more like that day-to-day life that each of us experiences. In *Breakfast of Champions*, Vonnegut writes that traditional linear narratives misrepresent life, and do so quite badly. Their worst mistake is making us believe that our real lives will follow the patterns evident in stories, that our lives will be orderly rather than chaotic. Vonnegut believes that this coercive misrepresentation gives birth to very dangerous ideas, especially the idea that like stories, lives have main characters who are important and bit players who are not.

Why were so many Americans treated by their government as though their lives were as disposable as paper facial tissues? Because that was the way authors customarily treated bit-part players in their made-up tales.

And so on.

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 others bring order to chaos. I would bring chaos to order, instead, which I think I have done. (*BOC* 210)

What is left out of traditional narratives—those that have a protagonist who is, for all intents and purposes, more important than the other characters, those that follow a typical plot structure with a beginning, a middle, and an end—is the chaos in which we live. The other people that I encounter are not bit-part players, they are just as human, just as valuable, just as capable of *becoming* as I am. Lives don’t have logical plots in which one action follows from what has happened before and in which all loose ends are neatly secured in a pathetic epilogue. What is missing when writers leave out the chaos is the *becoming*, the chance that someone, in spite of the difficulties, will seize the chaos and make something of him or herself.

The above passage can be seen as a key that can help us to understand Vonnegut’s works. Rather than misrepresenting life as a series of orderly, interconnected events in the life of one main character, Vonnegut seeks to shake us out of our habits of seeing ourselves as the main character in a traditional narrative and seeing other people as the bit-part players. These habits, according to Vonnegut, are inspired and encouraged by the misrepresentative stories we tell, and they have disastrous consequences. Rather than striving for *becoming*, for true creativity, many

of us expect our lives to follow the patterns that we see in stories. But Vonnegut is suspicious of these attempts to order the chaotic world in which we live, and so approaches an orderly form (the novel), by embracing chaos, by portraying *becoming*.

In doing so, Vonnegut hopes to subvert our habitual ways of thinking. He thinks that if we change the way we tell stories, we can change the way that people live. This is similar to Nietzsche's aims, since he, too, wants to confront a habitual way of thinking (systematizing) by presenting his readers with something different, something that encourages us to expect chaos rather than order. By portraying chaos rather than succumbing to the urge to give it an artificial order, both Vonnegut and Nietzsche encourage us to see ourselves as engaged in the process of *becoming* and to embrace that process rather than subverting it. Attempts at systematizing and structuring human experience are essentially attempts to escape its inevitable chaos. And since they reject the fundamental conditions of human life, they amount to a denial of it. As we'll see below, Vonnegut and Nietzsche are suspicious of such denials and escapism because they embrace the difficult idea of *affirmation*.

On Affirmation: Nietzsche and Music

“Without music, life would be an error.
The German imagines even God singing
songs.”

-Friedrich Nietzsche (*Twilight of the Idols*)

“The only proof he ever needed of the
existence of God was music.”

-Kurt Vonnegut (proposing his epitaph)

As a young man, Nietzsche was taken with the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer, the famously pessimistic philosopher. Schopenhauer's writings are brimming with discussions of pain and suffering, which he saw as rampant and inescapable qualities of human life. Schopenhauer even goes so far as to say that, observed objectively, humans appear to be designed for the purpose of suffering, given that they do it so often and so effectively. Further, Schopenhauer believed that we can't address the source of suffering, so the best we can do is find some way to escape the suffering incumbent on being alive.

Music, for Schopenhauer, is one way to escape. He saw music as superior to other forms of art, because it has the capacity to engage us, to sweep us away into the bliss of forgetting our worries and our pain, ultimately forgetting ourselves. In doing so, music allows human sufferers some measure of relief in the form of distraction. Since philosophers had traditionally valued the visual over the performing arts, this was something of a shift in thinking, and Schopenhauer was

quite popular among musicians, particularly Richard Wagner, because of it. Ultimately, though, Schopenhauer prized music as merely a kind of painkiller: it is something that can allow us, for as long as the music lasts, to escape the inevitable suffering of being alive.

To the youthful Nietzsche, Schopenhauer's philosophy was very attractive, and it was largely over shared interest the philosophy of Schopenhauer that Nietzsche and Wagner forged their famous and tumultuous friendship. Music was, for Nietzsche, a lifelong obsession, and like the famous composers of his day, he, too, was drawn to Schopenhauer's appraisal of music's power. The influence of Schopenhauer's pessimism is evident in Nietzsche's early work, but Nietzsche later goes out of his way to criticize Schopenhauer and to distance himself from his own early works. It was as Nietzsche matured, that he began to see Schopenhauer in a different light, ultimately repudiating both Schopenhauer and another former hero, Wagner.

The actual extent of Nietzsche's break with Schopenhauer is subject to debate. To take Nietzsche's word for it, the break is decisive and complete, but certain similarities remain. Nietzsche by no means meets Schopenhauer's gloomy pessimism with sunny optimism. In fact, in his book *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche holds firm to Schopenhauer's general ideas that, one, life involves a certain amount of suffering, and, two, that music, art, and even philosophy (which he considered to be an art), have a salutary effect. Nietzsche writes, "Every art, every philosophy may be viewed as a remedy and an aid in the service of growing and struggling life; they always presuppose suffering and sufferers," (§370).

Like Schopenhauer, Nietzsche believes that the arts provide relief from suffering, and he even sees that function as one justification for the arts. On its surface, this is not all that different from Schopenhauer's view, but Nietzsche diverts sharply from Schopenhauer in accounting for the nature of the relief art provides. Nietzsche speaks of art as an aid to "growing and struggling life." Schopenhauer would indeed see life as involving struggle, but he saw life as something to be minimized, not grown. With that simple word, *growing* life, it is clear that Nietzsche has a very different view of the arts. Schopenhauer is correct that music can lull listeners into a trance, but, for Nietzsche, it is capable of much more. Schopenhauer values music for its capacity to minimize: captivated by a piece of music, we might briefly forget our suffering by forgetting ourselves. Nietzsche sees this approach as fundamentally flawed.

What Nietzsche finds most objectionable in Schopenhauer's conception of music is that it is ultimately a denial of life. In one of his most famous and revered passages, Nietzsche confronts his readers with a fable. He asks us to imagine that, in our loneliest loneliness, we are visited by a demon that tells us that we must live our life over and over again, exactly the same way in even the smallest detail, eternally. "Everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence—even this spider and this moonlight between the trees." Nietzsche seems to expect that, confronted with this demon, we

would be inclined to gnash our teeth and curse the monster that had suggested such a thing, but he envisions a better answer. He wants us to praise the demon, to say to it, “You are a god, and never have I heard anything more godly.” Nietzsche wants us to express gratitude at the possibility that the demon speaks of, affirming our lives by being overjoyed at the possibility of repeating them eternally, word for word and deed for deed, and “to *crave nothing more fervently* than this ultimate confirmation and seal,” (*Gay Science* §341).

This passage is noteworthy because it exemplifies one of Nietzsche’s most difficult ideas, the eternal recurrence. Properly understood as a thought experiment, not metaphysics, the eternal recurrence is a test of one’s affirmation. Confronted by the demon, would you be upset, wanting to change some of the details of your life? Or would you, as Nietzsche clearly prefers, accept and affirm your life exactly as it has been? *Affirmation* is central to Nietzsche’s philosophy, and, more than any other single idea, it is the thread that is present throughout his works. As the basis for his famous disagreement with Schopenhauer and Wagner, it is central to his development as a philosopher.

While Schopenhauer values music for its capacity to minimize—especially our suffering, by way of minimizing our awareness and ultimately our lives, Nietzsche values music for its capacity to maximize—especially our lives by way of maximizing our appetite for *becoming*, and encouraging *affirmation*. More than other forms of art, music draws our attention to *becoming*. Given that tones in and of themselves have no explicit meaning, the meaning of a piece of music derives from its development, its *becoming*. In that sense, all music, by its very nature, is about *becoming*. As such, music also teaches us to *affirm*. *Becoming* is ultimately the process of development, changing from one state into another. The former couldn’t exist without the latter, since both are stages in the process of development. To that end, truly embracing *becoming* requires *affirming* every last detail as Nietzsche encourages us to do. Just as music draws our attention to *becoming*, it also draws our attention to *affirmation*, because the work itself depends on *affirmation*. In no form of art is it clearer that what comes next depends on what come before, and music shows us that, though there may be moments of discord or suffering, they lead to and amplify the moments of greatest joy.

It is through music, then, that we are best able to learn of *becoming* and *affirmation*, which is why, for Nietzsche, life would be a mistake without music. Just as we notice and appreciate each moment of a piece of music, Nietzsche wants us to notice and cherish even the small details of our lives. Similarly, Kurt Vonnegut’s Uncle Alex encouraged him to notice it when he was happy.

And his principal complaint about other human beings was that they so seldom noticed it when they were happy. So when we were drinking lemonade under an apple tree in the summer, say, and talking lazily

about this and that, almost buzzing like honeybees, Uncle Alex would suddenly interrupt the agreeable blather to exclaim, ‘If this isn’t nice, I don’t know what is,’ (*A Man Without a Country* 132).

This obviously had a lasting impression on Vonnegut, who continued the practice and encouraged his children and grandchildren to do the same. And while noticing and affirming moments of happiness is not all that Nietzsche advocates—he wants us to affirm even the moments of deepest despair and suffering—it is a first step toward Nietzsche’s *affirmation*. If, as Uncle Alex suggests, we often don’t even notice when we are happy, it seems unlikely that we would ever truly affirm our lives.

Whereas music is especially adept at teaching *becoming* and *affirmation*, it is not the only source for these lessons. Other forms of art draw our attention to these ideas as well, and both Vonnegut and Nietzsche prize the arts in general for this capacity. Indeed, their own writings are creative works that teach *becoming* and *affirmation*, and that espouse the importance of art to humanity.

The Art of Living: How Art Makes Us Human

“What does your conscience say? “You should become who you are.”

-Friedrich Nietzsche (*The Gay Science*)

“What can become is the miracle you were born to be through the work that you do.”

-Kurt Vonnegut (*A Man Without a Country*)

In his 2005 essay collection *A Man Without A Country*, Kurt Vonnegut writes once again about an issue that is present in practically all of his works: technology and its effect on human beings.

Today we have contraptions like nuclear submarines armed with Poseidon missiles that have H-bombs in their warheads. And we have contraptions like computers that cheat you out of becoming. Bill Gates says, ‘Wait till you can see what your computer can become.’ But it’s you who should be doing the becoming, not the damn fool computer. What can become is the miracle you were born to be through the work that you do. (56)

This is familiar territory for Vonnegut whose work often juxtaposes the human and the machine, particularly the machines of war. Vonnegut is consistently wary of technology for several reasons. First, we can’t trust that its advances will not be harmful. While it does provide

advances that useful and harmless, such as light bulbs and refrigerators, it also gives birth inhumane devices, such as landmines and nuclear bombs.

But more importantly, technology cheats us out of *becoming*. Computers appear harmless and useful, but over-reliance on them, addiction to them, isolates us from other human beings. They offer convenience, but often at the cost of creativity. Receiving electronic mail, though expedient, will never be the same as receiving a hand-written letter. Chatting with friends online will never be the same as chatting with strangers in line at the post office. With the advent of computers, these simple human activities—each a chance for *becoming*—have become unnecessary, intrusive, burdensome.

In *A Man Without A Country*, Vonnegut uses an anecdote from his own life to illustrate human *becoming*. He reminisces about the old days “not long ago,” when he used to send his first drafts to a typist named Carol. When he had enough pages written, he would call Carol on the telephone. He would chat with her, ask her about her back, and ask if she’d seen any bluebirds lately. He would also ask if she was still typing, and, if she was, he’d mail his corrected pages off to Carol. But, in order to do so, he needed an envelope. On his way out of the house, his wife says, “You are not a poor man. Why don’t you buy a thousand envelopes? They’ll deliver them and you can put them in a closet.” His response? “Hush.”

So he goes to the newsstand in his neighborhood and he marvels that the person who made the envelope must have known exactly what size paper he had used. And he gets in line behind people who are buying lottery tickets, so he chats with them. “Do you know anybody who ever won anything in the lottery?” “What happened to your foot?”

He follows a similar routine at the Post Office, where he is secretly in love with the woman behind the counter. She checks that he has the correct number of stamps, he works hard not to reveal his secret crush. He mentions that he had his pocket picked there once, and so got to tell a policeman about that. Finally, the envelope is stamped and addressed and on its way to Carol.

And I go home. And I have had one hell of a good time. Electronic communities build nothing. You wind up with nothing. We are dancing animals. How beautiful it is to get up and go out and do something. We are here on Earth to fart around. Don’t let anybody tell you any different. (61-62)

“Farting around” may well be another way of saying *becoming*, for it is in these simple moments of human contact, when we express our creativity by forgoing convenience and chatting with strangers, that we truly embrace chaos and the process of *becoming*.

Whereas technology inhibits our *becoming*, both Vonnegut and Nietzsche see art as an aid to it. Nietzsche believes that we owe, in his words, a “debt of gratitude” to art, that it is art

that can best teach us to embrace *becoming* and *affirmation*. Vonnegut illustrates the power of art as teacher in the moment that he calls the “spiritual climax” of his novel *Breakfast of Champions*.

Vonnegut himself is a character in *Breakfast of Champions*. He is present, and not just in the form of direct address. Kurt Vonnegut, the author of *Breakfast of Champions* and creator of all of its characters, arrives in its universe, and is present in the cocktail lounge at the time of the “spiritual climax.” And he is not merely present, but creative, controlling everything that happens around him at that moment. “I was on a par with the Creator of the Universe there in the dark in the cocktail lounge” (200).

Even so, chaos enters the equation. Vonnegut overhears an exchange between two of his creations, between Bonnie MacMahon, a saccharine, middle-aged Midwestern cocktail waitress, and Rabo Karabekian, a prickly, pretentious abstract artist visiting the Midland City for the opening of an arts center that has purchased one of his paintings. Vonnegut doesn’t care much for Karabekian or his abstract art, but, even so, Karabekian is the impetus for the epiphany that represents the “spiritual climax” of the book. Bonnie MacMahon tells Karabekian about Mary Alice Miller, a local teenager famous for winning an Olympic Gold Medal in the 200-meter breaststroke. MacMahon explains to Karabekian that Mary Alice’s father had taught her “to swim when she was eight years old and that he had made her swim at least four hours a day, every day, since she was three.”

And now comes the spiritual climax of this book, for it is at this point that I, the author, am suddenly transfixed by what I have done so far.

This is why I had gone to Midland City: to be born again. And Chaos announced that it was about to give birth to a new me by putting these words in the mouth of Rabo Karabekian: ‘What kind of man would turn his daughter into an outboard motor?’ (218)

This remark occasions an epiphany for Vonnegut, who, “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,” (219). This attitude is evident throughout *Breakfast of Champions* up to this point. Vonnegut speaks of successful people as machines in good repair and of dysfunctional people as broken machines, but this attitude is broken by one simple question, occasioned by Chaos. It is not Vonnegut himself, creator of the universe of the novel, who devises the remark, but it appears in the mouth of Rabo Karabekian and it changes Vonnegut deeply. In this powerful moment, he rejects his previous metaphor of people-as-machines, and recognizes the sacredness of human awareness.

It is an epiphany doubly inspired by art. First, the artist Rabo Karabekian, whose art portrays the sacredness of human awareness with “unwavering bands of light,” has presumably

learned to embrace the notion of *becoming* and portrays it in his own abstract art. Karabekian, in turn, inspires an epiphany, which Vonnegut describes as an “earthquake.” Vonnegut comes to love Karabekian and his art, both of which had previously disgusted him, and he internalizes the message of Karabekian’s art. Second, Vonnegut created Karabekian and the chaos surrounding that creation caused Karabekian to ask his question. From that creative disorder, Vonnegut inspired in himself an earth-shattering epiphany. Even artists have something to learn from their own work.

We are all ripe for this sort of epiphany. The illusion that other people are less important than me—that people, myself included, are cold machines following their orderly protocol—is a seductive one. We, like the pre-earthquake Vonnegut, are prone to succumb to this way of thinking, and that is why we need art.

Vonnegut and Nietzsche, two atheists, invoke God when talking about music (see the epigraph to the previous section). In doing so, they are telling us that music—and all forms of art—occupy God’s place. In Vonnegut’s *Breakfast of Champions* epiphany, he remembers that human beings—especially their awareness—are sacred. Nietzsche, in calling life without music an error, sees music (read: art) as the justification for existence. These functions—sanctifying and justifying life—that other thinkers reserve for God alone, Vonnegut and Nietzsche ascribe to art.

They do so because art teaches us to be fully human. In art we encounter chaos: art is born in creativity, and creativity chaos. Creating art, we encounter chaos directly; observing art, we encounter the chaos that the artist has allowed to seep into the work. Out of this chaos, a work of art emerges, and in witnessing or creating the work, we participate in its *becoming*, which shows us that we, too, can *become*. And since *becoming* is a process in which each step depends on the one before it, every stage in the process is integral to the outcome. As such, each step deserves to be embraced, to be *affirmed*. Through art, we learn to relish our personal development, to participate in the process of flourishing, and we learn to embrace and affirm every step along the way. The art we view, the art we make, the art we love, and even the art we hate all are crucial to our development, and they justify and sanctify our existence.

Recognizing, in Nietzsche’s words, “the debt of gratitude” that we owe to art, I now see my life as a work of art. I perceive myself as one human being among many others with full, developing lives. I look at myself carefully, observing all of the facets of myself. I am aware that, in spite of the various attempts to order the experience of being alive, it is ultimately, like a work of art, born and raised in chaos. Inhabiting this chaos and affirming it, rather than attempting to escape or deny it, I become the creator of my life. I come to see my life as a work of art, of which I am the artist.

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