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Vonnegut on the Art of Writing

In Kurt Vonnegut's eleventh novel, *Galápagos*, Leon Trout, son of ubiquitous science fiction writer Kilgore Trout, repeatedly asserts that human beings' big brains are responsible for most of the tragedy in the world. Thus, he insists that the de-evolution of human beings to small-brained seal-like creatures—which is depicted as occurring over the course of a million years in the novel—is a good thing, an improvement in human character. Yet, at the same time, the novel offers moments that suggest the loss of our big brains might be a tragedy rather than the triumph Leon Trout claims it is. One of the novel's most touching moments occurs when biology teacher Mary Hepburn's husband, Roy, is on his deathbed. A few seconds after Roy seems to have expired, his lips move again, and he whispers his final words to Mary:

“I'll tell you what the human soul is, Mary,” he whispered, his eyes closed. “Animals don't have one. It's the part of you that knows when your brain isn't working right. I always knew, Mary. There wasn't anything I could do about it, but I always knew.” (45)

Roy asserts here that human beings' self-consciousness is what sets people apart from the animals, what gives us a soul and makes us fully human. Vonnegut takes this dictum to heart in his own writing. Throughout his body of work, he remains self-consciously aware of his own position as a writer, frequently using metafictional techniques in his novels to comment on the nature of storytelling and narrative at the same time that he tells stories, and frequently discussing the art of the writer in his many essays and speeches.

This paper proposes to examine Vonnegut's commentary on the literary arts in both his fiction and non-fiction. I'm particularly interested in the contradictions and paradoxes that mark Vonnegut's view of narrative. Vonnegut is a writer who professes his love of literary symbols, but who pokes fun at symbol-hunting critics. He charts out what he believes are the few simple plots available to any artist, yet at the same time he insists on the danger of conventional narrative plots and vows to "shun storytelling" and instead "write about life" (215). He deglamorizes the role of the writer, yet he also asserts that reading and writing are "sacred" activities that can "create a spiritual condition of priceless depth and meaning" (*Fates Worse than Death* 188). While these contradictions can be difficult to sort out, I will argue that, while he shares a great deal in common with other postmodern writers who simultaneously serve as both writer and critic of their own work, Vonnegut

differs from most postmodernists in that he uses metafictional commentary largely to re-establish an old-fashioned humanism rather than to undermine it.

A biochemistry major during his years at Cornell, Vonnegut was always somewhat self-conscious about the fact that he did not take creative writing courses in college or major in literature. It wasn't until he began teaching at the Iowa Writers' Workshop in the mid-60's that he really felt he had found a community of fellow writers, despite his suspicions, voiced in an essay called "Teaching the Unteachable," published in the *New York Times Book Review* in 1973, that "You can't teach people to write well," that writing well "is something God lets you do or declines to let you do" (*Wampeters* 25). Wary of programs that exalt creative writing courses and skeptical of viewing the writer as a person of exceptional genius, Vonnegut insists repeatedly that writing is a "trade," much like building a house or repairing an automobile. Writers, he points out in interviews appearing in the *Paris Review* and in *Playboy*, have only average IQs; they are "mediocre people" who are patient and industrious enough to revise their stupidity, to edit themselves into something like intelligence. "If a person with a demonstrably ordinary mind, like mine," he explains, "will devote himself to giving birth to a work of the imagination, that work will in turn tempt and tease that ordinary mind into cleverness" (*Wampeters* xxv).

Coupled with his uneasiness about the feasibility of teaching creative writing in an academic setting is a suspicion about the project of literary criticism in general. In several essays, Vonnegut speaks of how vindictive and personally damaging he found certain reviews of his work, particularly of his novel *Slapstick*. The reviewers, he writes, not only thought the novel was “lousy,” but went so far as to claim the novel served as proof that all of Vonnegut’s previous work was no good either. Indeed, Vonnegut goes so far as to mock the very project of literary criticism at times in his work. When he announces in the preface to *Deadeye Dick*, for instance, that he will now “explain the main symbols in this book” (xii), and makes such statements as, “Haiti is New York City,” and “The neutered pharmacist who tells the tale is my declining sexuality” (xiii), his metafictional musings seem all too facile. While partly serious here, Vonnegut is also poking fun at what he sees as the dangerously reductive side of literary criticism.

Yet, elsewhere in his work, Vonnegut proclaims his admiration for literary symbols, for the symbolic nature of art and literature. At the end of *Player Piano*, for instance, Paul Proteus studies the revolutionary provocateur Reverend James J. Lasher carefully, realizing that the ex-minister is “a lifelong trafficker in symbols” (320). Further, Paul recognizes that Lasher “had created the revolution as a symbol, and was now welcoming the opportunity to die as one” (320). But rather than condemning Lasher for leading the people of Ilium into a revolution doomed

to failure, Paul realizes the importance of symbolic action—he understands the failed revolution as a work of art. Art, for Vonnegut, not only makes meaning through symbols, but it is also something that makes humans particularly human. The “player piano” of the novel’s title suggests an attempt to mechanize art, but such mechanization drains the music of its meaning and beauty. Vonnegut ends his third novel, *Cat’s Cradle*, by acknowledging the human desire to act symbolically as well. After the ice-nine disaster has turned the world into a frozen wasteland, John, the novel’s narrator, confides to Newt Hoenikker his “dream of climbing Mount McCabe with some magnificent symbol and planting it there” (285). It’s the fraudulent prophet Bokonon who finally supplies John with the appropriate symbol he has been seeking. If he were a younger man, Bokonon writes on the slip of paper he hands the narrator at the end of the novel, he’d lie down at the top of the mountain and make a statue of himself with the ice-nine, all the while “grinning horribly” and thumbing his nose at “You Know Who” (287).

But perhaps the novel in which Vonnegut most fully articulates his love of art and symbolic representation is *Breakfast of Champions*. When he enters the cocktail lounge of the Midland City Holiday Inn, as a character in his own story, Vonnegut tells us, “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” (225). Having given in to the “temptation” he

describes in the book's preface, that of viewing human beings in a mechanistic way, and thus accepting a deterministic outlook on human existence, the last thing Vonnegut expects is to be rescued by one of his own characters. He especially does not expect to be saved by artist Rabo Karabekian, who was, in Vonnegut's opinion, "a vain and weak and trashy man, no artist at all" (225). Yet, in a moving testament to the power of the human imagination, in what Vonnegut himself calls the "spiritual climax of this book" (224), the author's own creation surprises him by standing up and defending the symbolic beauty of his abstract painting, *The Temptation of St. Anthony*. With his words, Karabekian restores Vonnegut's faith in the sacred nature of human beings, countering his earlier suggestion that people are simply rubbery test tubes filled with seething chemical reactions. In this book, Vonnegut writes, "symbols can beautiful" (206), and he concludes the novel with himself playing the role of God to his own creation, Kilgore Trout, but offering the befuddled science fiction writer a symbolic apple rather than forbidding one.

In his published speeches and essays, Vonnegut also betrays a profound ambivalence about his relationship to postmodern or anti-realistic art. He insists, in an essay about literary style, written in 1980, that a writer's major responsibilities are to write clearly and to care deeply about one's subject matter. He says that he has always tried to be a "good citizen," suggesting that his writing specifically addresses social ills and attempts to change the world. In what seems

to be a dig at postmodern writers, he advises aspiring writers that it is this “genuine caring” and not “games with language” which will be the most “compelling and seductive element” of their style (*Palm Sunday* 69). While Vonnegut writes that he himself dreamed “of doing with words what Pablo Picasso did with paint or what any number of jazz idols did with music” (71), he acknowledges that he would have difficulty being understood by readers if he did so. Readers, he believes, have a difficult enough task decoding “thousands of little marks on paper” (71) without writers making their jobs even harder. Vonnegut, then, insists on clarity even though he points out, in the final chapter of *Palm Sunday*, that to literary critics and academics, “clarity looks a lot like laziness and ignorance and childishness and cheapness...Any idea which can be grasped immediately is for them, by definition, something they knew all the time” (291). Yet, at the same time, Vonnegut recognizes his own kinship with other postmodernists, justifying his own brand of anti-realistic storytelling. In an essay on painter Jackson Pollock, Vonnegut argues that abstract expressionism is a deeply moral artistic movement, an “appropriate reaction...to World War II, to the death camps and Hiroshima” (*Fates* 44). In the collection *Fates Worse than Death*, he admits having always felt a secret connection to the American experimental author Donald Barthelme, both sons of architects who “tried hard to make every architect’s dream come true, which is a dwelling such as no one has ever seen before, but which proves to be

eminently inhabitable” (*Fates* 55). Vonnegut’s metaphor of the house is interesting and can perhaps be seen as a way for readers to begin to reconcile some of his contradictory views on writing and art: Vonnegut wishes for the house he builds to be “eminently inhabitable”—he retains the clear, stripped-down prose of realism, the engagement with the real world and with social problems usually associated with realistic fiction, but these things appear in the midst of an “aggressively unconventional” (*Fates* 55) storytelling style that he shares with Barthelme and other postmodern writers.

As Vonnegut argues in *Breakfast of Champions*, the art which offers spiritual redemption, a new way of seeing the world, must be a new kind of art. While Rabo Karabekian’s minimal painting strips away the superfluities and distractions of everyday existence to show the sacred nature of human beings, Vonnegut’s novel strips away literary convention, also in an attempt to lend dignity and value to human existence. As in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, where traditional war narratives can glamorize violence and convince children to take up arms, Vonnegut in *Breakfast of Champions* criticizes conventional storytelling. As Vonnegut approaches his fiftieth birthday, he realizes that it was “innocent and natural” for people “to behave so abominably, and with such abominable results” (215). They’re simply “doing their best to live like people invented in story books,” he explains (215). Americans shoot each so often because shooting is a common

literary device, a way to end books. Americans are treated by their governments as unimportant because “that was the way authors customarily treated bit-part players in their made-up tales” (215). The new art Vonnegut visualizes refuses to fall into the trap of old-fashioned storytellers who make people believe life has leading characters, significant details, lessons to be learned, a beginning, a middle, and an end. He decides to “shun storytelling” and instead, “write about life” (215). All people in his books will be equally important, all facts will be equally weighty, nothing will be left out. Vonnegut’s theory of a new kind of storytelling explains the form of *Breakfast of Champions*, the inclusion of all the simple felt-tip pen drawings, the facts about men’s penis size, the perfect willingness to follow any digression that occurs to him. His book is chaotic because he believes human beings must adapt to the requirements of chaos; we do not live in an orderly world, and orderly literature is therefore a lie. Vonnegut is a writer for whom art matters, but he recognizes that in a messy, postmodern, fragmented world, art itself must be messy, postmodern, and fragmented as well.

The line between fact and fiction, between art and the real world, is always a tenuous one for Vonnegut. Readers may remember the moral he attaches to his third novel, *Mother Night*; “We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be” (v). In thinking about the role of writers, Vonnegut puts this dictum into more positive terms: By taking on the adventure of writing

fiction or producing art, by pretending to be clever, and by revising their work patiently, one may eventually grow into the artistic intelligence that was initially only a fiction. Vonnegut most fully lays out his view of art and writing in his address to the graduating class at Bennington College in 1970. In this piece, he urges the students he is addressing to cling to superstition and untruth if they want to make the world a better place: “If you want to become a friend of civilization,” he says, “then become an enemy of truth and a fanatic for harmless balderdash” (165). While it may seem surprising that a graduation speaker would recommend that students become enemies of truth, Vonnegut’s point here is that he wants the students to maintain their idealism in spite of the disheartening things going on in the world around them. The superstition he especially begs students to retain is the belief that “humanity is at the center of the universe, the fulfiller or the frustrator of the grandest dreams of God Almighty” (165). And the arts may be the best way to spread this superstition. The purpose of art, he adds, “is to use frauds in order to make human beings seem more wonderful than they really are” (166). By putting man at the center of the universe, “whether he belongs there or not” (167), the arts imagine a saner, kinder, more just world than the one we really live in. Despite his seeming uneasiness with postmodernism, Vonnegut, like other postmodern writers, believes in constructed selves and a constructed social order. Like other postmodernists, he elevates language and narrative, showing repeatedly in his

fiction that words and stories have the power to shape reality. Yet, paradoxically, Vonnegut uses these postmodern insights to re-establish a humanism that places people at the center of the universe. And Vonnegut believes that by imagining such a world, by pretending that such a world exists, humans may actually be able to create it. He closes his preface to the collection *Wampeters, Foma, and Granfalloon* by arguing that the only way Americans “can rise above their ordinariness, can mature sufficiently to rescue themselves and to help rescue their planet, is through enthusiastic intimacy with works of their own imagination” (xxv). While art itself may be *foma*, harmless untruths we tell to comfort ourselves, nevertheless Vonnegut believes in the power of these untruths to change the world. Although Vonnegut argues elsewhere that writers are “mediocre people” with only average IQs, in a speech given to the P.E.N. Writer’s Conference in Stockholm, Sweden, in 1973, he writes that he is persuaded writers are tremendously influential despite the fact that many political leaders, Americans especially, believe that fiction is “harmless,” just “so much hot air” (228). The good result of this belief is that Western governments allow writers unprecedented freedom to write what they want. Writers have power, Vonnegut believes, because they give people, especially young people, myths to live by. And eventually, in Vonnegut’s view, these myths can take on the status of truth.