

## Vonnegut without Kurt: Reading and Teaching after April 11, 2007

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I want to begin with an apology. You are all, at least from what I can tell of those of you assembled today, and from what I do know about those that I have met before, incredibly nice, welcoming, and kind people. But what I have to think about may, given its mild polemic, sound as if I am chastising the Vonnegut community. To be sure, I am not. It's just that, like Vonnegut, I have been thinking a lot about time and reputation—and maybe have listened to the *Hamilton* soundtrack on enough repeats to become somewhat obsessed with these ideas. I acknowledge that I don't necessarily have the *ethos* to think as broadly as I do. But I do know that I worry about the Vonnegut's legacy in the academy and especially in English departments, and have just enough hubris to think that someone might be bothered to listen.

So, listen: Work on Vonnegut has long been sustained by the close relationships that the writer had with his critics, whether literal friendships or simply through an affinity of sensibility. In short, people (and I include myself among them) who like Vonnegut *love* Vonnegut. Certainly he is not the only beloved author to have died and left behind a robust body of work for us to worry over—and yet Vonnegut's special, near-crazed relationship with his readers marks his posthumous trajectory in the world of literary scholarship as different. (One does not, say, see refrigerator magnets of Henry James at Whole Foods.) And, surely this is due in part to Vonnegut's late-life embracing his status as cultural prophet and Internet celebrity as his missives and interviews were disseminated in ever smaller soundbites across the globe. Since Vonnegut's death nearly a decade ago, the intensity of these personal critical relationships has only increased as the cottage industry of biographical or historical-contextual work shows. This is to be expected: Vonnegut was, after all, a magnificently personal fabulist, obsessed with self-creation and the ways in which writing could play a part in that process. He wrote *for* himself, and *about* himself. And yet, it must be admitted, we will someday—perhaps all too soon, and for various reasons—reach a tipping point where Vonnegut becomes canonical in merely the pejorative sense: the old dead white man dutifully toted around by undergraduates as a relic of a former age, to have his pages turned as cultural context rather than as the stylistic innovator and generative literary thinker he was and remains. Or worse, he won't be read at all.

Academics love a good crisis—and while I have used a bit of the rhetoric of crisis here to (mis)characterize the current state of Vonnegut studies, I would rather refigure this moment as a point of opportunity. Now that he *is* history rather than one of its staunchest critics and an appropriate period of mourning has elapsed, what is to be done? In response, this presentation seeks to think through a central claim: Let us focus our attention more intently on Vonnegut’s work by consciously removing the author as a personality from our discussion. To be sure, this is a difficult project, but not an unimaginable one. To that end, I suggest three avenues for changing and sustaining Vonnegut scholarship as the distance between scholar and author increases: deep archival work, textual scholarship, and placing particular limits on our teaching of his works. The point here is not to ignore Vonnegut the man—to overindulge the death of the author, as it were—but to find ways to make his work legible and compelling to those students and colleagues alike who haven’t (yet) been touched by his particular brand of humor, social critique, and ethical humanism, and thus secure him a vibrant spot among the authors that deserve our attention. These are suggestions, and only that; you likely have even better ideas. Whatever the end result, the insistence on making connections with our colleagues—or recruiting them to our cause, if you want to think of it that way—is what will keep Vonnegut alive and lively in the academy.

[Aside: Original pitch here was for five areas, but decided in the interest of time and spurring discussion to cut out the two furthest from something like biographical criticism—film and new formalism—I’ll stick to the two and a half that are the closest]

1. The departure-point for the kind of work I’m thinking about is, ironically, to double-down on the biographical, but in a strategic way. I recall that I am not the only one who, despite having high hopes, was not entirely satisfied with the Shields biography of 2011. But in the absence of any other biography it had to do. As if others were feeling this need, important and temporally strategic work has come out to nuance the portrait of Vonnegut as a culturally enmeshed and collaborative writer. Ginger Strand’s *Brothers Vonnegut* does precisely this, by exploring the burgeoning author’s attempts at publication through his relationships with the literary marketplace and GE. Set against the backdrop of brother Bernie’s fraternal patronage and cloud science, Strand expands our understanding of the mechanics of Vonnegut’s collaborative writing process—of first gleaning from the world, then studying the fiction marketplace, and of taking notes and advice from various editors. Vonnegut is too often

characterized as a singular genius—which he absolutely was—but he was also a writer who connected constantly with readers, students, editors, friends, and so on. We would do well to understand the complicity of others in Vonnegut’s work, from Ivan Chermayeff and Heinrich Böll or the PEN organization more broadly, to Lee Stringer and, for someone who has the courage, even try to wring something out of Jill Krementz.

Add to this the increased interest of late between the practice (or business) of creative writing and the American literary establishment, and we have a particularly rich vein to explore. Vonnegut is arguably one of the most important figures in the transition from self-teaching into the so-called “program era” that Mark McGurl explores in his study of MFA programs by that name. In that work, as well as Eric Bennett’s *Workshops of Empire*, Vonnegut receives passing mention, mostly for his colorful descriptions of people he encountered in the Iowa Writer’s Workshop. But it is nonetheless the case that Vonnegut was a man of two worlds, one of a very few writers who eked out livings “jobbing” in the modernist tradition, but became famous in the postmodern world that gave young writers instruction and professional credentials by attending university-run seminars. And, this is to say nothing of his life-long mentorship of some of the writers he collected as friends during his life. Instead of studies of the man, these would suggest something perhaps more old-fashioned: examinations of his influence.

2. Coupled with this deeper sort of biographical work, one can begin to imagine a textual scholarship of writerly development that is on par with, say, Henry James’s revisions for the New York Editions. While Vonnegut didn’t revise previously published works, he was nonetheless a furious and radical reviser in draft form with characters coming and going, whole sections thrown away or shelved for periods of time only to reappear in a subsequent draft. Gary McMahon’s *Centrifugal Force of Fate* holds out the tantalizing possibility of such an investigation over the course of his ultimately idiosyncratic commentary of Vonnegut’s entire life’s work. Much more powerfully, however, Gregory Sumner’s fantastic “Building the Monkey House,” included in the 2014 special edition of the 1968 short story collection *Welcome to the Monkey House*, serves as an exemplary model of textual scholarship for Vonnegut, as his commentary provides us a picture of a writer’s “dogged” approach to writing as real *labor*.

[The basher, a provocative thesis about modernism-*cum*-postmodernism]

Given the accessibility of the Vonnegut papers at IU’s Lilly Library, we would be remiss not to take advantage of the dividends to be paid out in that venerable institution. Pushing the

James connection a little further, this interrogation of the manuscripts could show us something approaching the totality of Vonnegut's house of fiction, itself richly imbricated with the long arc of turmoil in the so-called American Century [Sumner—a diary]. But put simply, tracing textual development is a sign of canonical import, an essential part of the body of scholarship attending writers as diverse as James, Walt Whitman, the great mass of modernists high and low, Richard Wright, and even now George Lucas and Kanye. If we are to believe those who see one of the futures of English studies to be the “archival turn,” then there is no reason for we Vonnegutians to ignore its possibilities.

3. The third suggestion I offer was, in a former iteration of this talk, called simply “Stop teaching *Slaughterhouse-Five*.” This overstates the case by a considerable amount, and is something I would never actually recommend in a literal sense, but nonetheless points to a central problem in reading and teaching Vonnegut, in that so much of his reputation leans on this one novel. This is for good reasons that we all know: it had the greatest cultural impact, it aligns with meaningful antiwar sentiments despite that it is about a war that in an abstract sense we can all get behind, and it has that ineffable quality pedagogues look for, namely that it teaches well. At the same time, and I readily admit this suggestion comes from someone whose favorite Vonnegut novel is *Bluebeard*, there is a good deal more to the Vonnegut corpus than this one novel—as we have seen and will see even today. Vonnegut's reputation suffers because of a singular overfamiliarity by scholars and students outside our fold. Even beyond *Slaughterhouse-Five*'s overdetermination of the author's literary reputation, I would submit that there are practical problems to the way that many use the novel to “teach” World War II or the 1960s in the ways that I have seen it used in English, history, and broad-based humanities courses (something I have been guilty of myself, and would be happy to say more about later). Any of the author's works could teach well in the right context, and none have the problem that *Moby Dick* or *Underworld* has in that it is short enough to fit into any class. More to the point, Vonnegut's works are all deceptively simple seeming, and each could contribute to combatting *Slaughterhouse-Five*'s AP-reading-list inertia so many students bring to college—not to mention the hipsters in your class will love an unknown book by a well-known author.

These suggestions could go on and on. Ultimately, I hope that I'm preaching to the converted, and suspect that many of you are already planning projects that push in these directions or will handily outdo them, are already working out the future of Vonnegut's place in

whatever may be left of something that used to be called “the canon.” Indeed, the work that is being done at this very conference suggests the trajectories of people who are trekking off to chart new territories, so I do not worry about us. The greater project is to consider the ways in which we can continue to make Vonnegut legible to the larger academic world. His vitality does not rest solely on our own ardent fervor, but instead on the ways in which we can continually reaffirm, remake, and reassess his place as a literary stylist for those who do not immediately recognize his talents or have been mowed over by wrong assumptions.

Let me conclude then with a telling anecdote to remind us of the centrality of his texts to our study. I first read Vonnegut when I was thirteen. I had found a pile of books in my grandmother’s house looking for something to read and his cover, for whatever reason, stood out. His name had a strange feel in my mouth, like *Faulkner*, who I was also quietly discovering at the time, and I knew I had heard it before. I had a vague sense that both authors were somehow “important,” whatever that might have meant to me at that age, but because they hadn’t been foisted off on me in a classroom—and wouldn’t be for a few more years—I didn’t have any context. I didn’t even know at the time that Vonnegut was from Indiana, a strangely shameful thing given that I’m a native Hoosier. (This should also, I might mention, say something about Vonnegut’s reputation—though we all know the author himself was fond of talking about his vexed relationship with that state.)

But whatever. I tucked the book into my army-surplus backpack that I had gotten for my new life as a high school student and read the book in odd hours during the first couple of days of classes that fall. I was entranced. I didn’t quite understand whether the person talking to me in the “I” that started the novel was the author or a character, or, really, that there could actually be a distinction. I loved the short sections that meant I could sneak bites of text in small moments. I didn’t understand most of what was going on—in some cases, the subtext; in other cases just the text. But I intuited that this was important work, taken up in this voice that tried to undercut the seriousness with humor, which in turn only drew attention to how serious it was. I loved it, finished it within the first week, and sought out more.

That novel was, of course...*Hocus Pocus*. I mention this not just because I have come to know that this is a strange path into Vonnegut’s work, but also because it points out just how compelling this work can be without the presence of the author. And by that I mean the presence of the author in an academic sense, as an apparatus that we append to works for our students and

peers to somehow explain or better appreciate the accomplishment of his writing. Of course he, unlike many fiction writers, asserts himself through his work, and this is something that needs accounting, but I might go so far as to suggest that knowledge of his life is neither a necessary nor sufficient requirement to enjoy, appreciate, and study these books, stories, plays, and essays. In fact, the questions about authorship, tone, form, pacing, plot, antiheroes, something I would later come to think of as hermeneutics, and so on—all of the things that I think of a central to the study of literature as such—I learned by reading Vonnegut without knowing a single thing about Kurt. This was in the days before Wikipedia, remember, and there was no entry in the V-volume of my World Book encyclopedia. Instead, he was on par with Dickens, Fitzgerald, Hurston, and Cather: all Writers with a capital W, who had these fascinating lives, but about whom I knew nothing.

I do not think we should attempt to get back to this state of nature. And yet, as we get further and further from his life, as with any historical phenomenon, it will be increasingly difficult to explain to students and scholars alike how much he meant to us except as and through his artifacts of literature. Biography, anecdote, and personal appreciation are the appropriate mode of response to get to know an author like Vonnegut, and doubly so after his loss. They are not, however, enough for the preservation and maintenance of literary reputation. Or, as the instructor of one of my first graduate seminars put it somewhat more bluntly, “Jerome Klinkowitz can put Vonnegut in the Norton, but it’s going to be up to your generation to see if he stays there.” I admit that for those of us who knew the man personally or who simply forged a deeply affective personal bond with his writerly character and his good works in the world, this attempt to attend more to the text may feel like a betrayal. I feel that too. I have sat in the Vonnegut Library staring at the walls of quotes, and been overcome by the very fact of Vonnegut’s life. But this textual presence is itself simultaneously evidence of the power of Vonnegut’s work that perseveres and deserves our attention.

Reading Vonnegut after April 11, 2007—and next year 2017 and later 2027 and so on—will require therefore the continual renewal of his lasting contribution to American letters by attending to his works as such. If you are here, then I imagine you’re with me. So let’s start recruiting—that way we still have the academically legible space to consider *whither* Vonnegut studies before we get to the point where we perhaps see it *wither*.