Critical Essays on Kurt Vonnegut

Robert Merrill

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Critical Essays on Kurt Vonnegut

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CRITICAL ESSAYS ON AMERICAN LITERATURE

This series seeks to anthologize the most important criticism on a wide variety of topics and writers in American literature. Our readers will find in various volumes not only a generous selection of reprinted articles and reviews but original essays, bibliographies, manuscript sections, and other materials brought to public attention for the first time. Critical Essays on Kurt Vonnegut contains the most comprehensive collection of criticism on this author yet assembled. The book presents both a sizable gathering of reviews of the major works and a broad selection of more modern scholarship, including essays on Vonnegut's early fiction, Slaughterhouse-Five, and later works. Among the reprinted essays are those by Tony Tanner, Terry Southern, Robert Scholes, Loree Rackstraw, John Updike, Charles B. Harris, and Kathryn Hume. In addition to Robert Merrill's important introduction, which surveys Vonnegut's career and the history of scholarship on his fiction, there are original essays commissioned specifically for publication in this volume by John L. Simons, David Cowart, and Charles Berryman. We are confident that this book will make a permanent and significant contribution to American literary study.

JAMES NAGEL, GENERAL EDITOR

Northeastern University

For Dotson

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INTRODUCTION

In 1973 Jerome Klinkowitz could confidently refer to Kurt Vonnegut as "the most talked-about American novelist since Ernest Hemingway." In 1980 he could reprint this opinion without qualification. One must wonder what Klinkowitz would say about Vonnegut's reputation today. The recent reception of Vonnegut's Bluebeard (1987) and Jane Vonnegut Yarmolinsky's Angels without Wings (1987) is somewhat discouraging for anyone who takes Vonnegut to be one of the major American novelists of the past forty years. Bluebeard received many good reviews, but one could make a long list of the major journals and magazines that chose not to review the book—among others, Newsweek, the Times Literary Supplement, the New York Review of Books, and the New Yorker. The review in the New York Times Book Review was almost embarrassingly brief.² Like the novel that preceded it, Galápagos (1985), Bluebeard sold enough copies to make the various best-seller lists but did not reach the top of these lists. And though there is little literary merit in Jane Yarmolinsky's account of how she and Kurt came to raise the three eldest children of Kurt's sister Alice, it is still surprising that a work of such obvious relevance to Vonnegut's biography inspired almost no critical interest.3 In sum, recent evidence suggests that people are neither talking about nor reading Kurt Vonnegut as much as they did in the years immediately following his first great popular and critical success with Slaughterhouse-Five (1969).

Of course, major American writers have rarely achieved great popular success within their lifetimes, so the oddity is perhaps that Vonnegut was talked about so much for so many years, not that his works no longer provoke Hemingwayesque discussion. Certainly it should not surprise us that Vonnegut's critical reputation is now unstable, for its earlier fluctuations are among the most pronounced in American literary history. Almost totally ignored for the first twenty years of his career, Vonnegut suddenly became, in the late 1960s, the sort of writer whose portrait graces the cover of *Harper's* and whose books are reviewed everywhere. In the 1970s and early 1980s Vonnegut's popularity translated into a vast critical industry that produced 265 critical studies, including eight books and two journal issues almost entirely

devoted to his works. If such massive evidence of critical interest has begun to abate, this may only mean that a lot of people have had their say about Vonnegut. In any case, the following account of Vonnegut's critical reputation will chart the curves of his fascinating career in order to characterize what has already been said and what perhaps still needs to be said about one postmodern American novelist who really matters.

The story of Vonnegut's critical reputation prior to 1969 is a very short story indeed. Vonnegut first began to write fiction in 1949 and published his first story in Collier's in 1950; subsequently he published forty-five stories through 1963, plus one additional story in 1968 and one in 1972.5 Yet there was no criticism on his short fiction until the early 1970s. And Vonnegut's first novel, Player Piano (1952), was his only book to be reviewed until God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater (1965). Vonnegut's strange publishing history is involved here, of course, for seven years elapsed between Vonnegut's first novel and his second. The Sirens of Titan (1959), and both The Sirens of Titan and Mother Night (1962) first appeared as paperback originals (as did Vonnegut's first collection of stories, Canary in a Cat House [1961]). Original paperback publication is a good way to reach a large audience, but the only critical reputation it secures is that of a hack (in Vonnegut's case, a sciencefiction hack). Though the reviews of Player Piano were friendlier than is often suggested,6 there is no denying that Vonnegut's serious reputation was almost nonexistent prior to the republication of his early novels in hardcover in 1966 and the redistribution of all his novels in new paperback editions in 1967. In 1961 Mark Hillegas discussed Player Piano as one of several recent examples of dystopian science fiction, and in 1963 the New York Times Book Review and the Spectator published the only reviews of Cat's Cradle (1963).7 The rest was silence.

Republication of Vonnegut's earlier works in 1966 generated the first serious reviews of his career. Historically speaking, the most important review was C. D. B. Bryan's "Kurt Vonnegut on Target" in the New Republic. Bryan's command of the facts was seriously flawed, as he claimed that Mother Night was published a few months ago, characterized Canary in a Cat House as a novel, and said that Player Piano preceded Cat's Cradle by nine years. But his very favorable review alluded to four of Vonnegut's novels, Player Piano, Mother Night, Cat's Cradle and God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater, each of which was praised as the work of a serious new writer. Never before had Vonnegut's early achievement received such conspicuous publicity. Moreover, Bryan's most severe reservation inspired the first serious academic study of Vonnegut's art the following year. Bryan characterized Vonnegut as a satirist who seems always to fall short of the great satiric models: "all the anger, the shame, the shock, the compassion, the irony, the control to produce great satire are there. . . . Why, then, does Vonnegut settle for such lovely, literate, amusing attacks upon such simple targets as scientists, engineers, computer technicians, religion, the American legion, artists, company picnics?"8

In 1967 Robert Scholes answered this question in his chapter "Fabulation and Satire" in *The Fabulators*. Here Scholes argues that the black humorists—Vonnegut among them—are in fact fabulators and not satirists. Black humor lacks "the rhetoric of moral certainty" that we expect from satire and seeks to make us "thoughtful" rather than to reform us. Its primary instrument is not invective but laughter. For Scholes, then, Vonnegut does not write great satire because his ends are not satiric. Instead, he writes a distinguished form of intellectual comedy. Scholes illustrates these generalizations by discussing *Cat's Cradle* and *Mother Night*, works that "exhibit an affection for the world and a desire to improve it—but not much hope for improvement." Scholes's essay is one of the most cogent ever published on Vonnegut. Scholes was the first scholar to point out the excellence of Vonnegut's craft, and the questions Scholes addressed remain crucial to all formal considerations of Vonnegut's art—is Vonnegut a satirist, and if not, what kind of fiction does he write?

Klinkowitz once remarked that except for Scholes's work no scholarly articles on Vonnegut appeared in American journals until 1971.10 This is true, but Tony Tanner's well-known chapter on Vonnegut in City of Words (1971) first appeared in Critical Quarterly in 1969, so Tanner should be recognized as the first critic to publish a comprehensive study of Vonnegut's novels from Player Piano to Slaughterhouse-Five. Tanner is the first of many critics to see Slaughterhouse-Five as the artistic climax to Vonnegut's early career, for Tanner's essay is essentially a thematic discussion of Vonnegut's first six novels as they build toward the "masterly" Slaughterhouse-Five. Tanner argues that man's peculiar status as "agent-victim" is Vonnegut's recurring subject, as Vonnegut sees man's dreams or illusions as not only resisting but also contributing to his own victimage. Tanner is especially good on Howard W. Campbell's embodiment of this schizophrenic condition in Mother Night. With Cat's Cradle and Slaughterhouse-Five, Tanner formulates the philosophical issues posed by these two books, especially their Bokononistic and Tralfamadorian responses to life. Though writing only a few months after the publication of Slaughterhouse-Five, Tanner deftly defines what is at issue in this novel and, somewhat less obviously, Vonnegut's earlier works. Tanner is perhaps a bit evasive about answering his own question as to whether Vonnegut, like his protagonist Billy Pilgrim, is a moral quietist; but no one has surpassed Tanner in demonstrating the urgency of this question. Inevitably dated and marked by a few minor errors of fact, this first extended discussion of Vonnegut's career remains one of the best.11

The Scholes and Tanner pieces were excellent first efforts to define Vonnegut's early achievement, but of course it was the publication of Slaughterhouse-Five that prompted widespread revaluation of his art. Among the many enthusiastic reviews of Slaughterhouse-Five, Scholes's assessment for the New York Times Book Review was probably the most important. ¹² Scholes's front-page review anticipated overviews of Vonnegut's career in a

number of major magazines and journals. In 1970, for example, Jack Richardson attacked Vonnegut in the New York Review of Books as "a soft, sentimental satirist . . . a compiler of easy-to-read truisms about society," while Leslie Fiedler praised Vonnegut in Esquire for being precisely such a sentimentalist. A year later, in the Saturday Review, Benjamin DeMott straddled these two positions by "praising" Vonnegut for an inartistic sentimentality that the young found immensely appealing. 13 These relatively early critiques initiated the popular view of Vonnegut as a sentimental champion of the young or what Fiedler called the new romanticism, a view that Vonnegut and his academic supporters have been challenging ever since; but these studies also pointed up Vonnegut's emergence as a major figure, one who deserves full-scale attack in the New York Review of Books. Another sign of Vonnegut's emerging reputation was the appearance of the first book chapter entirely devoted to his works, recognizing that Vonnegut seemed to stand out among his contemporaries as a representative figure. 14

By 1971 this view of Vonnegut as a serious artist was widely shared throughout the academy. In this year Summary published an entire issue on Vonnegut's life and works, Critique published four essays and the first substantial bibliography on Vonnegut, Charles Harris treated Vonnegut as one of four major American novelists of the absurd, and Mary Sue Schriber and L. J. Clancy published excellent scholarly articles on Vonnegut. 15 The essays in Summary are often brief and impressionistic, but the volume does include Scholes's "Chasing a Lone Eagle," a pioneering study of Vonnegut's journalism at Cornell; Seymour Lawrence's reflections on how Vonnegut became one of his writers in the late 1960s; and John Rauch's biography of the Vonneguts of Indianapolis, Indiana. (Rauch, an uncle of Vonnegut's, is not named as the author here, but Vonnegut identifies him in Palm Sunday [1981].) The essays in Critique are far more substantial as literary criticism. Max Schulz's "The Unconfirmed Thesis: Kurt Vonnegut, Black Humor, and Contemporary Art" extends Scholes's suggestion that Vonnegut is a black humorist who lacks the classical satirist's ethical certainty; indeed, Schulz ends up arguing that Vonnegut's major point is the absolute unverifiability of any moral or ethical position. Stanley Schatt complements Schulz's argument in "The World of Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.," a general essay that emphasizes Vonnegut's pragmatic, pluralistic response to a radically relativistic universe. Jerome Klinkowitz's "Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., and the Crimes of Our Time" is the first of Klinkowitz's many studies of Vonnegut. Klinkowitz disputes the tendency to identify Vonnegut with such black humorists as Terry Southern and offers as evidence an extended discussion of the themes and techniques of Mother Night and Cat's Cradle. Subsequently revised in 1973 for Klinkowitz's The Vonnegut Statement, this essay is still one of the shrewdest assessments of these early novels, especially Cat's Cradle, a book Klinkowitz understands as well as anyone who has written on Vonnegut. Finally, Leonard Leff provides the first essay-length reading of God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater. Leff highlights Vonnegut's somewhat didactic treatment of money as

power and defends Eliot Rosewater as an exemplary figure who must struggle against an inhumane, capitalistic status quo. The *Critique* essays and the formidable checklist provided by Schatt and Klinkowitz effectively introduced continuous rather than sporadic scholarly attention to Vonnegut.

Charles Harris's book chapter helped to focus this attention, for Harris offered the first decisive evaluation of Vonnegut's philosophical "progress" from *Player Piano* to *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Harris argues that Vonnegut tends to distinguish between two kinds of human illusions. Bad illusions are those that make life more miserable than it should be: nationalism, materialistic notions about success, racial prejudice. Vonnegut's early novels attack such illusions. Good illusions are those that help prevent despair: Bokononism, Tralfamadorianism. A later novel such as *Slaughterhouse-Five* offers "almost total resignation" as the proper response to a universe that is absurd in Camus's sense of the term. Harris's very clear presentation initiates the ongoing debate as to where Vonnegut stands vis-à-vis the deterministic philosophies presented in all his novels, but especially in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Together with the essays in *Critique* and the fine essays by Schriber and Clancy, Harris's chapter helped make 1971 the true beginning of serious Vonnegut criticism.

The surge of interest in Vonnegut following the publication of Slaughterhouse-Five reached its first climax in 1972, the year in which the first booklength critical studies appeared. The signs of critical interest were many and various, including the reminiscences of colleagues, critical notes and articles, and Raymond Olderman's important chapter on Vonnegut in Beyond the Waste Land, a book that rivals Tanner's City of Words as the best treatment of American fiction of the 1960s. 16 But the major publications were the books by David Goldsmith and Peter Reed. 17 To be fair, Goldsmith's work is in fact a forty-four-page pamphlet in which he traces Vonnegut's thematic development from the "nihilism" of The Sirens of Titan to the "tentative affirmation" embodied in Slaughterhouse-Five. But if the brevity of Goldsmith's essay is a handicap, its major problem is an excessive reliance on quotation and plot summary. Goldsmith is especially dubious as a critical guide, for he argues that God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater is "unquestionably" Vonnegut's best novel and that Slaughterhouse-Five is "his most poorly written novel." Peter Reed's book is superior in every respect. Reed offers what is still the most detailed analysis of the first six novels. Common techniques and themes are explored throughout and summarized in an excellent concluding chapter. Reed's patient handling of textual details is sometimes laborious and his stress on Vonnegut's ambiguities sometimes permits him to avoid critical judgments that seem called for. But Reed is very good on Vonnegut as a fabulator (though the term is never used), especially when he demonstrates the aesthetic coherence of Vonnegut's "fantastic" tales. This balanced but sympathetic study only covers Vonnegut's early career, but it can be supplemented by Reed's publications on the later novels. 18

Reed's book was followed a year later by a collection of essays written

by Vonnegut's most enthusiastic academic readers. Edited by Klinkowitz and John Somer, The Vonnegut Statement is a diverse work supposedly devoted to showing "that Slaughterhouse-Five constituted a resolution of sorts to themes and techniques developing throughout [Vonnegut's] previous work." A few essays do address this topic, but most develop their own subjects. Parts 1 and 2 deal with Vonnegut as a public and literary figure, part 3 with his novels. The first two parts include Klinkowitz's superb study of the short fiction, Scholes's essay on the Cornell journalism (reprinted from Summary), Dan Wakefield's reminiscences, and an extremely interesting Vonnegut interview with Scholes at Iowa. Part 3 is a mixed affair: the notes of a fan (Tim Hildebrand); a protracted and vague generic discussion (Karen and Charles Wood); an interesting study of Vonnegut's formal innovations in his first two novels (James Mellard); a revised version of Klinkowitz's Critique essay on Mother Night and Cat's Cradle; two very sympathetic but misleading studies of Vonnegut's thought and art, especially in Slaughterhouse-Five (Glenn Meeter, John Somer); and an excellent bibliography by Klinkowitz, Asa Pieratt, Jr., and Stanley Schatt. Mellard's essay is one of the most important discussions of Vonnegut's early fiction. Mellard traces Vonnegut's first efforts to get "beyond" the realistic or Jamesian mode of fiction to one that has its origin in popular oral tradition. Mellard shows how the conventions of the mimetic novel are revised in Player Piano, then overthrown in The Sirens of Titan, as Vonnegut achieves a modern form of "naive" literature that allows him "to reinstate popular sentimental values as commands—to love, to be courageous, to be kind." Meeter also emphasizes Vonnegut's "rejection" of the traditional novel, but he sees this aesthetic decision as linked to Vonnegut's rejection of conventional religion and even "a sense of history." Indeed, Meeter argues that "for the most part [Vonnegut's] work accepts the loss of tradition rather gladly as a fact, and even demands that it become a fact." Readers of the later Vonnegut, especially Slapstick (1976), will be surprised to learn that Vonnegut is so grateful for the loss of tradition; they may even think that Vonnegut regrets this loss very much. Meeter also argues that Bokononism and Tralfamadorianism are equally desirable versions of the same "faith," one of the crucial points of view in the debate as to what Vonnegut thinks of his invented religions. Meeter agrees with Somer, who argues that Vonnegut's continuing search is for "a hero who [can] survive with dignity in an insane world." Like Meeter, Somer thinks that Vonnegut ends this search with Billy Pilgrim, who achieves what is said to be a sublime serenity. Somer is rather more explicit than Meeter, but both critics see Vonnegut as espousing the benefits of what Harris calls "resigned acceptance." As this is consistent with what Klinkowitz also argues, the real "thesis" of The Vonnegut Statement seems to be that Slaughterhouse-Five is the most powerful expression of Vonnegut's stoical, even quietistic views on life. Whether one agrees or not, the long essays by Meeter and Somer are required reading for anyone interested in the thematic implications of Vonnegut's novels.

The emergence of a true Vonnegut "industry" can be traced from 1973 to 1976 (when the next book on Vonnegut appeared). In 1973 the Vonnegut phenomenon was remarked by a number of prominent critics and writers. Pearl Bell deplored Vonnegut as one of several recent "celebrants of unreason, chaos, and inexorable decay," Ihab Hassan labeled Vonnegut a fatalist but included him among "prominent" contemporary novelists, Charles Nicol and Michael Wood wrote admiringly of Vonnegut's work while questioning the uncritical enthusiasm expressed in The Vonnegut Statement, and Alfred Kazin and Doris Lessing offered extremely interesting evaluations of individual novels. 19 Kazin's comments illustrate the misunderstanding that mars the work of even the best critics when they deal with writers they know only superficially. Among other misstatements, Kazin refers to chapter one of Slaughterhouse-Five as an "introduction" (a view he subsequently reaffirmed by reprinting chapter one in a collection of essays) and suggests that Vonnegut "has no politics." Kazin strongly endorses the fatalistic reading of Slaughterhouse-Five, arguing that "Vonnegut deprecates any attempt to see tragedy that day in Dresden. . . . He likes to say with arch fatalism, citing one horror after another, 'So it goes.' " By contrast, Doris Lessing's belated review of Mother Night both praises Vonnegut ("one of the writers who map our landscape for us") and offers a major insight into Mother Night and Vonnegut's work in general. Lessing argues that "what Vonnegut deals with, always, is responsibility," and that Vonnegut refuses to succumb to "the new and general feeling of helplessness." In effect responding to the views of Meeter, Somer, and Kazin, Lessing anticipates many later defenses of Vonnegut's moral position in Slaughterhouse-Five.

The more scholarly essays published on Vonnegut in 1973 were all very good. The 1972 film version of Slaugherhouse-Five gave rise to several interesting studies of the relationship between George Roy Hill's film and Vonnegut's novel.²⁰ In addition, Arlen Hansen treated Vonnegut briefly but perceptively as an example of what Hansen calls "The Celebration of Solipsism: A New Trend in American Fiction." Hansen's most useful insight is that "in creating Bokononism, Vonnegut rejects the premise that mankind has no alternative but to adapt himself passively to the dictates of his environment." In "Vonnegut's Cradle: The Erosion of Comedy," Stanley Trachtenberg discussed Vonnegut's use of comic form in Cat's Cradle. Trachtenberg distinguishes Vonnegut's brand of comedy from that of the black humorists, but also from more traditional comedy as defined by Susanne Langer and Northrop Frye. Donald Greiner, in "Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse-Five and the Fiction of Atrocity," highlighted Vonnegut's unique treatment of war by relating his war novel to Robert Jay Lifton's concept of "the guilt of survival" and to several historical accounts of the firebombing of Dresden. Finally, Jerome Klinkowitz reviewed "The Literary Career of Kurt Vonnegut, Jr." in one of the best pieces on Vonnegut to this date. In this essay Klinkowitz argues that Vonnegut is "our great public writer." Klinkowitz's account of Vonnegut's career is filled with telling information, but it also develops a definite thesis concerning Vonnegut's themes. Klinkowitz quite accurately summarizes Vonnegut's social theme as his desire to "change the social ethic and treasure people for something other than what they can produce." Klinkowitz then identifies Vonnegut's metaphysical theme as his belief that mankind should reject responsibility for an absurd universe, as "the consummate horrors of the twentieth century have made it an unbearable trial for man to identify himself with the center of the Universe." In his otherwise excellent essay Klinkowitz does not explain how these apparently contradictory themes can be reconciled. ²¹

The major essays of 1974 varied a great deal, though even the weaker efforts provided good evidence of an emerging critical debate about the nature of Vonnegut's themes. David Vanderwerken's "Pilgrim's Dilemma: Slaugherhouse-Five" presented a brief but compelling argument that in this novel Vonnegut rejects both Tralfamadorianism and divinely oriented Christianity. These philosophies or religions share the deterministic belief that we cannot avoid wars and other social disasters; the inevitable result if we adopt such beliefs is moral apathy. Vanderwerken was the first critic to argue that Slaughterhouse-Five espouses "a humanistic Christianity, which may also be an illusion, but yet a saving one." At the other extreme, philosophically speaking, David Ketterer pointed out that the Tralfamadorian philosophy is "handy" as a way of dealing with life's horrors, for individual responsibility "shrinks" from view in this perspective. Ketterer's chapter, "Vonnegut's Spiral Siren Call: From Dresden's Lunar Visits to Tralfamadore," deals with The Sirens of Titan and Slaugherhouse-Five as examples of Vonnegut's science fiction. Unfortunately, Ketterer's grasp of textual details is either faulty or excessively ingenious, as when he remarks that Billy Pilgrim comes "unstuck in time" due to the example of his captives on Tralfamadore, or when he suggests that in The Sirens of Titan Mercury and Venus should be equated because Beatrice Rumfoord, in her cookbook, recommends young Harmoniums (from Mercury) filled with Venusian cottage cheese. Billy Pilgrim comes unstuck in time many years before he travels to Tralfamadore, the Tralfamadorians are hardly Billy's captives, and most readers would no doubt expect a stronger "tie" between Mercury and Venus. Arnold Edelstein's "Slaughterhouse-Five: Time Out of Joint" was a far more useful discussion of Vonnegut's sixth novel. Edelstein provides an extensive chronology of events to show that "all the significant details of Billy's life on Tralfamadore have sources in Billy's life here on Earth"—thus proving that Tralfamadore is Billy's own creation. As Edelstein points out, this only becomes clear at the end of the novel, a late revelation that powerfully reorders our entire sense of the book. This fine point about the novel's structure leads Edelstein to conclude that Billy's space-travel is made up of "escapist, regressive fantasies." Yet Edelstein ends his essay by insisting that Vonnegut shares Billy's Tralfamadorianism. As there is no evidence offered for this view, nor any discussion of its implications, Edelstein's final remarks seem oddly out of place. The same might be said of everything in Sanford Pinsker's "Fire and Ice: The Radical Cuteness of Kurt Vonnegut, Jr." Pinsker is one of the better critics of contemporary American writing, but his essay on Vonnegut seems either hastily or carelessly done. Pinsker refers to Robert "Heinlan" and speaks repeatedly of Vonnegut's "Harry" Campbell and Dr. Felix "Hoeniker." The quality of Pinsker's response to Vonnegut is suggested by the following comment: "But while the baggage that is history may have been a heavy burden for Joyce or Eliot, it is a lightweight affair for Vonnegut." In a relatively short essay Pinsker discusses the first six novels in a brisk, breezy fashion—all too brisk and breezy. This sort of casual, unsympathetic treatment of Vonnegut was still possible as of 1974, but it was to become almost extinct within the next year or so. Hereafter critics might dislike Vonnegut, but they would take his works far more seriously.

This kind of critical but scrupulous attention marks two other essays of the 1974-75 period, Peter Messent's "Breakfast of Champions: The Direction of Vonnegut's Fiction" and Clinton Burhans's "Hemingway and Vonnegut: Diminishing Vision in a Dying Age." Messent's 1974 article was the first serious discussion of Breakfast of Champions (1973). Messent is finally quite critical of Vonnegut's new novel, but he does Vonnegut the honor of analyzing his book at great length. In 1975 Burhans paid Vonnegut an even greater compliment by suggesting that Vonnegut represents his age as distinctly as Hemingway represents his. One must wonder, however, whether Burhans's contrast is really valid. Hemingway is said to offer "an essentially tragic vision of man" in which we achieve meaning by imposing aesthetic form on life's harsh realities, whereas Vonnegut presents man as "a silly and pitiful creature" who must turn away from truth to embrace comforting illusions. Burhans's Vonnegut is a despairing pessimist, an absurdist who should be linked with Beckett and Ionesco. Burhans makes many fine points in passing about such topics as Vonnegut's ambivalence toward love, especially sexual love, but he projects a Vonnegut who is all too neatly Hemingway's foil, someone who is blind to everything but humanity's silliness. Moreover, Burhans consistently quotes such Vonnegut characters as Winston Niles Rumfoord, Malachi Constant, and Billy Pilgrim as if they were mouthpieces for their creator. This extremely dubious practice leads Burhans to reverse what may be the appropriate conclusion, for many readers would argue that Hemingway is in fact the more pessimistic writer.24

Whatever one may think of Burhans's conclusions, the appearance of his article in *Modern Fiction Studies* marked a new stage in Vonnegut's assimilation into the American canon. Additional evidence was provided by Robert Uphaus's "Expected Meaning in Vonnegut's Dead-End Fiction," a review of Vonnegut's work in general and *Breakfast of Champions* in particular. Uphaus's very sympathetic essay asks a fundamental question, "what is the apparent meaning of Vonnegut's novels?," and proceeds to offer one of the

most interesting answers yet proposed. For Uphaus, Vonnegut's novels demonstrate that "self-actualization" can only be "imaginatively achieved" and so can never influence human history. Vonnegut therefore celebrates the human imagination while acknowledging its extreme limitations. This very tempting theory prepares the way for Uphaus's reading of Breakfast of Champions as a "moving, tortured, and honest" book, one that dramatizes its author's extreme ambivalence about human powers. The publication of Uphaus's review in Novel was yet another signal of Vonnegut's emerging status; other signs in 1975 were the prominent role assigned to Vonnegut in Thomas LeClair's and Jean Kennard's lengthy treatments of contemporary American writing and Lynn Buck's essay on Vonnegut in yet another major journal, Studies in American Fiction.²⁵

In 1976 a number of important essays were published, including Maurice O'Sullivan's "Slaughterhouse-Five: Kurt Vonnegut's Anti-Memoirs," Thomas Wymer's "The Swiftian Satire of Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.," and Charles Harris's "Time, Uncertainty, and Kurt Vonnegut, Ir.: A Reading of Slaughterhouse-Fice." O'Sullivan and Wymer reinforce Vanderwerken's reading of Slaughterhouse-Five, and Harris's essay complements his earlier work by treating Vonnegut's narrative techniques in Slaughterhouse-Five as thoroughly as Harris analyzed the novel's themes in his book chapter. Harris's essay is especially recommended to anyone interested in the chronological errors-deliberate or unintended-in Slaughterhouse-Five.26 It is rather harder to recommend the major publication of 1976, Stanley Schatt's Twayne book. Schatt consistently fails to evaluate or even characterize Vonnegut's formal achievement (or failure) as he reviews all of Vonnegut's works through Slapstick. Whether discussing Vonnegut's formal innovations in Player Piano, the role of the artist in Mother Night, the supposed "third" narrator of Slaughterhouse-Five, or the themes of Slapstick, Schatt comes to no real conclusions about the large topics he introduces. (Schatt's treatment of God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater provides a significant exception. The chapter on this book-Vonnegut's "richest and most complex novel"—is easily his best.) Formal questions are almost never addressed, belying Schatt's prefactory promise to engage just such questions. In addition, one could hardly count the typographical and factual errors that plague this book. A few random examples: Between Time and Timbuktu (1972) is cited as From Time to Timbuktu; Kilgore Trout's The Big Board is renamed The Big Barrel: Theodore Roethke's "I learn by going where I have to go," quoted in the first chapter of Slaughterhouse-Five, is rendered "dream by going where I have to go"; Vonnegut is said to have quit General Electric in 1951, at least a year later than he actually did so; The Sirens of Titan is omitted from the chronology of Vonnegut's life and works; Amanita Buntline, a minor character in God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater, is rechristened Amanda. Moreover, a number of the notes do not correspond to the numbers in the text and the index is virtually worthless, as it refers to none of the critics cited in the book. Schatt's critical judgments are also suspect,

as when he says that in *Player Piano* "Finnerty and his followers also believe that they cannot possibly fail," or when Billy Pilgrim is said to "realize" that he cannot comfort others with the Tralfamadorian philosophy. Finnerty and his followers are very much aware that they cannot *succeed* (see their conversation at the end of the book), and what is Billy doing at the very end of his life if not trying to comfort others with the good news from Tralfamadore? Schatt's typos and factual errors are minor but tend to undermine the reader's confidence; his critical misjudgments are rather more serious and severely limit the value of his book.

Three more books on Vonnegut appeared in 1977, another major year in the history of his critical reputation. The best of these was James Lundquist's contribution to the Ungar series. Lundquist begins with a long chapter that summarizes Vonnegut's recurring themes. Marred by excessive reliance on plot summaries, this discussion nonetheless offers a good paraphrase of Vonnegut's works. The next chapter responds to charges of artistic incompetence directed against Slaugherhouse-Five. Lundquist has many good things to say about the novel's structure, though he hints that Vonnegut agrees with Billy Pilgrim's "philosophy" without really arguing the matter. Lundquist's final two chapters are more successful. The first deals authoritatively with Vonnegut's relationship to science fiction, a subject Lundquist knows much better than most of Vonnegut's critics. The second offers a brief but effective summary of Vonnegut's basic methods. What is missing here, as elsewhere in the book, is a more detailed elaboration of Lundquist's main points. Nonetheless, Lundquist's book is far more reliable than Richard Giannone's Vonnegut: A Preface to His Novels. Like Schatt, Giannone first claims that he will study the form of Vonnegut's novels, then proceeds to say almost nothing on the subject. At most, Giannone offers a one- or two-sentence aesthetic judgment that has little connection to the chapter in which it appears. Following Giannone's argument is difficult enough in most chapters, but especially those on Player Piano and Cat's Cradle. In all fairness, one should add that others have liked Giannone's book a great deal; in his review for American Literary Scholarship, for example, James Justus calls it "the best of the new work on Vonnegut."28 The third book on Vonnegut to appear this year was another collection of essays edited by Klinkowitz (with Donald L. Lawler), Vonnegut in America. Most of the essays here are revised versions of talks delivered at a 1975 MLA session on Vonnegut, and the book as a whole does not measure up to The Vonnegut Statement. Still, there are many good things included. Klinkowitz's "Vonnegut in America" is the single best biographical account yet published. William Veeder's "Technique as Recovery: Lolita and Mother Night" is a fascinating comparison in which more is revealed about Nabokov's novel than Vonnegut's. Veeder's essay illustrates the problems that result when a writer's formal or generic intentions are misconstrued, for Veeder treats Lolita and Mother Night as if they were realistic actions in which Humbert Humbert and Howard W. Campbell function as the respective protagonists of contemporary bildungsromane. This approach is appropriate to Lolita, but it ignores the fabulistic nature of Vonnegut's "novel." Conrad Festa's "Vonnegut's Satire" presents a good argument that, pace Scholes and others, Vonnegut does indeed write satire. And Peter Reed's long essay on "The Later Vonnegut" offers a very good reading of *Breakfast of Champions* and the first extended treatment of *Slapstick*. Other essays discuss Vonnegut's status abroad, another sign of his developing reputation, and Klinkowitz again provides a remarkably comprehensive bibliography.²⁹

If the three books on Vonnegut in 1977 were of mixed quality, several essays advanced the study of his work considerably. Dolores K. Gros-Louis's "Slaughterhouse-Five: Pacifism vs. Passiveness" and John Tilton's "Slaughterhouse-Five: Life against Death-in-Life" continued reaction against the quietistic reading of Slaughterhouse-Five. Gros-Louis presents a strong argument that Vonnegut and Billy Pilgrim should not be identified, for Vonnegut represents pacifism and Billy a form of Tralfamadorian passivity. One limitation to her essay is that Gros-Louis never quite explains why Billy's experiences parallel Vonnegut's if the two men are finally so different. Tilton's long book chapter is a major study for anyone who takes Vonnegut or Slaughterhouse-Five seriously. Tilton points out that the parallels between Vonnegut and Billy Pilgrim are ultimately ironic, that Billy invented Tralfamadore in 1968 (not 1967, the year he claims to have been kidnapped by the Tralfamadorians), that Somer's distinction between hallucinations and time-travel ignores the fact that both are forms of human invention, and that the Kilgore Trout of this novel is much more cynical than the Trout of God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater. Tilton is less convincing when he discovers no fewer than four narrators in the novel, two of whom are supposed to be third-person narrators. These proliferating narrators permit Tilton to identify in the text a Kurt Vonnegut who neither recognizes nor embraces his "Billy Pilgrim-self," that is, the side of himself that "would welcome release from the world of familial, professional, and moral responsibility." But the Kurt Vonnegut who drinks too much, who notes anxiously the presence of clocks, and who reflects on the fate of Lot's wife is someone who would very much welcome "release." Tilton is also a bit reductive in presenting Billy Pilgrim as Vonnegut's satirical target, pure and simple. Most readers will feel that Vonnegut sympathizes with Billy even if he does not share his character's point of view. In sum, Tilton's extremely detailed argument goes too far in rejecting misleading theories advanced in The Vonnegut Statement. My own "Vonnegut's Breakfast of Champions: The Conversion of Heliogabalus" complemented Tilton's essay by arguing that in Breakfast of Champions Vonnegut exorcises the seductive appeal of Tralfamadorian fatalism. This argument may reflect Vonnegut's intentions rather than his achievement, for in this novel Vonnegut renders his fear of a totally mechanized universe far more persuasively than his "conversion" to a more humane optimism. Finally, in "Bringing Chaos to Order: The Novel Tradition and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.," Mary Sue Schriber presented the interesting idea that four of Vonnegut's novels-Mother

Night, Cat's Cradle, Slaughterhouse-Five, and Breakfast of Champions—all explore "the novel's relationship to reality and truth and, consequently, its contemporary value." Schriber is able to show that Vonnegut comments on the novelistic tradition within his own novels, but she is not very convincing when she suggests that Cat's Cradle is "cast in traditional novel form," or when she uses the phrase "the novel tradition" to refer exclusively to the more naive forms of realism. It may be that Vonnegut shares this very limited conception of the novelistic tradition, but one would want better evidence than is presented here. On the other hand, Schriber's Vonnegut is a sophisticated man of letters who self-consciously manipulates the conventions of traditional and more recent narrative—a Vonnegut many readers will recognize from their own experience with the novels. 30

The next year, 1978, marked something of a turning point in Vonnegut's critical fortunes. From that year to the present the volume of criticism has been consistent but smaller than in the early 1970s, and aside from Klinkowitz's short book for Methuen in 1982 there have been no book-length studies. The quality of this work is not in question, however, for Klinkowitz's book is perhaps the best single study of Vonnegut, and many of the best essays appeared in the 1980s. Unfortunately, two of the better-known discussions of 1978 do not measure up to this standard. In On Moral Fiction John Gardner suggests that it is natural for Vonnegut's "cynical disciples" to see him as a nihilist, for "Vonnegut's moral energy is forever flagging, his fight forever turning slapstick." Gardner's rather moralistic point is that Vonnegut's writing suffers from a "lack of commitment." This strange reading was matched by Josephine Hendin's in her Vulnerable People. Hendin says many astute things about Vonnegut's treatment of fathers and sons, but she also believes that "spacing out is Vonnegut's answer to death, war, and human glaciers" and that "dumbness is precisely his solution" in Slaughterhouse-Five. This extreme version of the quietistic reading betrays its shallowness, or so Peter Scholl and I argued this same year in "Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse-Five: The Requirements of Chaos." This essay was written as the pieces by Vanderwerken. O'Sullivan, Wymer, Gros-Louis, and Tilton were appearing, and is perhaps best seen as summarizing the case that Vonnegut does not recommend "resigned acceptance" of life's injustices. Scholl and I differ from others who deplore the quietistic reading by acknowledging such complicating factors as Vonnegut's sympathetic treatment of Billy Pilgrim. Finally, however, we agree that Vonnegut's primary purpose is to challenge the Tralfamadorian point of view when it is adopted by human beings in a position to know better and to act upon what they know.31

The debate about Slaughterhouse-Five continued in 1979 even when the critic showed no awareness of other points of view. Thus, in Thomas Hartshorne's "From Catch-22 to Slaugherhouse-V [sic]: The Decline of the Political Mode," Slaughterhouse-Five was seen as a political fable that preaches quietism: "One cannot control one's fate, so one should simply allow things to happen." For Hartshorne, Vonnegut's novel illustrates "the

decay of reformist hopes," a dour mood that characterized the late 1960s. This emphasis on Vonnegut's "resignation" anticipates the argument that Vonnegut's vision is "relentlessly pessimistic." So David Bosworth argued in "The Literature of Awe," an essay in which Vonnegut is said to recommend "pessimism, cynicism, resignation, despair." But resignation need not be equated with despair, as Philip Rubens insisted in one of the year's more important essays, "'Nothing's Ever Final': Vonnegut's Concept of Time." According to Rubens, Slaughterhouse-Five embodies a Bergsonian concept of time that frees us from "a linear, deterministic universe" by validating Billy Pilgrim's discovery, that is, "a multiple and ever-present now composed of good moments." Tralfamadorianism therefore offers comfort instead of freedom, an extremely desirable exchange because free will is nothing but an illusion in any case. Rubens refers to Vonnegut's "personal belief that the destruction of Dresden was not a final act, and, by extension, that death does not represent a final act for all men," a position attributed to Vonnegut almost entirely on the basis of a 1970 interview in which Vonnegut remarks that "nothing in this world is ever final—no one ever ends—we keep on bouncing back and forth in time, we go on and on ad infinitum."32 A single Vonnegut quote can serve almost any purpose, but why not embrace Vonnegut's comment in his 1966 introduction to Mother Night, "When you're dead vou're dead"? If Vonnegut really wants to reconcile us to what happened at Dresden, how does he go about it in Slaughterhouse-Five? Rubens raises the most tantalizing of issues, but his treatment of Slaughterhouse-Five itself is sketchy at best. Far more persuasive were Loree Rackstraw's excellent review of Jailbird (1979), the second of four essay-reviews she has published on Vonnegut since 1976,33 and Ellen Cronan Rose's "It's All a Joke: Science Fiction in Kurt Vonnegut's The Sirens of Titan," a suggestive attempt to show how Vonnegut's use of science-fiction conventions differs from that of Isaac Asimov, Arthur Clarke, and Frank Herbert. Among other reviews of Jailbird, John Irving's "Kurt Vonnegut and His Critics" deserves mention. A student of Vonnegut's, Irving offers a moving tribute to the influence and integrity of Vonnegut's fiction.34

In 1980 Jerome Klinkowitz either published or republished a number of his essays on Vonnegut. A slightly earlier piece, "Kurt Vonnegut Jr.'s SuperFiction," included interesting information concerning the manuscript of Breakfast of Champions. Contrary to rumor, Breakfast of Champions was unfinished as of 1971, at which time the book was about the narrator of Kilgore Trout's Now It Can Be Told. Also, the novel originally ended with "Kurt Vonnegut" and Dwayne Hoover in the same loony bin, an ending Vonnegut changed just before the book was published. In 1980 Klinkowitz republished "The Dramatization of Kurt Vonnegut, Jr." in his book The Practice of Fiction in America. This 1975 essay on Happy Birthday, Wanda June (1970) offers an interesting perspective on the post-Slaughterhouse Vonnegut. Klinkowitz also included a long chapter on Vonnegut in the second edition of his Literary Disruptions (a book first published in 1975). This

chapter is an expanded version of Klinkowitz's excellent Modern Fiction Studies essay of 1973, but curiously it does not have the same impact. The longer piece is a bit rambling, punctuated by suggestive facts that do not quite come together to make a thesis. Klinkowitz stresses Vonnegut's emphasis on the imaginative re-creation of an all too dismal reality, but he does not address the charge of escapism and never engages, here or elsewhere, the question of how we should respond to Billy Pilgrim. In "Kurt Vonnegut and Donald Barthelme: The American Image," a chapter in his The American 1960s, Klinkowitz deals with the same topic but to better effect. Here he argues that the novels of the 1960s are "demonstrations of the Bokononist fiction-making principle," an appropriate response to the period's more demoralizing "realities." Though he still fails to discuss Billy Pilgrim, Klinkowitz offers a far more definite reading of Slaughterhouse-Five. Nonetheless this version of Klinkowitz's argument still betrays a fundamental contradiction. In Klinkowitz's reading of the early novels, man is free to create imaginatively but does not have free will—a Bokononist paradox, perhaps, but one that is insufficiently explained.36

Three other essays of note appeared in 1980. Richard Ziegfeld's "Kurt Vonnegut on Censorship and Moral Values" published Vonnegut's letter to the head of the Drake, North Dakota, school board that burned thirty-two copies of Slaughterhouse-Five. Ziegfeld also comments on the case, rightly concluding that Vonnegut wrote his letter "to promote a better world in which people are kinder to each other than they are presently." Russell Blackford's "The Definition of Love: Kurt Vonnegut's 'Slapstick'" presented a thorough but possibly misleading interpretation of Vonnegut's thematic intentions in Slapstick. Blackford's reading is open to the same charge as my essay on Breakfast of Champions, for what Vonnegut intended does not square with most readers' disappointment at what he in fact did. Finally Robert Nadeau published the first extensive study of Vonnegut's use of science. Nadeau suggests that unlike other science-fiction writers Vonnegut uses scientific concepts for "metaphysical" rather than "spectacular" effects. Nadeau explains and relates quantum and relativity theories to The Sirens of Titan, Cat's Cradle, and Slaughterhouse-Five. He argues, for example, that Bokononism is based on our new belief in "the approximate or relative nature of truth," and that the theory of relativity "justifies" time-travel and Billy Pilgrim's Tralfamadorian beliefs. Nadeau may be right about all this. but his discussion is unpersuasive. The parallels cited are analyzed very briefly, Vonnegut's texts and even titles are miscited all too frequently (Vonnegut's most famous novel is referred to throughout as Slaughter House-Five), and Nadeau asserts that Vonnegut and the Tralfamadorians share a common philosophy without saying a word about the issue of determinism. 37

The essays of 1981 continued to treat Vonnegut as an established, perhaps even major writer. In his Alternative Pleasures Philip Stevick praised Vonnegut's ability to combine irony with sentimentality and explored the naive narrative mode of the later novels. Writing on "Elements of Dostoey-

sky in the Novels of Kurt Vonnegut," Donald Fiene established that the allusions to Dostovevski in Breakfast of Champions and Slapstick do not reflect anything Vonnegut remembered from Dostoyevski's texts. Fiene also quotes from correspondence that confirms Vonnegut's respect for the major Russian writers. Peter Reed's entry on Vonnegut in American Writers: A Collection of Biographies was of even greater biographical interest. This thirty-page essay complements Klinkowitz's earlier studies while proposing several crucial connections between Vonnegut's life and works. Richard Giannone and Barry Chabot provided the more substantial critical studies of 1981. Giannone's "Violence in the Fiction of Kurt Vonnegut" is an important article that repeats points from his earlier book but advances a far more striking (and unifying) thesis. Unfortunately, this thesis is an extreme one. Giannone traces a "pervasive" violence in Vonnegut's works, then argues that Vonnegut's response is one of "wacky despair." In Giannone's view. Vonnegut sees no hope in curbing life's violence. Indeed, Vonnegut's fatalism is so great that his books are parables of "the unalterable law of natural disorder." Giannone acknowledges that Vonnegut's public statements are much more hopeful, but he does not account for the discrepancy between these public utterances and the novels. Giannone fails to distinguish between the kinds of violence depicted in Vonnegut's fiction. More important, Giannone sees no difference between natural and man-made forms of violence. Perhaps Vonnegut himself makes no distinction, but Giannone offers no evidence to confirm this. Barry Chabot's "Slaughterhouse-Five and the Comforts of Indifference" presents a fascinating theory about Vonnegut's stance toward Tralfamadorianism. Chabot sees that the Tralfamadorian point of view is "cruelly inadequate," but he argues that Vonnegut still wants to achieve this perspective and its "comforts of indifference." The novel dramatizes Vonnegut's inability to maintain this stoical stance, a "problem" that many readers would see as altogether to Vonnegut's credit but which Chabot seems to take as a genuine failure. Chabot argues that "[Vonnegut's] allusion to Lot's wife is instructive, for Slaughterhouse-Five is a novel written by a man who would be stone," and he interprets Vonnegut's praise of Marv O'Hare as "a comment I can only read as gratuitous irony." These remarks expose the eccentricity of Chabot's case, for Vonnegut admires Lot's wife because she felt compelled to look back, not because she was turned to stone, and no other critic has read what Vonnegut says about Mary O'Hare as ironic. In each case Vonnegut praises someone who will not settle for the comforts of indifference.38

If the body of criticism on Vonnegut has diminished since 1977, 1982 was the major exception to this trend. Not only did a goodly number of essays and one book appear, the work published in 1982 represents perhaps the high point in Vonnegut criticism so far as quality is concerned. Lucien Agosta presented an acute psychological reading of *Cat's Cradle*, John Cooley emphasized Bokonon's complexity while presenting him as "one of the rare examples of a basically successful black portrait by a white writer,"

Thomas Wymer added to his earlier argument by tracing Vonnegut's complex attack on technology, Michael McGrath made a strong if exaggerated case for Vonnegut as an almost complete pessimist concerning the liberal tradition in a postindustrial society, and Jerome Klinkowitz discussed "The Hyannis Port Story" as an example of postmodernist anti-illusionism or what Klinkowitz calls "self-apparency." But the year's major publications were Klinkowitz's Kurt Vonnegut in the Methuen contemporary authors series and Kathryn Hume's three substantial essays on different features of Vonnegut's career. These pieces are, arguably, the best book and the best individual essays yet published on Vonnegut.

Klinkowitz's book is only ninety-six pages long, but it provides an extremely well-written and informative overview of Vonnegut's career prior to Deadeye Dick (1982). Klinkowitz describes Vonnegut's shift from a genre writer to a modern experimentalist to perhaps the major postmodernist. He assimilates material from his earlier studies, especially his work on the short fiction, and adds incisive discussions of Slaughterhouse-Five as a book about Vonnegut's problems in writing it, the thematic thrust of Slapstick, and Vonnegut's most recent achievement in Iailbird. No one knows more about Vonnegut, of course, and Klinkowitz's critical judgments are usually as reliable as his information. The latter is truly impressive here, for in this short book one learns a remarkable number of new things about Vonnegut, for example, that he used one of his proposed master's theses in Player Piano. that the stories published in science-fiction magazines were first rejected by mainstream magazines, that Vonnegut intended to call the narrator of Cat's Cradle "Vonnegut" but was overruled by his publisher, that Between Time and Timbuktu was put together by a committee rather than by Vonnegut, that changes were made in Happy Birthday, Wanda June even as the play was in production. Though not exactly a biographical critic, Klinkowitz brings his information to bear in such a way as to illuminate whatever he discusses. One might wish that his critical judgments were as frequent as they are reliable, for Klinkowitz tends to avoid distinguishing between Vonnegut's greater and lesser efforts. Thus he manages to discuss Slapstick for several pages without a hint of the novel's relative inferiority. More important, perhaps, Klinkowitz has little to say about the structure of Vonnegut's novels. But Klinkowitz has so much to say about so many other things, one can only regret that his one book-length treatment of Vonnegut is so short.⁴⁰

Kathryn Hume's three essays overlap a bit, but each advances a major argument. "Kurt Vonnegut and the Myths and Symbols of Meaning" derives from Hume's vast knowledge of myth as well as Vonnegut (she has written extensively about myth, especially as it relates to fantasy). 11 She describes in detail Vonnegut's almost step-by-step rejection of traditional mythic patterns, especially "the hero monomyth" as described by Joseph Campbell and others. Vonnegut rejects mythic plots because they "clash" with his personal experiences. Thus, in Vonnegut's fiction, "evil" women are not conquered and good women are extremely rare; dragonlike embodiments of evil are

hard to find, let alone defeat; atonement with the father never occurs; and "questing" heroes bring back no "boon" or special knowledge from their trials. Homecoming, the traditional end of the monomyth, is a particularly dismal experience (see especially Mother Night, Happy Birthday, Wanda lune, and lailbird). Vonnegut's most direct use of mythic "exostructures" occurs in Breakfast of Champions and Happy Birthday, Wanda June, where parallels to the Odussey are frequent and invariably ironic. Yet Hume does not see Vonnegut as nihilistic. "He is no Pollyanna, but neither is he totally pessimistic or cynical," she concludes, citing his efforts in the 1970s to find sustaining modes of behavior to replace mythic clichés. Hume's "The Heraclitean Cosmos of Kurt Vonnegut" also argues that Vonnegut is more hopeful than many have thought. Vonnegut's world may be chaotic, but he continues to believe that in the flux and flow of things it is still possible to honor what is distinctively human. Hume offers a wonderfully detailed portrait of Vonnegut's "cosmos," his constantly shifting fictional world that can only be understood by looking at all his works rather than any one book. She is especially good on Vonnegut's "recycled" characters, such as Kilgore Trout, who always seem to change when introduced into a new work. She offers the best published account of how Vonnegut treats traditional society, romantic love, and religion as momentary stays against confusion. Finally, she defines Vonnegut's position on his shifting cosmos by comparing it with similar worldviews in Ovid, Shakespeare (Hamlet), Heraclitus, and Gerard Manley Hopkins. This is a splendid essay tht paraphrase only beings to characterize. Finally, in "Vonnegut's Self-Projections: Symbolic Characters and Symbolic Fiction," Hume treats Vonnegut's main characters as "straightforward projections of some part of his psyche." This sort of analysis may seem suspect, but Hume's critical practice is exemplary. A good example is her claim that in Slaughterhouse-Five "the various responses of Billy, of the Vonnegut persona, and of Trout together provide a kind of symphonic score for rendering human reaction to such a disaster." She goes on to offer extremely perceptive readings of Kilgore Trout and the later novels, Breakfast of Champions, Slapstick, and Jailbird. Without exaggerating the value of these novels. Hume clarifies their relatively positive themes as well as anyone has yet done.42

As noted earlier, the flow of Vonnegut criticism since 1982 has been steady but diminished. In 1983 John Aldridge revived the opinions of more traditional critics such as Alfred Kazin and Charles Samuels. Aldridge berates Vonnegut for his "adolescent stoicism" and his retreat into "cuteness." Frederick Karl offered a far more extensive but no less critical commentary in his American Fictions 1940 / 1980. "His provenance," Karl suggests, "belongs not with serious practitioners of fiction but with the Beatles, McLuhan, and those who have probed into popular culture as ways of directly interpreting us." But Karl does not find Vonnegut's "probe" to be very profound, for he characterizes the novels as "drenched by sentimental whimsy," attacks such works as God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater for their "obviousness," and

laments Vonnegut's artlessness in Slaughterhouse-Five as well as Breakfast of Champions and Slapstick. Karl's grasp of Vonnegut is suggested by his definition of foma as "evil." Moreover, the organization of Karl's book is particularly frustrating, for the discussions of Vonnegut's individual novels occur in five separate chapters. Fragmentation and repetition are the almost inevitable results. Kermit Vanderbilt's "Kurt Vonnegut's American Nightmares and Utopias" was a much more successful review of Vonnegut's utopian instincts, especially as they inform Slapstick and Jailbird. But the year's two most valuable studies were by Joseph Schöpp and Lawrence Broer. Schöpp's "Slaughterhouse-Five: The Struggle with a Form that Fails" is a well-written essay that notes Vonnegut's determined effort to avoid the conventions of traditional narrative because they imply a coherence and rationality that do not apply to Dresden. Schöpp argues that Vonnegut "fails" in this effort, for his readers doggedly piece together the novel's chronology, assign praise and blame, and even end up providing a moral. Thus, Schöpp argues, Vonnegut's structural ploy forces us to confront the grim realities of Dresden. Curiously, Schöpp's otherwise skillful analysis says nothing about Vonnegut's use of the Tralfamadorians. Broer's "Pilgrim's Progress: Is Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., Winning His War with Machines?" identifies the technological horrors of the twentieth century as Vonnegut's prevailing theme. Broer is especially good at showing how Vonnegut's attack on Tralfamadorian complacency begins with his first novel, Player Piano, a book Broer reads as well as anyone. Broer's Vonnegut does seem terribly optimistic, however. According to Broer. Vonnegut "knows too that with a little imagination and heart we can, like Salo in Sirens of Titan, dismantle our own self-imprisoning machinery and become whatever we choose to become." Vonnegut knows all too well that this will require more than a "little" imagination and heart. 43

The essays of 1984 ranged from very modest to excellent. Robert Hipkiss's chapter on Vonnegut in his The American Absurd: Pynchon, Vonnegut, and Barth is marred by numerous editorial or factual errors and excessive plot summaries for all works discussed. Hipkiss is very good on Jailbird and other specific topics, but he is committed to the undemonstrated idea that Vonnegut is a determinist and offers what almost seem to be random notes without a controlling thesis. It also seems odd that in a chapter relating Vonnegut to "the American absurd" Hipkiss makes no reference to Charles Harris. T. J. Matheson's "'This Lousy Little Book': The Genesis and Development of Slaughterhouse-Five as Revealed in Chapter One" is a more successful essay even if one does not agree with it. Matheson argues that Vonnegut's persona undergoes a crucial conversion while writing Slaughterhouse-Five. At first "Vonnegut" is callous and cynical in his attitude toward Dresden, and his artistic aims are "those of a mechanic or laborer" rather than "a truly creative artist." This "Vonnegut" is shocked into a more responsible stance by Mary O'Hare, who recommends confronting the horrors of Dresden rather than "romanticizing or flatly ignoring events that are intrinsically sordid, unpleasant, or ugly." This evasive, irresponsible Vonnegut is largely Matheson's

creation. Why did Vonnegut have so much trouble writing about the firebombing of Dresden if he simply wanted to romanticize the event? Matheson is right to emphasize the Mary O'Hare episode, but the role he assigns it in Vonnegut's "development" is greatly exaggerated. An even more successful discussion was R. B. Gill's "Bargaining in Good Faith: The Laughter of Vonnegut, Grass, and Kundera." This first-rate essay links the three artists cited in its title as modern comedians who must be read against the expectations of traditional comedy: "Open-eyed and without illusion, they do not suggest that their comic imaginations can transform reality; nevertheless, they attempt to salvage what they can from their worlds, to accommodate themselves to what must be in any case. Their novels, then, record a comic impulse compromised by an unillusioned realism." Gill's views recall those of Robert Scholes, but Gill's Vonnegut is slightly more optimistic. For Gill, Vonnegut's laughter bespeaks a "healthy adjustment to a sad world," and the rituals proposed in a work such as Slapstick offer "respite from pain even if they do not offer meaningfulness." Gill is especially good on Jailbird, but his essay is recommended for everything he has to say about Vonnegut.44

In 1985 Vonnegut was the subject of five brief but highly suggestive discussions, several of them in essays or books on broader topics. Arthur Saltzman cited Vonnegut as a prime example of what he called "The Aesthetic of Doubt in Recent Fiction," arguing that Vonnegut struggles mightily with his lack of faith but ends up expressing "bewilderment and resignation, not affirmation." Saltzman suggests that Vonnegut's genius is to make this spiritual drama his most moving subject. In his Literary Subversions Jerome Klinkowitz returned to Slaughterhouse-Five to point out that this novel is "an anthropological reinvention," a work that confirms the fact our world is a cultural creation. 45 Despite his far-reaching title, "Physics and Fantasy: Scientific Mysticism, Kurt Vonnegut, and Gravity's Rainbow," Russell Blackford argued the rather narrow point that John Somer is wrong to insist Vonnegut authenticates Billy Pilgrim's space-travel in Slaughterhouse-Five. And in his book chapter "Kurt Vonnegut: The Cheerfully Demented" David Punter presented an astute if dour assessment of Vonnegut's social views. But the year's major piece was Charles Berryman's "After the Fall: Kurt Vonnegut." Berryman notes that each of Vonnegut's protagonists from Slaughterhouse-Five through Deadeye Dick is "haunted by images of death and destruction." These characters try to exorcise their terrible vision but fail. Indeed, their efforts to achieve a childish innocence lead to a remarkable string of deaths involving their women. As Berryman remarks, it is as if the later Vonnegut wanted to verify Poe's famous claim that the most poetical topic is the death of a beautiful woman. Berryman points out that Vonnegut has acknowledged a recurring bad dream in which he murders an old woman—a strong hint that Vonnegut's later novels are very personal indeed. Berryman's review of the later fiction presents a Vonnegut far less free from alienation than the writer Klinkowitz describes in "The Dramatization of Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.," but perhaps both Vonneguts are real. At times the later novels depict a Vonnegut who seems liberated from the paralyzing matter of Dresden, at times they present a Vonnegut who continues to fight internal demons we cannot trace to a single calamity such as Dresden. In any case, as Klinkowitz himself has noted, Berryman's essay is one of the best recent discussions of Vonnegut. 46

Only three essays were published on Vonnegut in 1986 but two were important contributions. Leonard Mustazza's "Vonnegut's Tralfamadore and Milton's Eden" is the best essay on Slaughterhouse-Five in many years. Mustazza shows that "Billy continually tries to construct for himself an Edenic experience out of materials he garners over the course of some twenty years." Billy's effort reflects "his own yearnings for peace, love, immutability, stability, and an ordered existence"—everything he has not known in reality. Billy creates a "myth" that shares much with Milton's Eden: "a prepared habitat, instruction by a higher power, a mate who is different from yet perfect for him." These parallels are ironic, however, for "contrary to Adam and Eve, Billy Pilgrim begins from the fallen state and expresses an overpowering desire to move backwards to a prior state, to go from horrid experience into a dimension where will and action are unnecessary or inconsequential." Unlike Adam, then, Billy seeks to reject his knowledge, to avoid what Mustazza calls "ethical action." Mustazza insists that Billy Pilgrim is not Kurt Vonnegut, that Vonnegut presents his character as a sympathetic but pitiable example of our own fate if we cannot resolve the problems that drove Billy to Tralfamadore. Joseph Sigman's "Science and Parody in Kurt Vonnegut's The Sirens of Titan" provides an excellent review of modern physics—Einstein, Planck, Heisenberg. Bohr—in order to demonstrate Vonnegut's use of the new concepts in The Sirens of Titan. Sigman is at his best in discussing Winston Niles Rumfoord's status as a false deity and Vonnegut's creation of "a totally relativistic cosmos." He is less convincing in claiming a correspondence between quantum jumps and the book's many scene changes, for the narrative shifts are almost always explained within the novel. Nor does Sigman ever quite formulate what he calls "the philosophical implications of modern physics." Nonetheless, his discussion is much more persuasive than Nadeau's earlier treatment of the same subject. 47

Since 1986 very little has appeared on Vonnegut. By far the most important publication of 1987 was Kurt Vonnegut: A Comprehensive Bibliography by Asa Pieratt, Jr., Julie Huffman-klinkowitz, and Jerome Klinkowitz. Updating their 1974 bibliography, the authors identify "all the published material both by and about Vonnegut from 1950 through 1985." Anyone who uses this book will quickly realize how remarkably complete it is. Its sheer size implies a kind of canonization, as the reviewer for American Literature remarked, 48 which seems quite at odds with the dwindling criticism devoted to Vonnegut's works. In 1987 only one short article was published, Robert A. Martin's "Slaughterhouse-Five: Vonnegut's Domed Universe," while Brian McHale referred to Vonnegut throughout his book Postmodernist Fiction.49 The one essay published early in 1988, William H. E. Meyer, Jr.'s "Kurt

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Vonnegut: The Man with Nothing to Say," is an eccentric effort to link Vonnegut with virtually every major figure in the American tradition, though Meyer's purpose in doing this is extremely fuzzy. 50 This sparse critical material, coupled with the lukewarm response to Bluebeard, seems to point to Vonnegut's declining reputation. But this may be a premature conclusion, for at least two major essays are forthcoming, Leonard Mustazza's "The Machine Within: Mechanization, Human Discontent, and the Genre of Vonnegut's Player Piano" and Lawrence Broer's "Kurt Vonnegut vs. Deadeye Dick: The Resolution of Vonnegut's Creative Schizophrenia." Mustazza's study of Player Piano illustrates that there is still much to be said about even the earliest of Vonnegut's novels, and Broer's essay is easily the best study to date of Deadeye Dick. These essays suggest that serious criticism of Vonnegut will continue, less voluminous perhaps but more discriminating.⁵¹

I suspect that Vonnegut criticism is about to undergo a marked resurgence. Mustazza, Broer, and Loree Rackstraw are all close to completing new books on Vonnegut, sophisticated studies that answer one of our obvious needs by taking into account the recent novels. (Indeed, Broer's Sanity Plea: Schizophrenia in the Novels of Kurt Vonnegut [Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1988] is the best thematic study of Vonnegut's works yet written. Though I have only read this book in galleys, I especially recommend its treatment of the later Vonnegut.) I would also suggest that we still need a formal study in which Vonnegut's generic experiments are assessed as well as described. We also need a book-length biography, though Klinkowitz's many fine studies will no doubt suffice for some time to come. And we need serious critical evaluations of many individual novels other than Slaughterhouse-Five. Notice, for example, how often I have praised what individual critics say about lailbird, yet so far no one has devoted an entire essay to this book. Also, no essay has appeared on Galápagos, which I would rank as Vonnegut's second best novel. Finally, Vonnegut needs to be more firmly related to the American and postmodern literary traditions, though Meyer's recent essay illustrates the kind of Americanist criticism we do not need, and Klinkowitz has already done much to relate Vonnegut to his postmodern peers. Perhaps I should simply say that Vonnegut needs to be taken even more seriously by even more critics, who will presumably undertake these and other tasks commonly associated with the reassessment of a major writer. Indeed, behind additional studies of Vonnegut's life, his individual works, and his literary relationships stands the fundamental question of whether Vonnegut is in fact a major writer. The large body of work already done suggests that the answer may well be yes. Future work of the sort described above will allow us to answer this questionat least for our own time-with greater confidence than most of us feel at present.

The four essays I commissioned for this collection do not provide a definitive answer to the question of Vonnegut's stature, but they move us closer to such an answer. John L. Simons's "Tangled Up in You: A Playful Reading of Cat's Cradle" is a serious revaluation of an early Vonnegut novel.

No one has presented a better case for the book's own seriousness. Charles Berryman's essay on Breakfast of Champions offers a chastening reminder of Vonnegut's comic, even self-parodic intentions, while his lively discussion of Galánagos is the first essay-length interpretation of one of Vonnegut's finest novels. David Cowart's "Culture and Anarchy: Vonnegut's Later Career" is an excellent thematic overview of the novels since Slaughterhouse-Five, a general study that has the advantage of encompassing all the novels except Bluebeard. These four essays treat Vonnegut with a respect each piece amply justifies. I believe they constitute a significant response to the dearth of recent criticism.

I would like to thank John L. Simons, Charles Berryman, and David Cowart for agreeing to write essays for this collection. They have been more prompt than I in fulfilling their tasks. My thanks to Judy Sokol, Lynn Herman, and Sandy Lucash for their assistance in gathering and preparing the relevant materials. My thanks, too, to Asa Pieratt, Jr., Julie Huffmanklinkowitz, and Jerome Klinkowitz, whose bibliography was indispensable to my work. Jerome Klinkowitz also read my introduction to help save me from factual if not critical sin. Finally, I am grateful to James Nagel for permitting me to undertake this task, one I have very much enjoyed doing.⁵²

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Notes

- 1. Jerome Klinkowitz, "The Literary Career of Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.," Modern Fiction Studies 19 (1973):57, and Literary Disruptions, 2nd ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press,
- 2. See Julian Moynahan, "A Prisoner at War in the Hamptons," New York Times Book Review, 18 October 1987, 12.
- 3. Vonnegut and Yarmolinsky separated in 1971 after twenty-six years of marriage. Published by Houghton Mifflin, Yarmolinsky's memoir uses fictional names to protect the innocent and the guilty, but Vonnegut's role as "Carl" is unmistakable.
- 4. I take these numbers from Asa B. Pieratt, Jr., Julie Huffman-klinkowitz, and Jerome Klinkowitz, Kurt Vonnegut: A Comprehensive Bibliography (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1987), 223-68. A few of the items included are reviews, but the overall figure would not change much if all reviews were excluded.
- 5. See the section on Vonnegut's short fiction in Pieratt, Huffman-klinkowitz, and Klinkowitz, Vonnegut: Bibliography, 177-82. Technically only forty-four stories were published through 1963, as "The Hyannis Port Story" was sold to the Saturday Evening Post in 1963 but did not appear because of the assassination of President Kennedy. The story was first published in Welcome to the Monkey House (1968).
- 6. Favorable 1952 reviews included Charles Lee, "New Terms and Goons," Saturday Review, 30 August 1952, 11; Don Fabun, "Anti-Utopian Novel," San Francisco Chronicle, 29 August 1952, 15; Granville Hicks, "The Engineers Take Over," New York Times Book Review.