

NEW ESSAYS ON THE WORK OF

KURT VONNEGUT



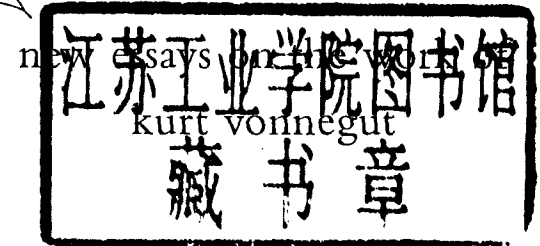
at millennium's

SECOND

KEVIN ALEXANDER BOON, EDITOR

WITH A FOREWORD BY KURT VONNEGUT

AT MILLENNIUM'S



Edited by

KEVIN ALEXANDER BOON

with a foreword by
KURT VONNEGUT

STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK PRESS

AT MILLENNIUM'S END

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FOREWORD

I sometimes say in lectures that I suffer from "survivor's syndrome," but not because of the Battle of the Bulge or the firebombing of Dresden in World War II, man-made calamities during or after which I saw more corpses than you can shake a stick at. A young woman complained to me after my lecture about that war, evidently feeling incomplete, that she had never seen a dead person. I made a joke. I said to her, "Be patient."

I do feel lousy, however, about the many passionate and gifted artists I know or knew, writers, painters and composers, dancers and comedians, actors and actresses, singers and cartoonists, who died or are dying in obscurity, more often than not in poverty. To quote the humorist Kin Hubbard: "It's no disgrace to be poor, but it might as well be." Audiences failed these friends and acquaintances of mine. Audiences were too barbarous and inattentive to realize how good they were and to reward them with sustained applause and a living wage.

I am reminded of a cartoon of long ago which depicted war as a rouged, warty old whore. She says to a youth about seventeen years old, "Hello, Sonny. I knew your Dad." She could represent the arts instead of war, and the cartoon would make just as much sense to a lot of people. The creation of works of art that a sizeable audience may appreciate and even pay for isn't all that different from an attack by either side in World War I, in which thousands of brave, good-hearted young people left their trenches at dawn, and practically everybody wound up draped over barbed wire, or drowning face down in water at the bottom of a shellhole.

Again: I suffer from "survivor's syndrome."

Anyone who survives a human wave attack against such daunting odds, whether in war or the arts, does so because of dumb luck. Agility and courage and character, or whatever, have nothing to do with how it all turns out. Gifted artists have to be what they are, have to do what they do the way they do it. Whether they earn a living and fame thereby is a matter of happening by chance upon breaks in the barbed wire, unswept by machinegun fire.

So to speak.

Mark Twain, a better writer and human being than I am, marveled, when an old man like me, at the durability of his works' popularity. He thought this might be due to his willingness to moralize. It was lucky for him that moralizing paid off so handsomely. In any case, Mark Twain was simply born to moralize.

I think I was, too. When I look back at my incredibly lucky career as a writer, it seems that there was never time to think. It was as though I were skiing down a steep and hazardous mountain slope. When I look back at the marks my skis made in the snow on the way down, I only now realize that I wrote again and again about people who behaved decently in an indecent society.

I received a letter from a sappy woman a while back. She knew I was sappy, too, which is to say a New Deal Democrat. She was pregnant. She wanted to know if it was a bad thing to bring an innocent little baby into a world as awful as this one is. I replied that what made living almost worthwhile for me were the saints I met. They could be anywhere. They were people who behaved decently in an indecent society.

Perhaps, you, dear reader, are or will become a saint for her child to meet. I thank you for your attention.

KURT VONNEGUT (JR.)
NOVEMBER 11, 1998



INTRODUCTION

WHAT TO DO WHEN A POOL-PAH IS YOUR ZAH-MAH-KI-BO

Kevin Alexander Boon

This collection of essays began around the time Vonnegut's final novel, *Timequake*, was going to press. It represents the first look back at Vonnegut's recently completed canon. In these pages, eleven human beings gather with Vonnegut, like friends around a fire at the end of a long day, to discuss his work. Several of the writers count themselves among Vonnegut's circle of friends; some have dedicated a large percentage of their careers to the examination of his works; a few are probably members of Vonnegut's "karass;" but all are Vonnegut scholars compelled to assemble here by a deep appreciation for the man and his writing.

Fifty years into the twenty-first century, when future scholars look back at Vonnegut's work, they may not label him the voice of the postnuclear twentieth century, but they will certainly recognize him as its conscience. For nearly five decades his novels, essays, and short stories have all attempted to talk some sense into people who are willing to balance the world on the precipice of utter annihilation, willing to imprison other human beings in concentration camps and ghettos, and worst of all, willing to entrust "power to people" who are "sickies" (*Fates Worse Than Death* 135). Vonnegut's message is simple: don't wage war, and treat each other with "a little more common decency" (*Slapstick* 3).

You get the sense, perusing the body of his work, that through the decades Vonnegut's respect for the individual has increased as his approval of humanity as a whole has declined. Taken individually, human beings are, for Vonnegut, quirky and fascinating universes, and Vonnegut's novels are full of these charming examples of human complexity. Topping the list is Kilgore Trout, Vonnegut's alter ego, who is followed by a collection of some of literature's most endearing characters: Billy Pilgrim, Eliot Rosewater, Rabo Karabekian, Circe Berman, Malachi Constant, Bokonon, Rudy Waltz, Howard Campbell, Walter F. Starbuck, Wilbur Swain, Eugene Debs Hartke, Leon Trout, and dozens of others. However, human beings taken as a whole are often portrayed in Vonnegut's works as ignorant, myopic warmongers who form corrupt governments, greedy corporations, amoral scientific-research organizations, and soulless militaries. The moral at the heart of this dichotomy is inscribed on Kilgore Trout's gravestone: "We are healthy only to the extent that our ideas are humane" (*Breakfast of Champions* 16). This is the message Vonnegut sends into the next millennium.

Vonnegut is a postmodern Mark Twain, whose own personality permeates everything he writes. Whether we are reading about Martian invasions, the firebombing of Dresden, time-tripping, or the de-evolution of the human race, we never lose touch with the character behind the characters—the reassuring, avuncular voice of the author. Continuing a trend in American literature that began with Benjamin Franklin, Vonnegut's style is ripe with irony and full of aphoristic wit. The maxims in Franklin's *Poor Richard's Almanac*—sayings such as "Lost time is never found," "Whatever's begun in anger, ends in shame," and "There are no ugly loves, and there are no handsome prisons"—are now inextricable from American mythology. Like Franklin, Vonnegut fills his writing with pithy witticisms—clever sayings and mottoes for the modern age, such as: "Before you kill somebody, make absolutely sure he isn't well connected" (*Slaughterhouse-Five* 109); "The main business of humanity is to do a good job of being human beings, not to serve as appendages to machines, institutions, and systems" (*Player Piano* 287); "Poverty is a relatively mild disease . . . but uselessness will kill strong and weak souls alike" (*God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* 210–11); and my personal favorite, "No damn cat, and no damn cradle" (*Cat's Cradle* 114). These Vonnegutisms have also infiltrated American discourse, indicative of Vonnegut's role as a key spokesman for the twentieth century and as a principle figure in the history of American literature.

Unlike the lure of many of his contemporaries, Vonnegut's appeal dissolves elitist intellectual boundaries. Vonnegut has the relatively unique ability to attract diverse groups of readers. Since the critical success of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, scholars and teachers have been increasingly drawn to his work, but so have lay readers, office managers, and computer programmers. His writing is regularly assigned at universities, where it is studied along with the works of Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, and Vladimir Nabokov, but his novels are also taught in high schools, purchased by hoi polloi, and read along with the nov-

els of Piers Anthony and Terry Pratchett. It is not so much that Vonnegut's writing crosses the line between popular fiction and literature, as it makes us stand back, scratch our heads, and wonder what made us think there was a line there in the first place.

My goal in putting together this book was to cover most of Vonnegut's writing up to the end of the millennium. This coverage begins with Jerome Klinkowitz's "Vonnegut the Essayist," a discussion of Vonnegut's three essay collections. Klinkowitz elaborates on Vonnegut's journalistic background and his career-long commitment to the genre. He traces Vonnegut's work as an essayist from Vonnegut's days as an editor on student daily newspapers in high school to the syncretism of essay and novel found in Vonnegut's last book.

Jeff Karon, in "Science and Sensibility in the Short Fiction of Kurt Vonnegut," closely examines the role of science in Vonnegut's often ignored, early science-fiction short stories, offering us valuable insight into how these early works interrelate with Vonnegut's other writing, and bringing to light the extremely useful notion of "ironic science" as literary device in Vonnegut's "science" fiction. Loree Rackstraw's "Quantum Leaps in the Vonnegut Mindfield" provides another view of Vonnegut's work and science, exploring important parallels between quantum mechanics and myth.

Lawrence Broer's "Vonnegut's Goodbye" analyzes the nexus between Vonnegut and Ernest Hemingway and sheds light on Vonnegut's career-long debate with masculinity. In "You Cannot Win, You Cannot Break Even, You Cannot Get Out of the Game," Donald Morse argues that Vonnegut's novels dismiss the notion of progress, and therefore redirect "humans . . . to look again at themselves and their planet." In a similar vein, Hartley Spatt's "Kurt Vonnegut: Ludic Luddite" elaborates Vonnegut's reprobation of technology and explores his long-standing role as the twentieth century's most well-known Luddite.

Looking to the heart of Vonnegut's work, Todd F. Davis's "Apocalyptic Grumbling" helps us to define Vonnegut's "postmodern humanism," and Bill Gholson's "Narrative, Self, and Morality in the Writing of Kurt Vonnegut" explores morality in the novels. David Andrews provides us with the first close examination of Vonnegut's aesthetics, and the final chapter in the book, "Vonnegut Films," critiques film adaptations of Vonnegut's writing. In it David Pringle takes on *Mother Night*, and I look at *Slaughterhouse-Five*, *Slapstick*, and the made-for-TV adaptations.

The title of this book, *At Millennium's End*, is based on a coincidence. As it happened, Kurt Vonnegut's career as a novelist and the millenium came to an end around the same time. Vonnegut reached what he called the "coda on my career" just as time's odometer was getting ready to roll over to 2000. That is, just as the Christian odometer was getting ready to roll over to 2000. The Jewish odometer was getting ready to roll over to 5761, and the Islamic odometer was getting ready to roll over to 1421—both very untidy numbers and not nearly as portentous. But the Christian calendar was the one that stimulated

end-of-the-millennium mania, despite the fact that the year 2000 marked a point in humanity's timeline 1,999 years from a clerical error. What happened was this: Around the middle of the sixth century AD (before there technically was a sixth century AD) Dionysius Exiguus set up a system for numbering years based on when Jesus was supposedly born. The church later learned that Jesus had most likely been born three years earlier than Dionysius's estimate, but by then everyone was used to the system. Thus, the year 2000 has all the meta-physical and historical significance of an automobile odometer. Ironically, the publication of Vonnegut's last novel in 1997 coincides more accurately with the end of the second millennium after the birth of Jesus than the Christian calendar does. As Vonnegut might say, make of that what you will.

Despite its superstitious foundation, the coincidental occurrence of these two events makes an amusing footnote to the career of a writer who spent his life warning human beings of the future science prefigures, and of the price humanity might pay for its blind loyalty to technology. Vonnegut said of this project: "It all seems very spooky to me—my being seventy-five, this being 1998, and all those people writing essays about my oeuvre." Perhaps it is spooky for Vonnegut, but for those of us who have appreciated his writing for half a century, the fact that Vonnegut's canon reached its denouement as the millennium drew to a close and the human race slipped into the twenty-first century seems like poetic irony.



CHAPTER ONE

VONNEGUT THE ESSAYIST

Jerome Klinkowitz

The key to understanding Kurt Vonnegut's seemingly unconventional work has always been to address that work's accessibility. When considering the literary role a novelist who has broken so many rules plays in the present world, one is well advised to consider the kind of writing training he had and the type of work he does on an almost daily basis. In each case we are obligated to look at Vonnegut's essays—essays that are just as unconventional as his novels, and whose violations of tradition are directed to the same purpose as his fiction: the desire to speak directly and convincingly to his audience. Reading anything Kurt Vonnegut has written is to engage in a remarkably personal dialogue with the man himself, and it is in his nonfiction prose that this manner is most apparent.

For a novelist whose books challenge the most established practices of traditional fiction, it should be remembered that Vonnegut was not taught to write like most belletristic authors. He wasn't an English major, for example. His high school courses were taken to prepare him for study in the sciences as pursued at Cornell University, where his father (an architect) and older brother (with a doctorate in atmospheric physics from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology) had determined he would have a "useful" rather than "ornamental" education—the Great Depression had soured his once-accomplished family on the arts. Vonnegut chose to major in chemistry and biology, with an eye toward becoming a biochemist. When World War II took him out of college and into the Army, he trained as a mechanical engineer, spending time at

Carnegie Tech. After the war and graduate study in anthropology at the University of Chicago, Vonnegut was able to return to what had been his first love: writing. But not writing novels or short stories. In both high school and college, Vonnegut had been an editor of the student daily newspaper, learning journalism from the ground up with hands-on experience that could not be duplicated by any purely academic program. And so his qualifications for employment as a writer took him to the General Electric Research Laboratory in Schenectady, New York, where with his brother's help he became one of the lab's publicists.

Hence by 1949 he had published more words than Norman Mailer, Saul Bellow, Grace Paley, or any other fiction writer his age. But none of it was in fiction. Instead, he had become a master of writing on deadline about assigned topics, all of them of great immediate interest and scheduled to run with very short lead time. Though daily journalism and slack work are not regarded as eminent professions, the subject matter these writers address is immensely serious and attended to with concern by readers. In the way that his father and brother had intended, Kurt Vonnegut was doing something useful, not ornamental. There was nothing ornamental about the great technological innovations General Electric was introducing into American life. The company's motto, "Progress Is Our Most Important Product," would help set the tone for the coming decade's lifestyle and the values behind it. In Schenectady Vonnegut lived within a stimulating environment; both work and social circles included the foremost scientists of his day, and the company's policy of letting them work unfettered on their own projects made for an ideal atmosphere. What Vonnegut wrote about as a publicist was of interest to himself and to his readers. Years later he might regret the confinement of a nine-to-five office job and resent its managerial pressures, but the substance of what he was doing has never been disavowed. In similar manner Vonnegut has spoken of what a serious accomplishment student journalism was, especially at Cornell, where the paper was an independent corporation, student-owned, and not subject to faculty or administrative control. Forty years later, as a world-famous novelist, he returned to address the newspaper's annual banquet. As collected in his volume *Palm Sunday*, Vonnegut's comments attest to the power and maturity of such work:

I was happiest here when I was all alone—and it was very late at night, and I was walking up the hill after having put the *Sun* to bed.

All the other university people, teachers and students alike, were asleep. They had been playing games all day long with what was known about real life. They had been repeating famous arguments and experiments, and asking one another the sorts of hard questions real life would be asking by and by.

We on the *Sun* were already in the midst of life. By God, if we weren't! We had just designed and written and caused to be manufactured yet another morning newspaper for a highly intelligent

American community of respectable size—yes, and not during the Harding administration, either, but during 1940, '41, and '42, with the Great Depression ending, and with World War Two well begun.

I am an agnostic as some of you may have gleaned from my writings. But I have to tell you that, as I trudged up the hill so late at night and all alone, I knew that God Almighty approved of me. (66–67)

Hence, seriousness in communicating with a responsive body of readers was from the very first a key element in Vonnegut's writing. Throughout his career that would remain the standard: getting something that mattered across. This called for two abilities, having something to say and an engaging way of saying it. When his son Mark wrote a book about his recovery from schizophrenia (*The Eden Express*), Vonnegut suggested the young man had managed to make a success of the project because he had something to say, and probably would write another book only if he had something else to say. As for reaching readers, Vonnegut had made that the essence of every lesson he taught during his 1965–67 residency at the University of Iowa Writers Workshop. To students in his fiction seminars he'd repeat that anything they'd write did not automatically merit an eager readership. In reaching out toward a public, they were not being coddled by family and friends. There had to be something evident in their work, from the very first lines, that would convince readers that here was somebody to be liked and trusted and worth the investment of reading time. At the beginning of each class, from the semester's start to its finish, Vonnegut would write the same admonition on the blackboard: "Face the audience of strangers." It was not a lesson he himself had learned in any English course or perfected in the pursuit of great literature. But it was to be an essential technique in his writing.

On February 11, 1950, Vonnegut's first professionally published short story appeared in *Collier's*. His G. E. coworker Ollie Lyon recalls that Vonnegut and his friends had a party to celebrate the occasion; everyone in the group was happy that the first of them was breaking out into the world of success beyond the office routine. Vonnegut used the occasion to write his father. He told him of the sale and his plans to keep submitting stories, saving the income until he'd have the equivalent of a year's salary put aside—at which point he promised to quit his office job and never take another, dedicating himself to living as a creative writer.

"Report on the Barnhouse Effect," "Thanasphere," "Epicac," "All the King's Horses," "Mnenomics," "The Euphio Question"—these half dozen stories, published within Kurt Vonnegut's first sixteen months at the trade, got him out of General Electric and into what he considered the more artistic environs of Provincetown, Massachusetts. Soon his short stories were appearing in the age's best venue for such work, *The Saturday Evening Post*, and his dystopian novel *Player Piano*, in which progress was anything but a benign product, was

ready to make any return to the G. E. fold an impossibility. For the next decade *Player Piano* would be the author's only hardcover novel; short stories were his bread and butter; forty-four of them published in good-paying markets such as *Collier's*, the *Post*, *Redbook*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *Ladies Home Journal*. *The Sirens of Titan* and *Mother Night* were paperback originals written only because an outline had been sold, a way to make money when the family weeklies reduced their story acquisitions (before going out of business entirely). *Cat's Cradle* and *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* only appeared as hardcovers because Kurt's paperback editor had changed jobs and taken his authors with him. Neither novel sold well. Indeed, it would not be until *Slaughterhouse-Five* that Vonnegut would have any commercial success as a novelist. But *Slaughterhouse-Five* was by no means Kurt Vonnegut's beginning, for by that time he had already kept his pledge and was supporting himself by writing short stories and idiosyncratically creative essays. Both genres would influence his novels to come.

Those forty-four stories have much in common with the daily journalism and publicity work their author had been pursuing beforehand. For the magazines he published in, particularly *Collier's* and *The Saturday Evening Post*, he was writing with short lead time. Not only were his topics popular, but they had to have the currency typical of a weekly magazine. Though fictive, pieces such as "Report on the Barnhouse Effect" and "All the King's Horses" featured persons, places, things, and issues common to the day's news stories. Any *Collier's* or *Post* in which Vonnegut's short stories appeared would include advertisements and real-life features complementary with issues the fictionist was addressing, issues such as the ethics of new products developed by scientific research or the psychological terror of a new ideological enemy being fought in the Korean War. Even more familiar issues were found in stories such as "The Foster Portfolio" and "More Stately Mansions," in which wealth and its pretensions were gently mocked in a way that reaffirmed a middle-class readership's values. "Face the audience of strangers," the author would later tell his writing students; here he was doing it on a regular basis and succeeding as someone found to be comfortable, trustworthy, entertaining, and instructive. Having moved early on from arty Provincetown to middle-class West Barnstable, on the domestic (as opposed to resort) side of Cape Cod, Vonnegut had established himself as a tradesperson in the manufacture and installation of short stories; no wonder that his most frequent narrator for these stories would be a salesman, peddling anything from insurance to storm windows as a way of getting a foot in the door and letting the author's art happen.

With the exception of two atypical later stories written for special venues ("Welcome to the Monkey House" for *Playboy* and "The Big Space Fuck" for a Harlan Ellison anthology), Kurt Vonnegut's career as a short fictionist came to an end in 1963. Yet it is incorrect to assume that with his story markets gone the author turned at once to the novel for financial support. True, *Cat's Cradle* and *Rosewater* appeared in 1963 and 1965 respectively, but their royalties (on sales of just a few thousand copies each) would not have supported a starving

artist, let alone a family man with six kids to feed, clothe, shelter, and educate. Nor did the lectureship he took at the University of Iowa's Writers Workshop help appreciably. Because the University of Chicago had rejected his M.A. thesis and he had left Cornell without a B.A., Vonnegut qualified for a salary at the bottom rung, less than \$7,000 annually. Compare that to the half-again or twice as much he earned during good years a decade earlier with *The Saturday Evening Post*. The economic truth is that beginning in 1964 the author's most consistent source of income was from essay writing. He began with travel essays for a handsome new glossy called *Venture*, continued with major book reviews for *Life* and *The New York Times Book Review*, and reached his full development with feature personal essays for such well-paying and culturally important magazines as *Esquire*, *Horizon*, *Harper's*, and *McCall's*. Undertaken before the success of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, but then propelled by that novel's cultural notoriety, Vonnegut's essays became an important mode of artistic expression and helped shape the revolutionary formats of his novels.

A look at Kurt Vonnegut's last major short story and first significant essay shows how his fiction and nonfiction share similar writing strategies. "The Hyannis Port Story" had been purchased by *The Saturday Evening Post* and was scheduled to run late in 1963. It was already set in galleys at the time of President John F. Kennedy's assassination. Because Vonnegut's short story spoofed the Kennedy mystique, it suffered the fate of much humor of its type popular up to this time and was cancelled. It did not see print until *Welcome to the Monkey House*, where it appeared with a selection of other Vonnegut stories and two nonfiction pieces: a hilarious review of *The Random House Dictionary* (published in *The New York Times Book Review* for October 30, 1966, the piece brought Vonnegut to Seymour Lawrence's attention and led to the contract for *Slaughterhouse-Five*) and "Where I Live," the author's first feature essay, published in *Venture's* October 1964 issue as "You've Never Been to Barnstable?" Both the Kennedy and Barnstable pieces are set on Cape Cod and are told from the perspective of local, unassuming familiarity rather than glamour or fame. Each teaches the same lesson about how simple homely values win out over self-seriousness and pretensions. Most emphatically, both pieces use a key technique just then becoming popular as The New Journalism, in which writers made sense of a situation by placing themselves at its center and describing their own experience. Using techniques from fiction to enhance journalism became a staple in the works of Tom Wolfe, Joan Didion, Dan Wakefield, Gay Talese, and many others beginning in the middle 1960s. With "Where I Live" Vonnegut joined the first wave of New Journalism, drawing on a method he had perfected in dozens of short stories for the family weeklies.

"The Hyannis Port Story" could almost be an essay, given its famous real-life subject and its strong dose of current-day politics. In time, footnotes may be needed to tell readers of the nuances involved with Adlai Stevenson's ambassadorship to the United Nations, Walter Reuther's presidency of the United Auto Workers, the late Senator Robert Taft's reputation among Republican

Party stalwarts, the nature of Dwight D. Eisenhower's nomination to run for president (instead of Taft), Kennedy's nomination as a Democrat (instead of Stevenson), Attorney General Robert Kennedy's position with the big unions, historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr.'s service as a presidential advisor, and several other minutiae, not to mention the overriding themes of Barry Goldwater's coming challenge in the 1964 election, the Cold War battles with Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev, and the celebrity of the entire (and extensive) Kennedy family during these years. These persons and subjects fill the story, which is propelled by a debate between Republican and Democrat, conservative and liberal, old wealth and new money, old age and youth, and inherited versus earned income. All of these are dealt with from the unique perspective of a storm-window tradesman who has come down from North Crawford, New Hampshire, to install a set of storms and screens on the Hyannis Port mansion next to President Kennedy's.

As an innovative storyteller, Vonnegut cleverly lets the essay aspects of his subject emerge by themselves. The narrator keeps his options open for more important things. The storm-window sale has been made at a local Lions Club meeting where the anticipated Kennedy-Goldwater presidential race is being debated. No hotter political topic in 1963 could be imagined, yet Vonnegut's spokesman shrugs it off (quite wisely for a tradesperson) by saying, "I hadn't made up my mind one way or the other" (133). The evening's speaker has, and as a Goldwater supporter is heatedly debated by a local Democrat. When the narrator gets into an argument later on with this same activist over a leaky bathtub enclosure, the speaker's father mistakes it for Goldwater support and awards a lavish contract on the spot. Thus is Vonnegut's narrator brought down to Hyannis, where in search of the job location he finds himself driving past "the *Presidential Motor Inn*, the *First Family Waffle Shop*, the *PT-109 Cocktail Lounge*, and a miniature golf course called the *New Frontier*" (136). Stopping for lunch, he finds the waffle shop's menu similarly rife with commercialization of the president's family. "All the different kinds of waffles were named after Kennedys and their friends and relatives," he notes. "A waffle with strawberries and cream was a *Jackie*. A waffle with a scoop of ice cream was a *Caroline*. They even had a waffle named *Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.*" Not to be mortified by a cutesy menu, he orders "a thing called a *Teddy*," mercifully undescribed, "and a cup of *Joe*," the patriarch's name letting the narrator speak like the worker he is.

"A man who sells storm windows can never really be sure about what class he belongs to, especially if he installs the windows, too" (137)—this reminder, voiced at the climax of the story's first rising action, is an important credo to both the narrator and Vonnegut himself. It is part of the author's "face the audience of strangers" imperative, a key device by which he makes himself likeable, trustworthy, and above all someone with whom his *Saturday Evening Post* readers can identify. Much as they might wish, they surely can't identify with John F. Kennedy; he's the one to be treated like an idol. Nor can they identify with the lofty world of international politics swirling around Hyannis

Port. Hence, when the narrator gets stuck in a traffic jam with Adlai Stevenson, he passes time by asking the ambassador how things are going at the United Nations. He is told things are going about as well as could be hoped for, and lets the matter go as easily as any back-fence chat with a neighbor over pleasant nothings. Thus readers are brought into the whole heady situation with Vonnegut's narrator as their spokesperson. This plain, simple, and unassuming posture turns out to be the only way of surviving the maelstrom intact, for at the maelstrom's center, facing the Kennedy home, is something more ridiculous than any of the town's commercialization: a giant floodlit billboard-sized portrait of Republican presidential candidate Barry Goldwater, an outrage to President Kennedy constructed by his neighbor who has ordered the storms and screens.

"The Hyannis Port Story" pauses at this point, much like its narrator, to take stock of the situation. The narrator's customer, Commodore Rumfoord, is in every respect the antithesis of President Kennedy. The last thing the simple, honest narrator wants to do is get involved in their squabble. So he carries on as what he is: a plain hard worker, trying to ignore the battiness around him. It is his good example that resolves the plot complications and lets the story end on a happy note. Deflated by the news that his son may be about to marry a Kennedy, the commodore is revived by his wife's encouragement to take back control of his life and do some meaningful work, with the tradesman's steady presence an implied example. Chastened, Rumfoord decides to leave his Goldwater sign unlit, only to be roused to action by his neighbor, President Kennedy, who ends the story by asking that the absurd display be activated for two reasons: so that the president can show it off to a visitor, Khrushchev's son-in-law, and so that its beacon can help the president find his way home.

Thus Vonnegut's roller coaster ride of absurdities is brought to an end on a happily harmless note. The obnoxious Goldwater sign has not insulted the president at all, and the two men are able to act toward each other as neighbors instead of ideologists—just as the narrator had chatted with Ambassador Stevenson. "The Hyannis Port Story" takes celebrity and reduces it to familiarity at the same time it transforms aggression into aid and angry confusion into friendly understanding. As a piece of writing, it has not only the subject matter of an essay but the rhetoric as well. Yet the method of telling is immensely personal.

"Where I Live" (as Vonnegut's title is restored for *Welcome to the Monkey House*) is explicitly an essay, written for *Venture* as a view of this less-visited side of Cape Cod and starting off the author's collection of short stories as an introduction to his life and times. Its beginning, however, might as well be a short story, for Vonnegut's method is decidedly anecdotal—not exactly "once upon a time," but close. The story opens with the news that "Not very long ago, an encyclopedia salesman stopped by America's oldest library building, which is the lovely Sturgis Library in Barnstable Village, on Cape Cod's north shore" (1). The story's point is how astonished the salesman was that this eminent collection's newest resource was a 1938 *Britannica*, nearly thirty years out of date. The

opening introduces the essay's theme, that the place where its author lives is not only quaintly superannuated but also dedicated quite consciously to remaining that way. As a matter of fact, the Barnstable library's newest encyclopedia *was* a '38 model, something a catalog check would confirm. But in terms of the methods of fiction, it is possible the salesman's visit was invented, just like the storm-window salesman's visit to Hyannis Port across the Cape. Confirming this suspicion is Vonnegut's choice to stay with the device, having the man prowl around Barnstable for a bit (and be amazed at even more intentionally backward idiosyncrasies, by which time he finds himself "strangling on apathy, an affliction epidemic among casual visitors to Barnstable Village" (2).

This is a strange way to begin a travel essay, indicating that the destination has nothing whatsoever to interest tourists, but it will become a factor in many of Kurt Vonnegut's essays: deliberately breaking conventional rules. Consequently, the salesman heads for a nearby tourist haven, letting the narrative continue in a way reminiscent of "The Hyannis Port Story":

He took the customary cure, which was to jump into his car and roar off toward the cocktail lounges, motor courts, bowling alleys, gift shoppes, and pizzerias of Hyannis, the commercial heart of Cape Cod. He there worked off all his frustrations on a miniature golf course called Playland. At that time, that particular course had a pathetic, maddening feature typical of the random butchery of the Cape's south shore. The course was built on the lawn of what had once been an American Legion Post—and, right in the middle of the cunning little bridges and granulated cork fairways was a Sherman tank, set there in simpler and less enterprising days as a memorial to the veterans of World War Two.

The memorial has since been moved, but it is still on the south side, where it is bound to be engulfed by indignities again.

The dignity of the tank would be a lot safer in Barnstable Village, but the village would never accept it. It has a policy of never accepting anything. As a happy consequence, it changes about as fast as the rules of chess. (2–3)

Here, by a very round-about way (another Vonnegut technique for both fiction and essays), the author gets to the point he wants to make: that Barnstable is indeed worth a visit, because it is so uniquely insulated from casual tourism, and therefore shows itself as a pristine example of how commercialism can be avoided in favor of maintaining a place where real people just simply live.

One of those people is Kurt Vonnegut himself. Although readers can easily surmise the type of guy he is by considering the values and manners of expressing them in this volume's twenty-three short stories (several of which are narrated by the same village tradesperson as "The Hyannis Port Story," where North Crawford stands in for West Barnstable), they can find factual evi-

dence in this collection's other piece of nonfiction prose, the author's review of *The Random House Dictionary*. Over the course of his three subsequent collections of essay materials, Vonnegut included very few book reviews, although reviewing has been an important part of his work and constituted most of his livelihood in the mid-1960s. This very assignment speaks for the financial straits he was in: who else would accept the daunting task of reviewing a dictionary? His brilliance is that he takes the job and completes it in an informative, interesting, and entertaining way. He is not a lexicographer, so he can find just one such issue to consider: does the new dictionary contain dirty words? Nor is he a linguist, and so the best he can make of their debates is that "Prescriptive, as nearly as . . . [he] could tell, was like an honest cop, and descriptive was like a boozed-up war buddy from Mobile, Ala." (108). Much of what Vonnegut has to say is culled from dinner conversations with two of his own present buddies, novelist Richard Yates and critic Robert Scholes. This deliberate informality provides an unexpected benefit when at the review's conclusion the author has some fun at the expense of the dictionary's publisher, Random House president Bennett Cerf. Cerf had once employed (and apparently put through the wringer) a young vice-president named Seymour Lawrence. The reference to his old boss caught Lawrence's eye, and a reading of Vonnegut's review made him think that anyone who could make such a dull review assignment so funny to read must have great talents as a novelist. Within three years Vonnegut had his first bestseller published by Lawrence, together with his five previously neglected novels brought back into print.

As a famous novelist in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, Vonnegut no longer had to write essays and reviews to support himself. But as a public spokesperson, he was in great demand, and remained committed to the great social issues of his day. Hence he continued writing nonfiction prose, and by 1974 had determined that it (and not his two dozen short stories that hadn't been republished) would provide the contents of future collections. The first, *Wampeters, Foma, and Granfalloon* shows how selective the author is. He discarded thirteen book reviews (in favor of saving just three) while passing over just one essay, the very early and atypically fabulative "Der Arme Dolmetscher," published in the *Atlantic Monthly* for July of 1955, but advertised as forthcoming in that journal as early as 1953. The canonical lesson is clear: although book reviewing was mostly work, essay writing was a practice of literary art, art that Kurt Vonnegut was happy to see preserved alongside his now-famous novels. The reviews themselves, both collected and not, often rely on autobiography, as the author relates the book at hand to his childhood in Indiana or early days with General Electric. In terms of reviewer objectivity, this practice can be considered as breaking the rules. But it is in the essays that Vonnegut shatters conventions by taking every opportunity to do something wrong. In "Science Fiction," a *New York Times Book Review* essay arguing against his own inclusion in the subgenre, it is a case of using rhetorical fallacies, in this case the excluded middle—saying that when SF advocates try to include writers such as Leo Tolstoi and Franz

Kafka in their clan it is as ridiculous as Vonnegut claiming that everyone of note belonged to his own fraternity, Delta Upsilon, whether he knew it or not, and then remarking how "Kafka would have been a desperately unhappy D. U." (4).

In "Yes, We Have No Nirvanas," an *Esquire* essay treating the Maharishi and transcendental meditation, Vonnegut breaks the rule of his own agnosticism by citing Christ's better religious example, and in "Excelsior! We're Going to the Moon! Excelsior!" (a *New York Times Magazine* feature growing out of a CBS Television News assignment) he mocks the seriousness of the Apollo space program by first comparing it to childlike endeavors and then by responding like an overexuberant drunk. Asked to speak to the American Physical Society, he argues not for science but for humanism; seeking an example of a humanist, he picks not a great artist or philosopher but his sheep dog Sandy, who likes people. Even for one of the book reviews he includes, "Oversexed in Indianapolis" (covering Dan Wakefield's novel *Going All the Way for Life* magazine), he begins by breaking three cardinal rules of the trade: he reviews the book of a friend, he admits that friendship in the first line, and he adds that even if he didn't think the book was good he'd say that it was.

Other pieces expand this habit of contrariness with convention into a vision. "Brief Encounters on the Inland Waterway" deglamorizes the Kennedys and demystifies yacht ownership; "There's a Maniac Loose Out There" makes the depersonalization of mass murder suddenly quite personal; the awesome doings of the Vietnam era's secretary of defense are related to the doings of high school friends, while "Torture and Blubber" compares military weaponry to juvenile fantasies.

Throughout, timing is of the essence, with short paragraphs and single-word sentences set in a rhythm much like that in *Cat's Cradle*. Deft little originalities of statement are crafted, such as this warning to fellow Indianapolis native Dan Wakefield that his sexually frank novel means that he can never go home again: "From now on, he will have to watch the 500-mile Speedway race on television" (118). Similar lines from other writers are equally treasured, such as when during the 1972 Republican National Convention (which Vonnegut is covering for *Harper's* magazine) columnist Art Buchwald comes up with an idea for the Party's two billion dollar campaign surplus: a plan "to buy something nice for the American people," namely "a free week's bombing of Vietnam" (188). The purpose of such timing is to disarm expectations, not just for the fun of it, but to let some new, otherwise rejectable wisdom fill the gap. Such is the technique Vonnegut uses in his graduation address to the students of Bennington College, who instead of being told to go out and change the world are encouraged to lay back and take it easy for a while, that there's nothing they alone can do to improve things or stop the war in Vietnam—the only person to ever stop a tank single-handed was John Wayne, and he was in another tank. Nor should they cry voluptuous tears over the world's suffering, for "To weep is to make the less of grief" (162). Above all, these bright graduates should not put too much trust in knowledge, for knowledge (especially as perfected by the

military) establishes how contemptible human life is; far better to be superstitious and have faith that life might matter.

Wampeters, Foma, and Granfaloon is a culling, as Vonnegut explains in its preface, a selection of materials from a much larger variety of work reaching back to before he had become famous. With the Delacore Press / Seymour Lawrence publication *Palm Sunday* in 1981, the author has his first opportunity to weave a volume more in the manner of whole cloth, incorporating the recent nonfiction prose that he'd written from a widely acknowledged point of view and in appreciation that these pieces would stand next to his novels as another Vonnegut book. The key difference between *Wampeters* and *Palm Sunday* is indicated by their subtitles: "opinions" versus "an autobiographical collage." Most of the former essays were written before their author was famous; they were, in other words, assignments, and though they were interesting enough to elicit his opinions and sufficiently important to appear in leading magazines, their collective impression could only be called various—from the Maharishi and the space program to Madame Blavatsky and Biafra it would be hard to establish a pattern other than concerns of the day, and therefore concerns of a working journalist. In *Palm Sunday* all that changes. As the best-selling author of *Slaughterhouse-Five* and several other number-one-listed novels, Vonnegut could choose his own occasions to write. The title itself refers to his new fancy of giving sermons from the pulpits of renowned churches, such as New York's Cathedral of St. John the Divine. Most important, the materials were bridged by fresh commentary linking them together by means of transitions, prefaces, and afterwords for each piece, producing the "autobiographical collage" as promised by the subtitle.

There is still a variousness of sorts to *Palm Sunday*, but it is a variousness relating to the author himself. The volume is divided into nineteen titled sections—some of them containing several essays, others just two or one, and in the case of section ten, "Embarrassment," no essay at all, just an autobiographical note on how the author proved an embarrassment to his Indianapolis relatives. In all cases the new interweaving material is substantial in itself and important to *Palm Sunday's* integrity as a book and not just a collection. This ongoing commentary combines with individual essays to produce a theme and a rhetoric for advancing it. This theme is the power of writing, and the rhetoric involves Vonnegut's autobiographical experiences in living by the word. As any reader of his novels would know, here was a man who treasured vernacular speech and used it quite effectively to both instruct and entertain. *Palm Sunday* puts that practice on record, explains how it came about, and indicates how the author has perfected it as his most successful manner. He explains how jokes work. He considers how libraries are important for preserving and making available personal visions expressed in a way that readers can share and recreate. He honors the First Amendment as the protector in principle of such expression. He examines how other writers have chosen such forms, from Swift and Céline to the vernacular mastery of Mark Twain. In the sermon that gives

his book its title, Vonnegut retranslates Jesus' words into a more common idiom so his thoughts can be better understood. How such writing works in practice is the subject of the advice he gives in an advertisement for a paper company, a matter having something to say and the ability to say it honestly and convincingly, lessons the author himself learned first hand as a student journalist. "Find a subject you care about and which you in your heart feel others should care about," he advises writing students. "It is this genuine caring, and not your games with language, which will be the most compelling and seductive element in your style" (77). As for the voice to express it, "I myself find that I trust my own writing most, and others seem to trust it most, too, when I sound like a person from Indianapolis, which is what I am" (79).

As the nonfiction prose written during the period of Kurt Vonnegut's greatest fame and busiest professional involvement, *Palm Sunday* is an active and even combative book. In it he takes on censoring school boards to defend the First Amendment and a selfish restaurant customer to speak for the waitress he has had unfairly fired. He mounts the pulpit to sermonize, and speaks consolingly at the funeral of an old friend's wife. He studies his ancestors to learn where he has come from, and talks about his children as examples of where the family genius is now leading, all of it undertaken with great seriousness. He is candid about his bad old ways of expression, having too much to drink and spending late evenings writing letters and making phone calls to old enemies, real or presumed. Now, when moved by righteous ire, he has pulpits and editorial pages open to his thoughts, and his happy resolve is to use those forums properly and effectively. *Palm Sunday* is the work of an essentially committed writer, and it is the manner of his commitment that gives it its form.

Kurt Vonnegut's novels during the decades of *Wampeters* and *Palm Sunday* parallel his evolving manner as an essayist. The author's tendency to introduce autobiographical elements into his fiction coincides with the self-apparent personal qualities in the essays and book reviews he began writing during this same period. The method reaches full expression with the revolutionary nature of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, where chapters 1 and 10 describe the author's crafting of the novel that will itself include three mentions of Vonnegut as a character within the wartime action. Readers can see it coming in the highly autobiographical introduction added to Harper & Row's 1966 hardcover edition of *Mother Night* and *Welcome to the Monkey House*'s preface, each of which relates Kurt Vonnegut directly and extensively to the fictive writing that follows. These elements were developed between 1966 and 1968, just as the most characteristic essays of *Wampeters* were taking shape. In both fiction and nonfiction, the author was not only drawing on his autobiography but using elements of his life to alter each genre's form, suspending the novel's customary suspension of disbelief in favor of self-evident and actively present authorship at the same time the customary objectivity of journalism gave way to an honest appraisal of the self's role in this business. Vonnegut's fiction of the later 1960s, then, with its nondescript protagonists, reflects his essays of the period, which take an

appealingly aw-shucks posture toward topics otherwise supposed to be impressive (the Mararishi, the moon launch). When during the 1970s (and now famous himself) his novels are narrated by loftier personages (a U.S. president, a high-level Nixon administration official), Vonnegut's committed manner and more serious topicality coincide with similar qualities of his '70s nonfiction adding up to *Palm Sunday*.

In the 1980s Kurt Vonnegut's writing takes another turn, once again paralleled by fiction and nonfiction. Although usually set in the future, these novels have a retrospective quality to them. His narrators look back on matters from Darwinian evolution and modern American art history to a reexamination of our country's culture during the Vietnam War (during which time a massive sell-off to foreign interests began to reshape the economy). Here an autobiographical presence is less evident than in the later '60s and '70s work, certainly less active in shaping each novel's form. In a similar way Vonnegut's essays of the 1980s, most of which are woven into the almost seamless text of *Fates Worse Than Death*, take a more relaxed attitude toward autobiography's shape-taking power. Unlike the pieces in *Wampeters* and *Palm Sunday*, these writings do not use references to the author's life as a way of surprising the reader, disarming expectations, or slipping the otherwise confining gears of good rhetoric. Instead, like the novels Kurt Vonnegut was writing at the time, they use autobiography in its simplest, most obvious manner: that of reminiscence. As with parts of *Bluebeard* and *Hocus Pocus*, the tone can become almost elegiac, most obviously so in the lovely essay on his family's long-ago summers in a string of cottages along Indiana's Lake Max-incuckee. Similar essays on his father, his sister, his first wife, his old war buddy, and others (all of them long dead) are not so much collected as drawn upon as first drafts for what now becomes an even more integral book than *Palm Sunday*. Instead of categorical sections, Vonnegut prepares a series of numbered chapters, the substance of which lies not in any specific topicality but rather in the posture he takes throughout, which is to look back—not in anger, but with a growing sense of peace. When not elegiac, this peacefulness is achieved by gentle self-mockery, as in the conclusion to his coverage of a particularly tragic and atrocity-filled African war. "The photograph at the head of this chapter shows me in Mozambique, demonstrating muscular Christianity in an outfit that might have been designed by Ralph Lauren," the author remarks. "The aborigines didn't know whether to shit or go blind until I showed up. And then I fixed everything" (175). That his conclusion is set apart in parentheses, a radically unconventional way to end an essay, underscores Vonnegut's understanding that in retrospect there was nothing at all that he could do.

Throughout his three volumes of nonfiction prose, Kurt Vonnegut maintains a consistency of method, the key to which is an artful inconsistency. Like even his earliest novels, there is a sense of rambling to his line of development—not hopelessly disordered, but arranged in ways other than the

straight line of rational logic, making wide-sweeping lateral moves so that otherwise overlooked materials (often autobiographical) can be brought in, and most effectively so that having outflanked his readers, as it were, he can make his rhetorical move along a less guarded approach. Thus his essays work best when they are long, allowing him to amass a wide range of topics and opinions on which he can touch almost subliminally, just as in his novels odds and ends from widely various sources will recur often enough to give his narratives an uncanny sense of deep order. Within the continuity of *Fates Worse Than Death* he has familiarized readers with so many of his attitudes that he can bounce several of them together in a sentence or two with the multifaceted effect of a fancy combination pool shot. For example, halfway through the volume he has established in individual pieces how strategic bombing is inhumane, how politicians sometimes don't have best interests at heart, how nations are artificial and ineffective ways of human organization, how chance encounters with old hometowners are as meaningful as any other systematic structure, and so forth. Notice how so many of these points come together in a brief aside to fellow novelist John Updike, who before speaking in Indiana asked Vonnegut for some local names and topics: "I added that George Bush's making Dan Quayle the custodian of our nation's destiny, should Bush become seriously impaired, was proof to me that Bush didn't give a damn what became of the rest of us once he himself was gone. There's a bomber pilot for you" (94).

As with this comment on President Bush, Vonnegut's overall method is to personalize, to look past obscuring technicalities in order to see the human dimension and, most important, to express that dimension in familiar, trustworthy terms. For his writer's career, this method has shown success in both his fiction and nonfiction, whether in parallel fashion or through an intermixture of generic techniques. In *Timequake*, novel and essay are united in a new form by which the author presents neither fiction nor nonfiction, but rather the autobiography of a novel. Here matter and manner are mutually reinforcing, for the narrative about a ten-year jumpback and subsequent replay of a decade's history is told not as a story per se but as an account of how Vonnegut struggled with a more conventional version of these doings, scrapped it, and recrafted the volume as a summary of the original story within the context of everything else happening in the writer's life during this time.

Like all of Kurt Vonnegut's work, *Timequake* faces the audience of strangers to convey, in an interesting, entertaining, and trustworthy manner something important and worthwhile. In this work's case, the message involves the value of art in making the otherwise troublesome experiences of life more rewarding. The manner used to express this point encompasses Vonnegut's wide reach for materials from his own life and his countrymen's shared popular culture. Like all of his prose that he has allowed to be collected, it satisfies this firmly agnostic author that he has done his job in a way of which even God must approve.

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CHAPTER TWO

VONNEGUT AND AESTHETIC HUMANISM

David Andrews

We are here to help each other get through this thing,
whatever it is.

—Dr. Mark Vonnegut, epigraph to *Bluebeard*

Pictures are famous for their human-ness, and not
their picture-ness.

—Kurt Vonnegut,
quoted in Klinkowitz, *Vonnegut in Fact*

It is infinitely better not to know anything about art
than to have the kind of half-knowledge which makes
for snobbishness. The danger is very real. There are
people . . . who understand that there are great works
of art which have none of the obvious qualities of
beauty of expression or correct draughtsmanship, but
who become so proud of their knowledge that they
pretend to like only those works which are neither
beautiful nor correctly drawn.

—E. H. Gombrich, *The Story of Art*

In *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* (1965), a character in a Kilgore Trout novel asks the question that haunts so many Kurt Vonnegut novels: "What in hell are people for?" (21). The question remains unanswerable because it assumes an ultimate design within which humans have a meaningful, crucial function—an assumption that dissatisfies skeptics from Hume to Vonnegut.¹ In the absence of such ultimacy, Vonnegut grants humanity a wholly practical, humanistic purpose. People are *for* people—or, as Eliot Rosewater proposes to tell twin infants, "There's only one rule I know of, babies . . . God damn it, you've got to be kind" (93). Because it seems so arbitrary, however, Eliot's single commandment seems made for breaking. Were *Rosewater* a Barthelme story, the infants might respond by objecting that Eliot, in eliminating divine design, has eliminated the ultimate foundation for altruism. Why be kind? Who says?

Vonnegut says—and *Rosewater* is, after all, his design. By consistently answering the unanswerable question in *Rosewater's* way, Vonnegut has been implicitly answering a more focused question all along: What are the arts for? Predictably, Vonnegut's answer is that they are for people. The latter answer is satisfactory for the same reason the former is not. The unanswerable question is flawed in that it implies an erroneous analogy between people and manmade things, which have originary purposes only insofar as they have creators. As such a creator, Vonnegut assigns the rules for his artificial worlds; as a result, *Rosewater's* kindness imperative is, within his world, a species of absolute. Outside that world, it amounts to just another artificial construct, a lie. But it is an ethical lie, one unlikely to worsen humanity's plight. This is in keeping with Vonnegut's belief that "writers should serve their society," each writer proving himself "a good citizen" through the fabrication of things "that would tend to make people gentle" (*Conversations* 45, 72, 19). These may sound like the prescriptions of a didactic, potentially inartistic writer, but it would be a mistake to infer that Vonnegut thinks his admittedly simple purpose is simply accomplished—a point that *Bluebeard* (1987), his eleventh novel, makes clear.² Though all of Vonnegut's works are informed by his humanism, *Bluebeard* is unique among them in that it alone discloses through its literal, ideational content the actual complexity of Vonnegut's aesthetic and his view of art history. As a set of concepts, this moral-aesthetic viewpoint is revealing in its idiosyncrasy and worthy of scrutiny. What gives *Bluebeard* its power and its elegance, however, is the novel's unified structure, which realizes this complex viewpoint in a wise and decidedly crafty manner.

Before turning to an examination of *Bluebeard* and related texts, it is useful to break Vonnegut's moral-aesthetic viewpoint into a set of basic concepts. If art is explicitly humanistic, it must be solidly rooted in the contingent world, its positive value gauged by its relatively utilitarian, experiential, and ethical functions. For Vonnegut, a successful artwork, whether a novel or a painting, is never autotelic in the art-for-art's-sake sense. Rather, such an artwork is always for things external to itself, that is, for creators and perceivers. In this regard, art has two primary positive effects on creators and perceivers: therapeutic and

communicative. The act of creation itself has the potential to be immediately therapeutic. Still, since creation is typically solitary, this is not the effect with the greatest humanistic value. Insofar as art forges a bond between creator and perceiver—a bond that, among its virtues, possesses a secondary therapeutic value of its own—art's communicative function is most important to Vonnegut. Naturally, the act of reading or interpreting art, whether literary or otherwise, supplies this effect most readily.

In other words, it is incumbent upon the artist to *express* himself to someone else. If this modest purpose is combined with a basic understanding of the three enduring artistic theories (the mimetic, the expressionist, and the formalist), *Bluebeard's* position on abstract expressionism and its historical skirmishes with representationalism will come into focus. In Vonnegut's aesthetic, the expression of ideas and emotions is art's goal, with mimetic (or representational) and formalist (or abstract) techniques the instruments of this goal. If the artist expresses himself, his choice of technique is relatively unimportant. This is in keeping with the idea that art, a physical artifact, is in itself unimportant.³ For Vonnegut, art does not possess intrinsic value; rather, it refers to humanity's intrinsic value.⁴ Still, an artist must make formal choices, and these should be dictated by his inborn gifts (as *Bluebeard* proves, the author is a firm adherent of the idea of "talent"), by the idea or feeling he means to express, by his medium, and by his audience. Finally, the artist, however talented, is responsible for his expressions and must express ideas and images deemed likely to increase the world's store of available gentleness.

This is how art should work, but what Vonnegut and *Bluebeard* do best is dissect the various historical processes that corrupt art. These corruptions all turn art against its ideal humanistic purpose and exemplify in a specifically artistic context the author's ongoing ambivalence toward technology and other forms of artifice, which often betray the idealistic pursuits that spawn them. (That Vonnegut regularly refers to artworks as machines, as "gadgets" on which to "tinker," is instructive [e.g., Reed and Leeds 36].) The example of Felix Hoenikker in *Cat's Cradle* (1963) is relevant in that he unites science and art by equating an autotelic truth with an autotelic beauty. For Irving Langmuir, Hoenikker's real-life model, "any truth . . . was beautiful in its own right, and he didn't give a damn who got it next" (*Conversations* 233). Because Hoenikker pursues the truth with disinterest—a largely post-Kantian attitude that connects "pure science" with "pure art"—he considers the practical consequences of his science irrelevant. Through his research, Hoenikker separates himself from human experience and thus sacrifices his conscience—a Faustian process that Vonnegut's artists frequently duplicate. Sensibly, though, Vonnegut realizes that the pursuit of a true beauty through art is unlikely to lead to the annihilation that results from Hoenikker's pursuit of a beautiful truth through science:

... he was allowed to concentrate on one part of life more than any human being should be allowed to do. He was overspecialized and