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The Postwar Novel as Postmodern: Billy Pilgrim's Imagination and the Critical Tendency towards Teleology, Slaughterhouse – Five

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Abstract: *This paper is an exploration of Slaughterhouse-Five (1969), an early document of American postmodern literature. In particular, this paper attempts to present the critical discussions surrounding this novel as equidistant to the broader theoretical discussions surrounding the concept of postmodernism. My contention is that, in discussing this novel, due in part to the natural teleological and linear tendencies of literary criticism, and despite the professed openness of postmodern thought to conflict, diligent efforts must be made to periodically reassert collapsed possibilities in literature. With this in mind, I approach Slaughterhouse-Five in an effort to, first, demonstrate how critics have diminished the potential meaning of each novel in imposing their own notions of a literary-historical trajectory, and, second, how readings of marginalized characters in this novel can reveal untapped potential for further exploration of the broadest definitions of the project of postmodernism.*

Keywords: *Postmodernism, Literary-Historical Trajectory, and Linear Tendencies of Literary Criticism, Imagination, Slaughterhouse-Five.*

INTRODUCTION

The arena of postmodern literary criticism, an arena very much committed to the idea of “decentering,” is at once ideally equipped to challenge the authority of any rival ideology and, thanks to this same commitment, constantly on the verge of collapsing under the weight of anxiety stemming from its own lack of authority. To devotees of the many theoretical practices that coexist under that umbrella of postmodernism, the above quotation from Linda Hutcheon should provide some comfort. Here Hutcheon suggests that the influential and still-vital theories of Foucault, Derrida, and Marx persist despite the conflict that they are “implicated in that notion of center they attempt to subvert”—and they are so implicated deeply and knowingly. I begin with Hutcheon’s idea of persistence in the face of conflict because it indicates at once the sense of humility and sense of boldness that I posit must underlie all discourse on the postmodern. Participants in this discourse—writers, critics, and readers alike—must humbly accept the instability and uncertainty of meaning that accompanies the project of decentering epistemological authority; but on the other hand, they must also be bold enough to produce meaning from such unstable ground.

At the heart of this paper lie an American novel about World War II that are typically included in this discourse of postmodernism. The inclusion of Slaughterhouse-Five is warranted at least in part because both persist in the spirit of Hutcheon’s conflict: both are about producing meaning where none seems to exist. As I approached the literary criticism surrounding each novel, I came to the conclusion that postmodernism can help one understand the novels, this paper is just as much about how Slaughterhouse-Five can help us understand postmodernism better. More specifically, I hope to establish the following five positions that are critical to my understanding of each novel and its context in postmodern literary discourse: I appreciate the difficulty with which critics grapple with the postmodern conflict in their work. The many fascinating conversations that make up the discourse of postmodernism can also be found in the discussion surrounding the war novel of Vonnegut. While a typical project might concentrate on how postmodernism can help one understand the novel, this paper is just as much about how Slaughterhouse-Five can help us understand postmodernism better. More specifically, I hope to establish the following five positions that are critical to my understanding of each novel and its context in postmodern literary discourse:

1. Literary criticism, even postmodern literary criticism, is naturally teleological. Despite the urging of postmodernism, critical texts tend to be placed within the broader context of a literary-historical tradition with a certain trajectory. Further crippling its ability to accommodate the conflicts of postmodernism, literary criticism tends to impose linear narratives upon its subjects. Such impositions are inevitable and can be productive, but need to be recognized.
2. Hutcheon suggests that postmodernists accept their implied roles in postmodern conflicts deeply and knowingly, to which I add a third suggestion: that we fly in the face of conflict transparently. Although writers of literature and criticism may embrace postmodern conflicts knowingly, they cede control over the interpretation of their texts once the texts are made public. Therefore, critics and readers must work vigilantly to prevent such conflicts from collapsing. In this paper, I try to open back up such collapsed conflicts in my readings of *Slaughterhouse -Five*.
3. The trajectory implied by the teleology of literary criticism contributes to the insistence that postmodern literature is something fundamentally new. In fact, viewing postmodern literature strictly in terms of its innovative qualities results in an incomplete understanding of how the conflict of postmodernism is itself the persistence of an old conflict.
4. At the heart of most attempts to establish a productive definition of postmodernism is the idea that postmodernism includes all attempts to resist grand cultural narratives. While this may be true, dissent from these grand narratives is nothing new; what is perhaps new is the sheer scale of grand narratives in the 20th century.
5. Postmodern text like *Slaughterhouse-Five* specifically resists impositions of linear, unidirectional critical narrative. One such narrative suggests that postmodernism can yield nothing but frustration, complacency, and meaninglessness: that postmodernism is ethically void. *Slaughterhouse-Five*, specifically the way its narrator undermines its protagonist Billy Pilgrim, shows how complacency can be turned into productive anger.

While I hope that this list of ideas begins to tell an intriguing story on its own, I must first properly introduce and develop a sixth idea, which serves as the primary premise of this paper and remains in the foreground throughout:

6. The public doctrines that pervaded American understanding of the Second World War and, subsequently, the Cold War is the quintessential American grand narratives of the postmodern era. The fundamental characteristic of postmodernist literature, though not necessarily a characteristic distinguishing it from modernist literature, is its ability to offer alternative narratives that (would ideally) disrupt the grand narratives that allow cultures to make sense of their history with minimal guilt and maximal pride.

In the remainder of my introduction, I will attempt to establish this premise, which will enable me to engage the critical discussion surrounding *Slaughterhouse-Five* and the larger, overarching discussion on postmodernism as parallel, mutually influencing discussions. By seeking to recoup potential lost by years of critical discussion, this paper will, in effect, also seek the recovery of powerful ethical capabilities that are often denied to postmodern literature. With this in mind, I will first guide my project toward the broad concept of postmodernism.

Although an unchallenged definition of postmodernism does not exist (and may not be possible), most critics agree that, for their experimentalism and anti-war message, *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969) by Kurt Vonnegut represents something like the first wave of American literary postmodernism. Yet, I hope to demonstrate here a major problem in deeming any novel "postmodern": the tendency of the critic's postmodern expectations to be read into the literature, rather than anything inherent to the novel dictating its classification. Postmodern classification is particularly susceptible to such self-fulfilling critical prophecies because of the highly arbitrary and subjective criteria that distinguish it. However, before approaching such difficulties, it is necessary to first establish some stable ground for the term.

What I intend to examine in the following pages are the distinct ways in which *Slaughterhouse-Five* achieves paradigmatic status as postmodern American Cold War-era novels about World War II. Furthermore, I intend to interrogate how these distinctions reveal biases towards incomplete and exclusionary definitions of postmodernist literature, specifically in these definitions' conceptions of the relationship between postmodernism and modernism. I have already briefly sketched out the reasoning behind the two approaches: one focusing on how postmodernism continues the modernist project of dissent, and one focusing on how postmodernism innovates formally beyond the modernist novel.

In Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Billy Pilgrim becomes unmoored in time, traveling at random through episodes in his life that range from his unexciting existence in upstate New York where he lives out middle age as an optometrist, to his experience as a prisoner of war in Germany where he witnesses the destruction of Dresden, and to his time spent on the planet Tralfamadore where he lives in an exhibit with a beautiful female human movie star, subject to curiosities of aliens who marvel at the distinctly human tendency to seek explanation for all events. The novel begins with the musings of a narrator who can be considered Vonnegut himself. In this first chapter, Vonnegut apologizes for the "failure" of a book to follow and explains how the tragedy of Dresden both defies explanation and requires a human response (Vonnegut 22). The bombing of Dresden is the kernel of trauma that underlies the entire novel.

The form of *Slaughterhouse-Five* allows humanity's relationship to tragedy to be expressed in a manner much more poignant than the science fiction overtones of the novel let on. In this way his narrator puts is, something "intelligently" said about the Dresden massacre could not possibly do it justice. To demonstrate, Vonnegut imports excerpts from the forward to David Irving's historical account *The Destruction of Dresden*.

In this chapter on *Slaughterhouse-Five*, I hope to demonstrate two key elements that relate the critical discussion of the novel to the assertions on the nature of literary criticism in postmodernity. Here, I will introduce a critical discussion regarding the imagination of Billy Pilgrim to demonstrate how teleological expectations tend to establish a linear narrative that overemphasizes postmodernism's break from modernism. In other words, like *Slaughterhouse-Five* contains ample strategies for overturning

negative stereotypes of postmodern ethics—that postmodern ethics must be nihilistic, relativistic, impotent, complacent, and lacking conviction.

Billy Pilgrim's Imagination and the Critical Tendency towards Teleology: Many critics of the novel argue that the supernatural experiences of Billy Pilgrim can and should be explained away as psychological fantasies, an interpretation that would reassert the epistemological dominant of the novel. Donald E. Morse provides a roundup of critics who consider Billy Pilgrim's experiences to be the work of an imagination seeking escape from traumas sustained in Dresden, rather than actual paranormal encounters (89). Tony Tanner describes Billy Pilgrim as "an innocent, sensitive man who encounters so much death and so much evidence of hostility to the human individual while he is in the army that he takes refuge in an intense fantasy life" (195). Wayne McGinnis asserts that the Tralfamadorians are "mythical creatures who live on a distant planet in Billy Pilgrim's mind" (115). William Godshalk refers to Billy as Slaughterhouse-Five's "mad protagonist" (qtd. in Morse 105). Russell Blackford is taken to task by Morse for tracing Billy Pilgrim's moment of becoming "unstuck in time" to brain damage from a minor incident in which Pilgrim is banged against a tree by Roland Weary (Vonnegut 23, Morse 89). To these readers, explains Morse disdainfully, Slaughterhouse-Five is "a realistic novel with a hero who fantasizes" (89). They miss the point; the proper reading, according to Morse, is to accept Billy's adventures literally:

Billy does not hallucinate; instead, as Vonnegut tells us repeatedly, he simply, if fantastically, comes "unstuck in time" and is, therefore, able to move in time forward as well as backward. As a result, Billy enjoys the nonhuman consolation of seeing time and events as God sees them...that is, all at once. Similarly, Billy's ability to escape suffering by viewing only those good moments in his life where "nothing hurt" becomes appropriate if—ultimately—self-defeating for this utterly passive victim of other people and events (89).

However, Morse's reading is problematic, too. He is right to refer to the genre of the fantastic in relation to Slaughterhouse-Five, but wrong to assert with such certainty that Billy's time traveling should be considered an unchallenged fact for readers. Morse's reference to "Billy's ability to escape" is a clear indication that he has overstated his case. If Morse advocates taking the narrator's description of Billy Pilgrim's time-travel more literally, we should certainly pay heed when told that "Billy is spastic in time, has no control over where he is going next, and the trips aren't necessarily fun" (Vonnegut 23). To further bolster this point, Albert Cacicedo points out that Pilgrim's first travel in time takes him back to a terrifying incident when his father was teaching him how to swim: "It was like an execution," Billy says (Cacicedo 363, Vonnegut 43-4). Of course, it is possible that, in the world of Slaughterhouse-Five, Billy actually did visit the planet Tralfamadore; however, the possibility also remains that Billy's problem is psychological. In fact, Billy's daughter Barbara refuses to believe her father. After he writes a letter to the local newspaper explaining the lessons about time and destiny he learned from the Tralfamadorians, for example, Barbara confronts him: "It's all just crazy. None of it is true!" to which Billy replies, "It's all true" (Vonnegut 29).

It is the simultaneity of the possibilities that Barbara or Billy may be correct that makes Billy's Tralfamadorian experiences part of the literature of the fantastic. Those readers that take either Billy's or Barbara's word over the other do so with insufficient evidence fantastic literature cultivates this balance. As McHale notices, this very hesitation "between natural and supernatural explanations" is what characterizes the fantastic. Kafka's "Metamorphosis" is like Finnegans Wake when it comes to critical discussion of the fantastic: all theories must be tested against it. For Morse, who argues vehemently for the supernatural explanation of Slaughterhouse-Five, a critic suggesting that Billy Pilgrim's trips to Tralfamadore are fantasy "might as well suggest that Gregor Samsa only hallucinates being a cockroach in "The Metamorphosis" (89). Tvetan Todorov, unable to incorporate Kafka's story into his account of the fantastic as hesitation between uncanny and marvelous explanations, concludes, "Kafka's text heralds the disappearance of the fantastic in twentieth-century literature...a consequence of the disappearance of representation in contemporary writing" (McHale 74).

In order to recover the fantastic for postmodernism, McHale must complete three important steps. First, he must explain how the fantastic can survive the "unfantastic tone of banality" that gives Kafka's story its anomalous aspect and signals the end of the fantastic for Todorov. Although there are no characters in "The Metamorphosis" who hesitate to accept the supernatural situation of Gregor Samsa, McHale argues that "it is the reader himself or herself" who does the hesitating (75). McHale is convincing in making the case that the banality of "The Metamorphosis" actually multiplies the effect of the fantastic in the story. It was Albert Camus who said of Kafka, "We shall never be sufficiently amazed at this lack of amazement" (qtd. in McHale 76).

Secondly, McHale must first refute Todorov's charge that the fantastic ceased to exist in the latter 20th century because recent writers have exhibited a lack of interest in representing the real. To do so, he argues, "In the context of postmodernism the fantastic has been co-opted as one of a number of strategies of an ontological poetics that pluralizes the 'real' and thus problematizes representation" (75). In other words, representation of the real persists beyond Kafka, yet this representation is of an abstracted real that in no longer stands in contrast with the supernatural.

But a third step remains for McHale in recovering the fantastic for postmodernism; up to this juncture, McHale has only argued for the persistence of Todorov's poetics of the fantastic beyond "The Metamorphosis" and throughout the 20th century; Todorov's structure is an epistemological one, which doesn't align it with McHale's insistence on the ontological dominant of the postmodern. For Todorov, "a text belongs in the fantastic proper only as long as it hesitates between natural and supernatural explanations, between the uncanny and the marvelous" (McHale 74). As demonstrated by the competing insistencies of Billy Pilgrim and daughter Barbara, and the opposing viewpoints of David Morse and those psychological realises he refutes, such hesitation exists throughout Slaughterhouse-Five. McHale admits that, in the pre-20th century fantastic that formed Todorov's study, this hesitation is rightly

considered by Todorov as an epistemological one. McHale provides several examples of novels that retain hesitation all the way through, like Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* and Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot*, in which Oedipa Maas considers the existence of the other "world," the Tristero conspiracy, but in which, ultimately, "one hesitates between the epistemological and the ontological lines of explanation without resolving the hesitation" (24). Because *Lot* does not break through to an embrace of the ontological explanation, Pynchon has not "broken through here to a mode of fiction beyond modernism and its epistemological premises" (McHale 24).

Here McHale runs into a problem with the internal consistency of his poetics. On one hand, he has claimed that the hesitation between epistemological and ontological explanations in a novel that incorporates the fantastic leaves it short of embracing the ontological, post-cognitive questions that characterize the postmodern novel. However, on the other hand, he claims for postmodernism all fantasy novels when he argues that, "in the years since 'Metamorphosis,' this epistemological structure has tended to evaporate, leaving behind it the ontological deep structure of the fantastic still intact" (75-6). While I find McHale's distinction quite useful, the ambiguity of it again reinforces the idea that it is, foremost, the critic who reads postmodernism into the novel, and not the novel that leaves the critic with no choice but to declare it postmodern. For example, the debate over the governess's sanity in *The Turn of the Screw* persists today, similar to the debate over Billy Pilgrim. Is it then true to say that the epistemological structure was any less or more evaporated in 1969 or 1898?

I do not think so: for all of its incorporation of science fiction, the fantastic, and historical fiction, the three genres McHale sees as most commonly allied with postmodernist fiction, *Slaughterhouse-Five* is at its most emphatic when confronting epistemological questions. The ontological question, the question of whether the Tralfamadorians exist outside of Billy Pilgrim's head, is subordinate to the implications that Tralfamadorian insights and opinions have on the human concepts of time, war, and narrative. In one telling scene, a Tralfamadorian explains to Billy that the end of the universe will be precipitated by a Tralfamadorian test pilot who mistakenly hits a wrong button. Yet, to Billy's chagrin, the Tralfamadorians do not dare try to intervene to prevent this disaster. "He has always pressed it, and he always will. We always let him, and we always will let him. The moment is structured that way," Billy's guide explains (Vonnegut 117). Upon reading this, I am willing to wager that most reflect—and believe Vonnegut intends them to reflect—on the implications of determinism on this earth, and not on the implications of another planet on which time is structured in this way. The supernatural serves allegorically the cognitive question McHale offers via Dick Higgins: "How can I interpret this world of which I am a part?" (McHale 1).

CONCLUSION

Postmodern literature resists grand narratives and highlights a multiplicity of voices. These, the broad definitions of postmodernism introduced early in my paper have proven to be the most useful definitions. In a sense, they are meta-definitions: definitions based on other, more specific definitions. The more specific we get in defining postmodernism, the more we run the risk of diminishing conflicts to binary relationships. For example, McHale's assertion of the ontological dominant in postmodern literature leads him to make a series of either/or decisions that support his case, but limit the potential of the texts he examines. While it is still necessary and fruitful to get more specific, such endeavors also create the need to rescue conflicts. So many of the elements claimed by postmodernism can be used to describe *Slaughterhouse-Five*. For example, from Hassan's list alone, the novels demonstrate Play, Deconstruction, Anti-narrative, Irony, and Misreading (Hassan 152). Such elements, however, frustrate because they are all easily located in modernist literature, too—I am thinking here of the playfulness of Finnegans Wake, the misreading of *The Good Soldier's* narrator, and the anti-narratives of Virginia Woolf. Ultimately, such descriptions that would once and for all describe postmodernism as opposed to modernism are not possible, because what has changed is largely the way critical readers interpret literature. Postmodernism, too, has reserved for itself the right to include anything we can't stop it from including.

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