

“THAT VONNEGUT STYLE”: SLAUGHTERHOUSE-FIVE REVISITED

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ABSTRACT

Once the contemporaneity of the 1969 novel *Slaughterhouse-Five* by American writer Kurt Vonnegut is established, the text outlines the narrative strategies, the stylistic preferences and the peculiar techniques of wording that, together, build up the author’s distinctive individual style nowadays so frequently associated to him. The study also highlights his incomparable sense of humor, his sagacity and satiric wit, as the foremost elements of creation that provide unique hue to his stories. Finally, metatextual instances are selected for investigation as well as his atypical fictional technique referred here as space-temporal dislocation.

Keywords: kurt vonnegut, slaughterhouse-five, narrative style, metatextuality, space-temporal dislocation.

On the contemporaneity of *Slaughterhouse-Five*

U.S. troops kill Osama bin Laden in Pakistan
--CNN, May 2nd 2011

In times of (questioning) returning violence with violence, Kurt Vonnegut’s novel *Slaughterhouse-Five* springs to prominence as an extremely up-to-date novel today just as much as it was at the time of its publication in 1969 – for distinct reasons, naturally. It is a well acknowledged truth that it takes time to recuperate from traumatic experiences, whether of collective or personal nature, such as the incidents that occurred in lower Manhattan in September 11, 2001, or the incidents that took place inside the mind of an American soldier locked up in an underground meat house in Dresden in the Second World War.

The majority of themes approached by Vonnegut throughout the narrative of *Slaughterhouse-Five* are as current as they could ever be: on the one hand, violence,

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killing, bullying, and drinking; on the other, solidarity, sympathy and humor; this latter, of various kinds, from naïf to black humor, from sarcastic flair to sheer sardonic wit. The author's satirical and comic choices of vocabulary and syntax, added to his outrageously innovative narrative strategies, are well deserving of attention and will be the main focus of this text.

For sad reasons, there is an outdated reference in the *Slaughterhouse-Five* found at the beginning of the book, in a passage where character filmmaker Harrison Starr asks character Vonnegut what he is working on; to what Vonnegut replies that it is mainly a book about Dresden. The following exchange is then presented:

'Is it an anti-war book?'
'Yes,' I said. 'I guess.'
'You know what I say to people when I hear they're writing anti-war books?'
'No. What do you say, Harrison Starr?'
'I say, "Why don't you write an anti-glacier book instead?"'
What he meant, of course, was that there would always be wars, that they were as easy to stop as glaciers. I believe that too (VONNEGUT, 2007, p. 3).

In times of global warming and all sorts of haphazard climatic changes, the exchange presented above is today sadly moot. The former perennial appeal of glaciers is lamentably no longer an example of constancy. Vonnegut's message, happily, is.

An introduction to the Vonnegut style

Ever since he began writing in the 1950s his stories are marked by a consistent individual style operating in a weird-prone tone frequently associated nowadays with him. His style is often described as wacky and goofy, but also melancholic and fatalistic (WEINSTEIN, 1997) and has often been characterized as honed-down (REED, 1999). It has, nevertheless, rendered him the reputation of being one of the most playfully distinctive stylists in modern American literature (NORDQUIST, 2011).

In the fall of 1976, Charles Rilley conducted an interview with Vonnegut in which he inquired about what he termed "that unmistakable Vonnegut style" (1980, p. 1). The interviewer had read a short story called *Unready to Wear*, written in the early 1950s, and was having difficulty finding the proper wording to his question, since he

judged the adjective ‘simple’ as too simple to describe Vonnegut’s prose, until settling with ‘pure’. His question was concerning the origins or the source from which the referred style had been modeled after or influenced by. Vonnegut answered that although he considered himself an ‘instructed’ writer, he did not have a particular model. He revealed that when he was in high school, he wrote for a daily paper, and his target audience was his peers rather than his teachers, and that is why he made sure while writing that his ideas could be understood by all; hence the ‘simplicity’ – that is the word he uses – of his prose. Furthermore, the idea of an uncomplicated style was being encouraged at the time: “clarity, shorter sentences, strong verbs, a de-emphasis of adverbs and adjectives, that sort of thing” (In: RILLEY, 1980, p. 1). When he was a student at Cornell University, that way of writing made him a prominent figure in the *Daily Sun*, the local news periodical. He adds that: “since I was a Chemistry major, I had very little instruction from the profoundly literary people” (p.1) – a nice, polite provocation.

In 1982, Vonnegut published a short piece called *How to Write with Style* in the International Paper Company. In it, he described what one should consider when trying to improve his or her writing style:

If you scribble your thoughts any which way, your readers will surely feel that you care nothing about them. They will mark you down as an egomaniac or a chowderhead--or worse, they will stop reading you. (...) [An] audience requires us to be sympathetic and patient teachers, ever willing to simplify and clarify--whereas we would rather soar high above the crowd, singing like nightingales. That is the bad news." At one time or another we've probably all felt that impulse to "soar"--by extending a brilliant metaphor, perhaps, or stretching a terribly clever sentence. Why do we resist? Because in the back of our minds we hear our readers insisting, "Come on now, get on with it. Get to the point. (In: NORDQUIST, 2011).

It is most probably the element of enjoyment in the creation of his stories that is conveyed in his writing. His sense of humor and his satiric wit are crucial parts of this peculiar technique of wording with all its diverse hues.

In literary as well as editorial history, it is rather surprising, albeit rare, for one to come across novel which is radically experimental and, at the same time, a bestseller. That is the case of *Slaughterhouse-five*.

Part Science Fiction, part Meta-text, *Slaughterhouse-Five* is Kurt Vonnegut's most famous novel and represents perhaps his most successful fusion of popular culture, popular genres, postmodern technique, and current events into the irreverent, parodic, but also lamenting style that has become its author's signature (MECHE, 2007, p. 2017).

Appearing at the height of the Vietnam War, the book conquered the imagination of so many readers, especially the young ones, and rendered its author the quality of one of America's foremost writers in terms of popularity. It had been a long time since a book had pervaded the minds of so many Americans to the point of making them so deeply aware of an ongoing war – perhaps *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had been the last one (ALLEN, 1999). Writer and Professor William Rodney Allen goes as far as saying that just as president Lincoln allegedly acknowledged that Stowe's book helped start the Civil War, Vonnegut's book, along with non-fictional events such as the Tet Offensive and Kent State, helped end the Vietnam war for the United States. This assertion, though highly debatable and far-fetched, is corroborated by the strength of the impact caused by 'Slaughterhouse'. The book was described as "fiery and cool, despairing yet comforting" (ALLEN, 1999, xi). *Time* magazine called its author 'UltraVonnegut'.

Ironically, at the height of his fame in the 1970s, there was a marked decline in interest towards Vonnegut's work. Surprising though it was, many academic critics started not taking his books seriously. He was then accused of being sentimental, fuzzy, facile, superficial, and simplistic (WEINSTEIN, 1997) – and none of these words used in their good sense.

Fortunately, by the end of the twentieth century, this attitude was no longer the norm; his reputation received a fresh blow of enthusiasm, and with it, a renewed and fresh interest in his entire *opus*.

Vonnegut did have a special eye for sentimentalism, he could not only smell it, but he knew how use it to soften the harshness of the some of the things he had to say. An illustrative example is the sentimental rhetoric behind the description of one of *Slaughterhouse-Five*'s unforgettable characters, Wild Bob; Even though he had a participation that can mostly be considered as a sort of cameo appearance, this dying American officer conquered readers and fans alike, generating an appreciation likened to that of Bobba Fett for *Star Wars* fans. After losing his entire regiment, Wild Bob

inquires of Billy:

(...) 'You one of my boys?' This was a man who had lost an entire regiment, about forty-five hundred men—a lot of them children, actually. Billy didn't reply. The question made no sense (...) There was another long silence, with the colonel dying and dying, drowning where he stood. And then he cited out wetly, 'It's me, boys! It's Wild Bob!' That is what he had always wanted his troops to call him: 'Wild Bob' (VONNEGUT, 2007, p. 66).

Once the reader gets into the story, this statement is really heart wrenching. It also shows the typical American dimension; that of Americana, much like the feeling a football or a baseball coach has towards his players:

But the colonel imagined that he was addressing his beloved troops for the last time, and he told them that they had nothing to be ashamed of, that there were dead Germans all over the battlefield who wished to God that they had never heard of the Four-fifty-first. He said that after the war he was going to have a regimental reunion in his home town, which was Cody, Wyoming. He was going to barbecue whole steers. He said all this while staring into Billy's eyes (VONNEGUT, 2007, p. 66).

Not unlike the sports team really, who brag about their superiority and then later celebrate victory with a barbecue (WEINSTEIN, 1997). There is also great *pathos* in the book.

The story begins with a man who is having great difficulty in narrating his experience. A long time passes between the moment of his traumatic event in 1945 to the date of publication of the book, in 1969, which only helps (or compels) the narrator to be acutely aware of the passage of time and of the fact that he is growing old, and that is clearly perceptible in his words: “But not many words about Dresden came from my mind then—not enough of them to make a book, anyway. And not many words come now, either, when I have become an old fart with his memories and his Pall Malls, with his sons full grown.” (VONNEGUT, 2007, p. 2). There is a natural *pathos* in the book that cannot help but corroborate the longstanding notion that there is not anything very intelligent to be said about a massacre.

The plot of the book moves in several directions at once, which gives the reader a quirky narrative experience, and the awareness of being before a new kind of fiction,

holding none of the traditional narrative tricks; in addition, an author who is honest about that. In the beginning of the book, Vonnegut confesses that he must have written around five thousand pages and thrown them all away: “As a trafficker in climaxes and thrills and characterization and wonderful dialogue and suspense and confrontations, I had outlined the Dresden story many times” (2007, p. 5).

Metatextuality

Slaughterhouse-five is full of metatextual instances. The text is very much aware of itself. One of these instances happens when Kilgore Trout tells the reader about one of the books he is writing, which is about people who are taken away in a flying saucer to a different planet. It does not take long for the reader to identify that Trout is talking about the very book he or she is reading.

But the largest portion of metatextuality comes from Vonnegut himself, especially regarding his presence at the text in the beginning of the book. The reader is introduced to character Vonnegut prior to being introduced to the fictional protagonist, Billy Pilgrim. Billy appears for the first time on page twenty-two, the last page of the first chapter of the book. Before that, there are roughly twenty-one pages of what seems to be the voice of an honest Vonnegut in a heartfelt effort to begin his story, which is only later transferred to the hero, Pilgrim.

The book begins with this man called Kurt Vonnegut who makes telephone calls at night to his old war buddies. He is often drunk when he does that and his breath smells like mustard gas and roses. The attentive reader notices that later on in the story the character Kurt actually calls Billy, in an amusingly ingenuous and subliminal passage: “Billy answered. There was a drunk on the other end. Billy could almost smell his breath-mustard gas and roses. It was a wrong number. Billy hung up (VONNEGUT, 2007, p. 73), a witty instance of the author entering his own creation and becoming part of the weave of the fabric of the text. That, however, would not be the last reference to that characteristic smell from his breath; at the end of the book, after Dresden’s bombing, Billy Pilgrim would comment that: “There were hundreds of corpse mines operating by and by. They didn’t smell bad at first, were wax museums. But then the bodies rotted and liquefied, and the stink was like roses and mustard gas. So it goes.” (p.

214).

At other times, the author's appearance is not as subliminal. There is a passage in which American soldiers, who are at that moment in time dreadfully sick, stop in a camp just before the Dresden bombing, and they are served a sumptuous meal. They had been starving prior to that so they eat as if there is no tomorrow (WEINSTEIN, 1997). In the following scatological passage, the character Vonnegut appears commenting the event, standing beside Billy: "An American near Billy wailed that he had excreted everything but his brains. Moments later he said, 'There they go, there they go.' He meant his brains. That was I. That was me. That was the author of this book" (VONNEGUT, 2007, p. 125). These are but simple harbingers of the metatextual dimension of the book.

Space-temporal dislocation

Vonnegut tried to outline his Dresden story using the traditional fiction techniques, but to no avail. The items he describes in *Slaughterhouse-Five* are simply impossible to fashion using the typical staple characteristics of ordinary narrative, therefore, he decided to elaborate on a weird simultaneity that wreaks havoc with linear plots that usually go somewhere, and consequently disabled the building of common climaxes (WEINSTEIN, 1997). This attitude is, for complicated reasons, fostered by the Tralfamadorians, in the way they explain their version of what a book is:

Billy couldn't read Tralfamadorian, of course, but he could at least see how the books were laid out-in brief clumps of symbols separated by stars. Billy commented that the clumps might be telegrams.

'Exactly,' said the voice.

'They are telegrams?'

'There are no telegrams on Tralfamadore. But you're right: each clump of symbols is a brief, urgent message describing a situation, a scene. We Tralfamadorians read them all at once, not one after the other. There isn't any particular relationship between all the messages, except that the author has chosen them carefully, so that, when seen all at once, they produce an image of life that is beautiful and surprising and deep. There is no beginning, no middle, no end, no suspense, no moral, no causes, no effects. What we love in our books are the depths of many marvelous moments seen all at one time' (VONNEGUT, 2007, p. 88).

Escapes in time are presented, glossing the book with an emblazoned fleeting tone, so that the reader almost never knows in advance where he or she is being taken next. In a sequence in which Billy is in bed with his wife, honeymooning on Cape Ann, in a certain moment, after sex, she asks him about the war:

'You must have secrets about the war. Or, not secrets, I guess, but things you don't want to talk about.'

'No.'

'I'm proud you were a soldier. Do you know that?'

'Good.'

'Was it awful?'

'Sometimes.'

(...)

He got out of bed, said, 'Excuse me, ' went to the darkness of the bathroom to take a leak. He groped for the light, realized as he felt the rough wall that he had traveled back to 1944, to the prison hospital again (VONNEGUT, 2007, p. 121-123).

The reader never knows when this is going to happen. Sometimes Billy opens a door and instead of going into another room, he goes into other times. In the prison hospital mentioned in the excerpt above, he had terrible memories and the consequence was that:

Billy reeled away from his vision of Hell. (...) He came to the door of the little hospital by accident. He went through the door, and found himself honeymooning again, going from the bathroom back to bed with his bride on Cape Ann.

'I missed you' said Valencia.

'I missed you,' said Billy Pilgrim (VONNEGUT, 2007, p. 126).

This sort of space-time dislocation somewhat echoes the dazed, traumatized condition of people in a war: "He could scarcely distinguish between sleep and wakefulness now, on the third day, found no important differences either, between walking and standing still" (VONNEGUT, 2007, p. 34).

This style is an invitation that Vonnegut stands to the readers eliciting him or her to see things panoramically or panoptically (WEINSTEIN, 1997). That is, however, a human impossibility, due, naturally, to the constitution of human eyes and of human brains, that renders them locked in a determined perceptual frame, so, sadly or not, there is no way humans can do what a Tralfamadorian does.

Apart from the ubiquitous narrative style, a question that always lingered was

why would Vonnegut write a book about Dresden, and especially why in the way he did. The answer may sound as simplistic as his text was once accused of: it is because he was there. Vonnegut experienced the bombing of Dresden. He offers the reality and the fiction; he offers the numbers about Dresden so that the reader knows not only what the city meant to him but the historical significance of that catastrophic event.

Though considered a science-fiction novel by some, the book is extremely down to earth, and like most of Vonnegut's texts, it seems to promote universally human values. Written in extremely simple language, one may say too simplistic at times, and interspersed even by child-like drawings, *Slaughterhouse-Five* has a purpose that justifies all choices, for through its style it seeks to capture the absurdity of that moment in time.

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“AQUELE ESTILO DE VONNEGUT”: MATADOURO CINCO REVISITADO

RESUMO

Uma vez estabelecida a contemporaneidade do romance de 1969 *Matadouro Cinco*, do escritor norte-americano Kurt Vonnegut, este texto descreve as estratégias narrativas, as preferências estilísticas e as técnicas peculiares de construção frasal que, juntas, constroem o estilo individual distintivo tão frequentemente associado ao autor atualmente. Este estudo também destaca o incomparável senso de humor, sua sagacidade e poder de sátira, como principais elementos de criação que fornecem matiz ímpar para suas estórias. Ao final, exemplos de metatextualidade são selecionados para investigação assim como sua técnica ficcional atípica referida aqui como deslocamento espaço-temporal.

Palavras-chave: kurt vonnegut, matadouro cinco, estilo narrativo, metatextualidade.