

The End of the Road: Slaughterhouse-Five, or The Children's Crusade

by Peter J. Reed

In *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), Vonnegut comes at last to a direct confrontation with his Dresden experience. He also brings together many of the other things he has talked about in his first five novels. The numerous recapitulations of previous themes, resurrections of characters who have appeared before, and recollections of earlier mentioned incidents in this novel are not just self-parody as they might be in *Cat's Cradle*, nor are they simply the development of a kind of extended in-joke as they might be in the intervening novels. Rather, they represent an attempt at integration, an effort to bring together all that Vonnegut has been saying about the human conditions and contemporary American society, and to relate those broad commentaries to the central traumatic, revelatory, and symbolic moment of the destruction of Dresden. The event itself, of course, is not the problem. The difficulty lies in trying to say all that the fire-raid means, to one man, to each individual man, to all men collectively. Vonnegut also says the book is a failure. We may not agree; or, if we do, we will probably want to give more credit to the attempt than the author gives himself. The only real failure is that the novel had to be written at all. Whatever its weaknesses (like characterization, a weakness Vonnegut freely admits), the book's achievements are considerable – and more numerous than a first glance suggests. *Slaughterhouse-Five* goes beyond being a therapeutically autobiographical novel, or simply an anti-war novel, the two categories into which it could be most easily fitted. It is both these things and more – an attempt, in effect, to create a contemporary legend.

Slaughterhouse-Five begins autobiographically with Vonnegut musing about himself – his good friend the dog, late nights drinking, smoking, telephoning long-lost friends, teaching at the Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa – and the fact that he has been telling people for a long time that he was working on a book about the raid on Dresden. He was there during that raid, and its impression has been indelible. He also recalls visiting a veteran friend, "Bernard V. O'Hare," to talk over some of their war experiences. O'Hare's wife, Mary, had appeared hostile, and it emerged that she had feared the book would be a glorification of war, adaptable to a movie starring John Wayne or Frank Sinatra. She had insisted the men were "babies" in the war, and that a glorification would send more children, like theirs upstairs, into more wars. That was when the author agreed to call his story *The Children's Crusade*. With O'Hare he then traveled to Dresden on Guggenheim Fellowship money, looking back like Lot's wife at the ruined city. The book is a failure, he says, because it is written by a pillar of salt.

After this prologue, Vonnegut recounts the story of Billy Pilgrim, focusing upon his capture by the Germans in World War II, his presence in Dresden during the raid, and the consequences of these experiences on his later life. It should be emphasized that the novel does not at all follow the chronological development used in this summary for clarification. Basically, there are two major time-streams in the novel: from Billy's becoming lost in Luxembourg in 1944 to his being in Dresden in 1945, and from 1969 to later in the same year. But there are numerous time shifts between these two sequences and to other periods. Seldom do more than two pages fix on one date.

Billy Pilgrim, like his author, was born in 1922. One of his earliest memories is of being taught to swim by his father on the "sink if you don't" system. Other early traumatic experiences occur during a trip West with his family. While he stands tremulously on the brink of the Grand Canyon his

mother unexpectedly touches him and he wets his pants. Then he has the life scared out of him when the guide turns out the lights in the Carlsbad Caverns.

After a few unsuccessful weeks in college, Billy goes off to war as a chaplain's assistant. In 1944 the Germans pour into Luxembourg during the Battle of the Bulge, leaving Billy stranded behind enemy lines. He meets up with two scouts and a tank gunner named Roland Weary. For several days this motley foursome searches hopefully for American lines, Billy bobbing up and down on a heel-less shoe. Under the stress of hunger, shock, exhaustion, and exposure, Billy loses the will to live and his mind wanders. It is here that he begins to become "unstuck in time" – that is, to find himself living in moments of the past or future. From this point on he frequently knows what will or will not happen to him.

Eventually Billy's slow pace and apparent delirium becomes too much for the scouts, who depart on their own. This infuriates Weary, who sets about beating up Billy, only being prevented from finishing the job by the arrival of some German irregular soldiers. Weary is forced to give up his shoes in exchange for the feet-cutting hinged clogs of one of the Germans. The two hobbling Americans are herded off to join an ever-increasing number of other prisoners being marched into Germany. They are jammed into boxcars, which, after sitting in marshalling yards for two days, begin a slow journey toward the east. On the ninth day, Weary dies of gangrene from his injured feet. He blames Pilgrim for his plight, and a paranoid little soldier named Paul Lazzaro swears to avenge him by having Billy killed.

Eventually the dilapidated prisoners are unloaded at a camp for Russian POWs, are deloused, showered, given overcoats, and marched into a compound for British officers at the center of the camp. The British POWs are organized, clean, healthy, and disciplined, and put on a welcome dinner and pantomime for the new arrivals. The food overwhelms the half-starved Americans, whose unsanitary physical response and general dispiritedness appall the Englishmen. Billy spends a couple of days in the British sickquarters, time-travelling as usual.

Within a few days the Americans march into Dresden to begin work, mainly bottling a honey-like vitamin supplement for pregnant women. They are housed in a slaughterhouse numbered five. At one point they are urged to join the "Free America Corps" to fight the Russians by the American Quisling, Howard Campbell. When the great air raid begins, Campbell, four guards, and a hundred of the Americans take shelter in a deep cold storage area. They survive while 135,000 are dying above. When they surface, the ruins of Dresden look like the face of the moon. For a few days the Americans are employed digging in the wreckage. One of them, the earnest former schoolteacher Edgar Derby, is executed by a firing squad for taking a teapot from a wrecked building. As the war ends, Billy and his friends are riding around Dresden in a coffin-shaped horse-drawn wagon. Billy basks in the sunlight, contentedly time-travelling. After repatriation, Billy goes to optometrists' school in Ilium. There he meets and marries the college founder's daughter, Valencia. She is a gross, candy-munching woman of limited intellect, but she loves Billy and the two lead a fairly contented life together. They have two children, Barbara and Robert. Robert goes through a period of juvenile delinquency, but emerges as an exemplary Green Beret. Barbara becomes a "bitchy flibbertigibbet" fussing over her father and her husband. Billy thrives as an optometrist, coming eventually to employ five assistants, own shares in other local business, earn \$60,000 a year, and drive a Cadillac complete with Birch Society bumper stickers supplied by his father-in-law. He continues to time-travel, often at moments

disconcerting to his patients, so in 1948 he commits himself to a mental hospital. There he shares a ward with Eliot Rosewater, who introduces him to Kilgore Trout's science fiction. He discovers the writer ruthlessly supervising a crew of newspaper boys, and invites Trout to his wedding anniversary party.

By 1967, Billy seldom seems to know whether he is here or there – or now or then. On the night of his daughter's wedding he is picked up, as he knows he will be, by a Tralfamadorian flying saucer. Transported to Tralfamadore, he is kept in a luxurious "zoo" where he is mated with a kidnapped movie star, Montana Wildhack. (Billy's absence escapes notice, because by travelling through a time warp his stay of several years on Tralfamadore only means that he is gone from Earth for a microsecond.) The two live almost blissfully, have a child, and then somehow Billy returns. The Tralfamadorians explain Billy's time travelling. To them all times coexist – "whatever is always has been and always will be" – meaning, among other things, that people are always alive at some point in time. They necessarily believe in inevitability and see the conception of free will as a curious Earthling perversion.

In 1968, Billy survives an airplane crash, but with a serious head wound which again hospitalizes him. As the distraught Valencia races to the hospital, she becomes involved in a car accident which rips the exhaust pipes from the Cadillac. On arrival she collapses of carbon monoxide poisoning and dies almost immediately. This time Billy shares his ward with Air Force historian Bertrand Copeland Rumfoord, who is writing on the Dresden raid. After his release, Billy visits New York where he goes on a radio talk show to divulge his experiences with the Tralfamadorians. This, and the letters on the same subject he writes to newspapers, convinces his daughter Barbara that he is, at 46, senile.

As Billy sees what happens subsequently, he becomes something of a celebrity, speaking to large crowds about flying saucers, time, and the insignificance of death. On February 13, 1976 (the twenty-first anniversary of the Dresden raid), he is speaking in a stadium in Chicago. (Chicago has been rebuilt, having been hydrogen-bombed by the Chinese. The USA has been Balkanized into twenty petty nations to end its threat to world peace.) He predicts that he will die within the hour, makes no effort to prevent this, and is shot by a gunman hired by the aged, crazy, but still revengeful Paul Lazzaro.

Vonnegut returns to his exterior frame for the story at the end, mentioning the deaths of Senator Robert F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr., his father, and the weekly carnage in Vietnam. He muses that Darwin teaches that "those who die are meant to die, that corpses are improvements." As he and O'Hare fly toward Dresden, he reflects that if the Tralfamadorians are right that we all live forever it does not delight him, but that he is glad to have many happy moments to relive. O'Hare observes that by the year 2000 the world population will be seven billion. And the author, having given such a bleak portrayal of the individual human's lot on Earth, says sardonically, "I suppose they will all want dignity."

Since the Dresden raid is central to this novel and often mentioned by Vonnegut, here is a historical note. Contrary to some claims, Dresden was *not* an open city, and it did present some targets of military significance. But it had not been bombed before, and the great raid killed few

military personnel. At the time, Dresden's population had been doubled by refugees from the East. On the night of February 13-14, about 800 Royal Air Force Lancaster heavy bombers struck in two waves, dropping tons of high explosive bombs and 650,000 incendiaries. The enormous conflagration created was visible 200 miles away. The next day, 450 American B-17 Fortresses dropped more bombs, and P-51 Mustang fighters strafed the wrecked city. Militarily, the raid was immensely successful, very few Allied aircraft being shot down while the target was virtually destroyed. Casualties were variously estimated from 35,000 to over 200,000. 135,000, the conservative estimate of the Dresden Police President, is the normally-accepted figure. Whether Dresden should have been bombed at all, especially so late in the war, has been questioned. The Allies kept details of the raid secret long after.

While *Slaughterhouse-Five* may appear to be wandering and random, an example of Vonnegut's tendencies toward the episodic and the digressive indulged to the extreme, it actually possesses an intricately designed structure. The author's description of his efforts to outline this story, climaxed by his making his "prettiest one" on the back of a roll of wallpaper with his daughter's crayons, seems entirely appropriate. Billy Pilgrim is at one point described as trying to reinvent or restructure his life, while in telling the story Vonnegut tries to give form to the same experiences. At the center of Vonnegut's material – in the wallpaper outline it is cross-hatched across the sheet – is the Dresden raid. From that central event he extends a web outward in time, space, and characters. But "web" is a poor metaphor; one might as easily say that he "tunnels into" the experience to find its meaning. Time, space, and event coexist and coalesce in this novel, and that is what the structure attempts to convey.

First Vonnegut sets up a frame for the story with the autobiographical prologue in the first chapter. An important preparation for this comes on the title page itself; between the title and a thumbnail biography of the author, Vonnegut describes his book as "A Duty Dance with Death." The autobiographical first chapter is matched by a return to more of the same in the last chapter, completing the frame, but in such a way as to integrate the frame with the main narrative. The framing device and the interrelationship of the autobiographical with the narrative are strengthened by periodic intrusions by the author throughout the novel: "I was there" or "that was me." "A Dance" is an apt description for the interwoven pattern of the narrative, with the author himself occasionally appearing as one of the dancers. All of the events portrayed are carefully interconnected, and events from "separate" times are often juxtaposed, completing or commenting upon one another. The frequent complementary nature of the time fragments adds to their coherence, although there is surprisingly little difficulty in following this seemingly disjointed narrative. The prologue to the first chapter, and the quick general guidelines to Billy's life in the second, provide the reader with a strong sense of direction from the outset.

The title page gives another clue to the structure of *Slaughterhouse-Five*: "This is a novel somewhat in the telegraphic schizophrenic manner of tales of the planet Tralfamadore, where the flying saucers come from." It might seem absurd to take such an obviously spoofing account at all seriously. The description of the Tralfamadorian novel represents characteristic Vonnegutian self-derision, like the portraits of Kilgore Trout, but as parody it makes some real sense. The Tralfamadorian novel is made up of "clumps of symbols," each of which "is a brief, urgent message – describing a situation, a scene." Tralfamadorians read these simultaneously, not consecutively. "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 inspiring and deep.” Aside from the fact that the Tralfamadorians, in their novels as in their minds, emphasize beautiful moments and exclude the unpleasant ones, *Slaughterhouse-Five* almost fits their requirements. Most of the situations described are grim, many downright painful. The “clumps of symbols” obviously cannot be read simultaneously, either, but the way in which short scenes from several points in time are spliced together does help sustain the impression of concurrent actions, and intensifies the sense of an interrelationship of events transcending time. Nor is there always a “particular relationship between all the messages,” but they often do show a kinship of theme or image, and they cohere to create “an image of life” which, while not always “beautiful,” is frequently “surprising” and in total effect quite “deep.” Because all of its scenes cannot be read simultaneously, the book comes closer to possessing a climax than does the Tralfamadorian novel. It is hard to single out one climactic event, be it the raid itself or the ironic execution of Edgar Derby, but the novel certainly builds toward the end where the meaning, the questions, and the emotional impact come together.

In order that this discussion itself avoid the “telegraphic schizophrenic manner,” it might be well to pay attention first to the nucleus of the novel, namely Billy Pilgrim and his experiences during the war, in the Dresden raid, and on his trip to Tralfamadore. As already mentioned, there are limitations to the character of Billy; limitations which seem to go beyond those explained by Vonnegut at one point in the novel. “There are almost no characters in this story,” he says, “and almost no dramatic confrontations, because most of the people in it are so sick and so much the listless playthings of enormous forces. One of the main effects of war, after all, is that people are discouraged from becoming characters.” Some of that we can accept, but some we may question. Vonnegut makes the point here that Edgar Derby is about to act as a character. Others, like the British officers, Weary, and even Paul Lazzaro, become “characters” as opposed to “listless playthings” apparently *because* of this confrontation with war situations. The circumstances imposed do seem to lessen the possibilities of “dramatic confrontations,” most of the characters *are* sick, and many of them are manipulated by “enormous forces” in ways which limit their freedom for character-defining actions. Furthermore, the whole design of the novel calls for much of the cast to make only brief appearances which, while they might create striking impressions, are not of the sort to develop characterizations. Yet most of these observations do not really apply to the protagonist.

Billy Pilgrim is both sick and a listless plaything, but that part of his characterization works quite well. His physical ailments and his vulnerability to controlling forces are even more extensive than those of Eliot Rosewater in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, and impose some of the same burdens on characterization, yet in this respect Billy seems at least as convincing as Eliot. The ambiguities of his sanity or insanity are more extreme than those surrounding Eliot. They represent the culmination of a progression which begins with Paul Proteus’s moral uncertainty, which becomes psychologically more complex in the uncertain truths of Howard Campbell’s self-analyses, and which incorporates questions of morality, motivations, and sanity in the case of Eliot Rosewater. The very uncertainties and ambiguities of Billy Pilgrim as shocked, uncomprehending, and listless victim add conviction in that role. Billy grinning foolishly at Germans who abuse him, Billy in a delirium of fatigue in the boxcar, even Billy weeping silently years after the war, emerges as touchingly lifelike. In other roles, he does not.

Perhaps the problem arises from the number of roles Billy must fulfill. The novel concerns itself not just with Dresden or the war, but with a much broader depiction of a human condition which these events emblemize. At the center of such a work, Billy becomes, as his name distinctly suggests, a contemporary pilgrim progressing through an absurd world – except that he does not really progress. Being an Everyman proves tricky in the age of specialization. Billy must be innocent Adam falling into the terrible wisdom of the twentieth century. He portrays a modern version of the Christ figure more than once. He is the child duped into the children’s crusade. He becomes a credulous and adaptable Gulliver on a voyage to another world. And he is asked to fulfill the roles of prosperous businessman, polished convention speaker, crank participant in talk shows, and death-denigrating messiah of quasi-religious crusades. Understandably, his characterization proves unequal to all these roles. Eliot Rosewater’s recovery from shell shock to become a successful foundation administrator seems plausible enough; it simply marks a return to his established lifestyle. His becoming benefactor to the poor similarly has adequate motivation. It proves much more difficult to reconcile the predominant image of Billy the bemused POW with the \$60,000-a-year optometrist-businessman, even given that he married the boss’s daughter. Vonnegut asks us to give him that – and to laboriously document Billy’s ascending career would indeed be irrelevant to the novel’s purposes. We might ask *why* Billy must become a \$60,000-a-year optometrist, unless it is to emphasize the helpless child at the mercy of indomitable forces within the controlling businessman. Or unless, of course, the \$60,000-a-year optometrist *is* the modern Everyman. We do know that Billy weeping silently, dozing off into time travel, blundering embarrassedly in a porno bookstore, or jiggling on his electronic bed fits consistently with the shattered soldier, and that it is hard to see how a chap like that could successfully run even a shoeshine stand. Shell-shocked veterans have made competent businessmen. Henry Green shows how in *Back*, and Vonnegut makes it plausible with Eliot Rosewater, but the Chamber-of-Commerce side of Billy Pilgrim never comes alive.

At the core of the characterization of Billy Pilgrim is the conception of war as a children’s crusade. The starting point for the analogy is Mary O’Hare’s insistence that men like to give war an aura of glamour as a mature masculine activity whereas in fact it is fought by mere babies. The author concurs – “We *had* been foolish virgins in the war, right at the end of childhood.” And his promise to call the book “The Children’s Crusade” leads him and Bernard O’Hare to look up some facts about the title event. They discover that the Children’s Crusade began in 1213, the idea of two monks who planned to assemble an army of children and sell them as slaves in North Africa. Accordingly, 30,000 volunteer children were marched to Marseilles, half subsequently being drowned in shipwrecks and half indeed being sold into slavery. A few went to Genoa, where there were no ships waiting, and were treated kindly by the local people. The obvious parallels with the raising of a modern army are that the people sent to die are in both cases young, innocent, and uncomprehending, that the patriotic fervor of onlookers and influential persons urges on both enterprises, that too many die needlessly while too few are treated humanely, and that the declared “noble” intentions may bear little relation to the actual purposes or accomplishments of the enterprise. In each case, mere children find themselves the hapless pawns of forces they neither understand nor can resist. Young of face, gawky of stature, and childishly perplexed, Billy Pilgrim, who like the crusade starts out on a holy mission as a chaplain’s assistant, makes the perfect representational figure for this conception of war.

The affinity between men at war and children emerges in several ways. Among the most obvious is the youth of Billy himself and of other soldiers. Two German troopers, in particular, are merely boys in their teens. The colonel who commands the British prisoners makes the point explicit, saying that having been prisoners since the beginning of hostilities, his group had imagined the war being fought by men of their age. After he sees the Americans shaved and cleaned, he realizes for the first time how young they are and is shocked. “‘My God, my God-’ I said to myself, ‘it’s the Children’s Crusade.’” Vonnegut underlines the resemblance more than once, as when he qualifies his description of “Wild Bob’s” regiment as about forty-five hundred men by saying “-a lot of children, actually.” The character of “Wild Bob” helps make another observation on children at war: that men at war become as children in fact if they are not in age. This colonel from Wyoming has always wanted his men to call him “Wild Bob” (they never have), as if he boyishly envisions himself fulfilling the role of a military “character,” hero and friend to his troops – whom he has in fact led to disaster. Similarly, Roland Weary wistfully envisions himself as one of “the Three Musketeers,” and dreams romantically of valor and loyalty. The two scouts will not play his game. Fittingly, the entertainment the Englishmen provide for the Americans is a modified children’s pantomime, and when the British recoil from their “guests” they divide the camp compound by the old childhood technique of scraping a groove in the ground with the heel. These and similar instances emphasize the childlike nature of men at war not so much to say that war is childish as to indicate the helplessness of men caught up in war, like children somehow swept up in an adult barroom brawl. They also suggest that men made helpless, shocked, dazed, bullied, and maimed in war are driven back into themselves in regressive ways. War *might* be childish in some ways – the referees of the American war games arguing over who is “dead,” or the Germans “capturing” for the cameras the already-captive Billy could be taken to suggest this – but that is not the main thrust of Vonnegut’s anti-war theme. He seems most concerned to show war as a terrifying unleashing of monstrous forces which sweeps up the innocent children of men to destroy and enslave them.

That particular emphasis to Vonnegut’s war-criticism, and beyond that to his diagnosis of the contemporary human condition, necessitates that he extend – even mythicize – his presentation of Billy Pilgrim as universal man-child. The name begins the job, and the allusions to Jesus Christ and Adam continue it. One of Trout’s novels, *The Gospel from Outer Space*, sets the tone and the direction of the Christ references. Trout’s spaceman, having studied Christianity, finds it hard to understand how Christians can so easily be cruel. He concludes that while the Gospels *mean* to teach mercy to even the lowest of things, they actually taught this: “*Before you kill somebody, make absolutely sure he isn’t well-connected.*” Consequently, the modern reader of the Gospels comes to the story of men killing the Son of God and thinks that the killers made a mistake, as if killing Jesus had he *not* been the Son of God would have been all right. The spaceman’s gospel has God take a different line: “*From this moment on, He will punish horribly anybody who torments a bum who has no connections!*” Soldier Billy, if not Businessman Billy, fills the role of bum-Jesus admirably, and makes an excellent vehicle for the demonstration of those morals about showing mercy to even the lowest.

Other Christ allusions show Billy wandering in a wilderness, being falsely accused and made a scapegoat (by Weary, who blames Pilgrim for his death), being reviled by the other inmates of the boxcar, and hanging from a crossbar in one corner, “self-crucified.” Later, as he lies dozing in the cart after the Dresden raid, he hears voices which sound to him like “the tones...used by the friends of

Jesus when they took His ruined body down from His cross.” Ironically, those tones are not meant for him but for the pathetic horses drawing the cart. Billy cries for those horses, and weeps often later, always silently. Vonnegut observes that “in *that* respect, at least, he resembled the Christ of the carol: *The cattle are lowing / The Baby awakes. / But the little Lord Jesus / No crying He makes.*” (That carol also provides the novel’s epigraph.) Vonnegut’s saying “in *that* respect, at least,” implied his rather self-consciously putting a qualification on the Christ role of Billy, but that he definitely does intend Billy to be viewed thus in *at least that* one respect. The identification can be taken seriously if not solemnly. At times it becomes ludicrous – but that is exactly the point. Billy’s being moonishly bemused, utterly helpless, even ridiculous, fits him for the role of persecuted child, of babe born to die.

Perhaps the most important allusion to Adam comes at the time of Billy’s capture. The German corporal wears a pair of golden cavalry boots taken from a Hungarian colonel. As he waxes them, he tells recruits, “If you look in there deep enough, you’ll see Adam and Eve.” Obviously the only way that could happen would be for a recruit to see the Adam and Eve within himself, which is essentially what Billy does when he sees the naked couple within the boots’ lustre. “They were so innocent, so vulnerable, so eager to behave decently. Billy Pilgrim loved them.” Innocent, vulnerable, eager to please – the description applies aptly to Billy. When the fifteen-year-old German soldier is labeled “as beautiful as Eve,” the association of Billy with Adam becomes even stronger. This allusion, like those to Christ, has its comic undercutting. The nearest Billy comes to being Adam in a literal sense might be when he and Montana Wildhack live naked in the geodesic paradise of the Tralfamadorian zoo. But while these identifications are made almost laughingly, as the tone of the novel demands, they are explicit. They extend the dimensions and significance of Billy’s role, contributing to the expansion of the book to a more universal scope than that of anti-war novel alone.

The character of Billy gives *Slaughterhouse-Five* a point of focus, particularly for the emotions generated by the wide-ranging action of the story. In that respect, this novel proves more successful than *Cat’s Cradle* which in some ways resembles *Slaughterhouse-Five* more closely than do the other four novels. (*Cat’s Cradle* also speaks of the Children’s Crusade, of mass destruction, war, and the moral questions they generate, uses numerous references to other works by Vonnegut, and spreads itself over a similar wide range of times, episodes, and social issues.) The war, and Dresden in particular, also gives focus, in a way which again invites contrast to *Cat’s Cradle*. The narrative device used in that novel is that Jonah has been trying to write about “the day the world ended” – the day Hiroshima was bombed – but has been unable to do so. He does ultimately write about the day the world ends, but the final catastrophe by *ice-nine*, while giving tone to the narrative and providing the context for the consideration of ethics, religion, politics, and art, does not become a dominating event in itself. The Dresden raid does achieve such centrality in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Everything that happens points forward or backward to Dresden. If the war becomes the general metaphor for Vonnegut’s vision of the human condition, Dresden becomes the symbol, the quintessence. It acts as something concrete, a specific point of reference, to which all that is said about human behavior or the nature of man’s existence can be related. For example, who better fitted to ask that recurring question “Why me?” than the victims – or the survivors – of Dresden? Or what better example of the absurd than this, the Allies’ most “successful” application of bombing in the European theater, being directed at a non-target? The Dresden raid, together with the character of Billy Pilgrim, helps unify

and focus the disparate elements of the novel. As an actual event realistically portrayed, the raid adds intensity to the questions, denunciations, and pathos in the novel, as compared to that generated by fictional disasters in the earlier books. That fact also greatly affects the tone of the novel, making it more serious, more terrifying, and more moving than *Cat's Cradle*.

The moral and psychological context for the depiction of the Dresden raid is set up in the first chapter. There we see essentially two perspectives, the highly personal recollections of the author who was involved in the event, and the detached, distant view of history. The latter is introduced in the account of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah which the author reads in his motel Gideon Bible. It suggests that "Those were vile people in both those cities, as is well-known. The world was better off without them." Obviously, he does not share that harsh moral view, and his sympathies lie with Lot's wife, who looks back to where people and homes had been – a fact he finds lovable because it is so human. The Biblical account provides a precedent for Dresden; a city destroyed in righteous wrath, people judged evil and ripe for annihilation, and an observer who looks back wonderingly, touched by human compassion. Some of the parallel moral questions posed by such great destructions are obvious. So the people of Sodom and Gomorrah were a bad lot – does that justify their obliteration? So the Germans had devastated Warsaw, Rotterdam, Coventry, and East London, and had sent millions to their deaths in other ways – does that make moral the destruction of Dresden? Vonnegut makes considerable effort to incorporate official and historical assessments of such raids into his novel by quoting from President Truman's announcement of the atom-bombing of Hiroshima and from David Irving's book, *The Destruction of Dresden*. The Truman statement, made in time of war, essentially argues that the destruction of Hiroshima was necessary to save civilization from the destruction wreaked by the Japanese. The two forwards to Irving's book, written by Lieutenant General Ira C. Eaker, U.S.A.F., and Air Marshal Sir Robert Saundby, R.A.F., some time after the war, struggle with the moral issues, regretting so many deaths in a militarily unnecessary raid but insisting that they be viewed in the context of the even more massive slaughters wrought by the Germans.

Vonnegut's comment on those official assessments comes in the rambling words of Billy Pilgrim: "If you're ever in Cody, Wyoming...just ask for Wild Bob." Wild Bob was the colonel who had led his troops to disaster, lost his regiment, then tried to assure his soldiers they had "nothing to be ashamed of" because they had left a lot of Germans dead, too. Yet Wild Bob remains a sympathetic character. Perhaps through him Vonnegut observes that military men responsible for such slaughters act not out of malignity but from muddled values which prevent them from seeing simpler moral truths. Treated less sympathetically than the commander who makes a mistake is the military historian who later tries to justify the error. Illustrating this role is Bertram Copeland Rumfoord, "the official Air Force historian," writing his one-volume history of the U.S.A.A.F. in World War II. He feels obliged to mention Dresden because so many people now know that it was worse than Hiroshima. The raid has been cloaked in secrecy for years lest it be criticized by "a lot of bleeding hearts," Rumfoord says, and he seems bent only on dismissing any notion that it might be a blemish on the glorious record of the Air Force. So intent is he on treating Dresden with official "detachment" that he shuts out any possible firsthand reports from Billy Pilgrim. He seems only concerned to convince Billy, as his readers, that "it *had* to be done" – while remaining rather uneasy himself.

Posed against the official assessments are episodes involving two lesser characters which serve to expose Dresden to a different moral viewpoint. The Sodom and Gomorrah reference, the allusion to Hiroshima and the historical judgments on Dresden all involve looking at the raid from a distance, taking an overview of it, placing it in a large historical context. The stories of Paul Lazzaro and Edgar Derby, like those of Lot's wife and Billy Pilgrim, reverse the perspective, measuring the larger event against individual human consequences. Paul Lazzaro typifies those miserable little men, inviting our pity as much as our disgust, who are as close as Vonnegut ever gets to creating villains. He threatens to have Billy killed, and actually does have him killed years later. In the prison camp he tries to steal an English officer's watch, gets caught in the act, and suffers a severe mauling. Characteristically, he swears he will have the Englishman killed – a stranger will knock at his door, announce he comes from Paul Lazzaro, "shoot his pecker off," give him a couple of minutes to think about that, then kill him. He also tells a tender story of how he once fed a dog steak containing sharpened fragments of clocksprings. This twisted little crank feeds on revenge – "the sweetest thing in life" – yet he takes no satisfaction from the destruction of Dresden. He bears the Germans no grudge, and he prides himself on never harming an innocent bystander. The obvious moral object lesson here is that in some ways even a sordid monster like Lazzaro can be superior to the saviors of civilization, who also take revenge, who kill those who have done them no harm in ways every bit as horrible as anything the warped mind of Lazzaro could conceive and with no thought for innocent bystanders. The second incident involves Edgar Derby, who is arrested and shot by the Germans for plundering when caught with a perfectly ordinary teapot taken from a ruined house. This time we observe the irony of a society which condones massive destruction but which executes a man – one who tries bravely to be decent and moral – for salvaging a teapot from that wreckage.

These two minor incidents give scale to the inhumanity and moral dubiousness of the Dresden raid. The disaster itself remains so massive as to be hard to register in any other way. Statistics of the numbers killed and the houses destroyed, or descriptions of the ruins lying like the surface of the moon, remain too large, too general, too abstract. Particular images like human bodies being reduced to charred logs or girls boiled alive in a water tower, and personal episodes like those involving Lazzaro and Derby, stick in the mind. The same is true for Billy. The horror of the total nightmare registers in the little things, like the four distraught German guards, huddled together, mouths open but not knowing what to say, looking like a barbershop quartet singing (and here the irony borders on excess) "That Old Gang of Mine." "So long forever, old sweethearts and pals – God bless 'em –." And after all that he has suffered and the carnage he has witnessed among the debris, it takes the sight of those wretched horses drawing his cart to reduce Billy to tears.

The significance of the Dresden firestorm, then, is weighed on the scale of time, from Sodom and Gomorrah down to Hiroshima, and on the scale of human response, from the collective, public view of the official history to the personal nightmare of Billy Pilgrim. It is also measured spatially, in effect, through the perspective afforded by the use of science fiction. Billy tells the Tralfamadorians about wars on Earth, and what a great threat to all life the inhabitants of his planet must be. The Tralfamadorians regard his concerns as stupid. They know how the Universe ends, and Earth has nothing to do with it. Their own experiments with flying-saucer fuels end the Universe. In any case, they tell Billy, Tralfamadore is not as peaceful as he seems to think. They have wars as dreadful as anything Billy knows about. Once again the point of view of a more sophisticated being from another planet provides commentary on human behavior, yet this time it might surprise us as much as it does

Billy. The Tralfamadorians' timeless view is not that Earthlings are senseless and barbaric to engage in war, a menace to themselves and the Universe. It is that Billy is ridiculous to expect such a logical projection of the future to work in an absurd Universe, and that he exaggerates the importance of the human role in the cosmos. In particular, he overemphasizes free will and fails to recognize that the tragedies of war and ultimate destruction occur, like all things, because that is the way the moment is structured. They advocate acceptance of life's cruelties and catastrophes, saying "so it goes" to each, then turning their thoughts to happier things.

That position has a certain undeniable logic, especially to beings capable of time-travel. For one thing, it avoids putting them constantly at odds with the essential nature of an Absurd Universe. For another, it makes sense given their conception of time, where past, present, and future are all fixed and determinate. Whatever will be, is; whatever has been, is; whatever is, always has been and always will be. We need not accept the Tralfamadorian view of life to recognize that it represents a commentary on the human lot. For the events of the novel point to a world in which things happen which are beyond our control, in which what we try to control even with the best of intentions often goes awry, and where the forces which shape our destinies are beyond our comprehension even if they are more than simply "the structure of the moment." If the circumstances of existence are thus, then the motto which we are shown once hanging on Billy's wall and once hanging between Montana Wildhack's breasts – "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom always to tell the difference" – proves ironic to say the least. As the narrator comments, "Among the things Billy Pilgrim could not change were the past, the present, and the future." Or, in other words, accept everything with serenity. Thus the lesson of Tralfamadore has much in common with the admonition to Lot's wife not to look back to Sodom and with Rumfoord's attitude of leaving the history of the Dresden raid as nearly forgotten as possible. It is also implicit in Vonnegut's saying that his book remains a failure because it was written by someone who, like Lot's wife, had been turned into a pillar of salt.

But Kurt Vonnegut looks back. Here the structure of the novel becomes vital to its meaning, for Vonnegut not only looks back to his own Dresden experience but to his previous fiction. If the earlier novels have all been pointing towards Dresden, he now draws arrows back to them, as it were, to connect them with the climactic event. Tracing all of these echoes and repetitions, showing how they unite to produce a cumulative description of a world and a pattern of existence emblemized in Dresden and its impact on Billy Pilgrim, would be tedious. The method and effect of the device can be illustrated with a selection of recurrent images, themes, characters, or simple incidents.

In the first place, it should be recognized that Billy Pilgrim represents the culmination of a number of traits present in a progressively increasing degree in the earlier protagonists. *Cat's Cradle* makes such generalizations about Vonnegut's protagonists, difficult, because its narrator remains something of a non-protagonist. Making allowance for exceptions in that case, however, it becomes possible to deduce some patterns. Each of the protagonists is at least partially a victim of circumstances, either social or cosmic, which effectively control his destiny. The protagonists of the first three novels become captives in a literal way, Jonah and Eliot both undergo confinements, and Billy becomes the prisoner of Germans and Tralfamadorians. Each endures a scene of desolation, from the wrecking of Ilium to the Martian war on Earth to Eliot's imagined firestorm in Indianapolis, leading up to the Dresden conflagration. Faced with the terrors of an absurd, uncontrollable, and

frequently hostile environment, each is driven toward some form of evasion. As if reality becomes too much to bear, each moves into some kind of unreality or seeming unreality. Emotional disturbance, neurosis, and possible madness emerge in a developing pattern, from Proteus's momentary suspicions of his own mental health to Billy's having himself committed. At least at some point in their lives, all are financially successful men, yet prosperity has little correlation with peace of mind, as the silently weeping optometrist-businessman Billy demonstrates. Most of them have ambivalent feelings towards their fathers which *might* have something to do with their social views but more probably do not. As the prosecutor suggests Proteus's actions express resentment of his father, so Pilgrim's psychiatrist thinks the scares his father has given Billy cause his condition. Both judgments ignore the obvious motivations. But the gulf between father and child parallels that between controlling forces and the man. All follow a literal journey which accompanies the psychological voyage toward awareness. Each is reviled by a society whose moral values are inferior to those it judges warped in the protagonist. Yet each struggles with morality, tries to be a moral man, and evinces an enduring concern to give purpose and goodness to life.

The essential pattern emerges of an unheroic man who is wanderer and prisoner in an absurd universe, a perpetual child dominated by forces he scarce understands, shocked and stunned by incomprehensible horrors, yet somehow finding happiness in moments of joy and love, and doggedly persisting in the effort to be a decent person and to find meaning in existence. Billy epitomizes most of these characteristics. His story may not as fully demonstrate every phase of the pattern as does that of Malachi Constant, but through the war scenes and the central event of Dresden it generates a peculiar force. Dresden becomes the one metaphor around which *Slaughterhouse-Five* builds, like a poem probing the arrested moment and its implications with vivid intensity. (In that respect it might be seen as roughly akin to a poem like Yeats's "Leda and the Swan," building outwards or – against the ambiguity – delving inward from its climactic symbolic event, the rape of Leda by Zeus, to the Trojan war and speculations beyond.) By comparison, *The Sirens of Titan* remains more purely narrative in form, demonstrating and explaining its thesis. Billy Pilgrim, wanderer and prisoner on Earth and in space alike, Jesus and Adam, optometrist-businessman and modest loving husband, talk-show crank and preacher of life-in-spite-of-death, traumatized survivor of Dresden, brings together the elements of the pattern in a version of twentieth-century combination saint and everyman.

From *Player Piano* comes the setting for the American scenes of *Slaughterhouse-Five*: Ilium, New York. The industrial giant located in Ilium varies from novel to novel, but it remains essentially a one-company town. The successive Iliums with their particular resident industries represent the way so many American cities are in fact dominated by one industry or one group of industries – Seattle by Boeing, Detroit by auto manufacturers. But the device goes much further than this, Ilium becoming a representative unit of the larger industrial society, a demonstration-piece for aspects of life under American capitalism. The characteristics developed to an extreme in *Player Piano* recur: domination by a new technological-managerial elite, working masses either being replaced by automation or rendered automatons themselves, people without sense of purpose or self-esteem. In Billy's Ilium, the ghetto residents have felt such futility that they have burned down their own neighborhood, making it look like Dresden after being fire-bombed. Nothing could make more explicit the resemblance between what man is doing to man in Ilium and what man did to man in Dresden. Another echo from *Player Piano* comes in images of loneliness, surely an appropriate

emotion in the inhabitants of such an environment. One of these images, which occurs several times in Vonnegut's work and twice in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, is of a big dog barking somewhere far off. Each time the sound is the same: "With the help of fear and echoes and winter silences, that dog had a voice like a big bronze gong." We might recall Winston Niles Rumfoord's terrible isolation in being sent finally into endless space without even his dog, Kazak, or the gong-like bark seeming to portend his fate which Constant hears as he enters Rumfoord's estate. Billy hears the gong-bark as he wanders in Luxembourg and as he enters the prison camp – it acts as a signal emphasizing the loneliness of his dual fate as a wanderer-prisoner.

From *The Sirens of Titan*, by way of later appearances, come the Rumfoords. Some of the attributes ascribed to this selectively-bred stock in *The Sirens of Titan* seem both admirable and sincerely intended by Vonnegut. On the other hand, they are typically aloof, somewhat out of touch, lacking in human warmth and compassion. The honeymooning Pilgrims cannot fail to be aware of the passing yacht *Scheherazade*, but on board the honeymooning Lance Rumfoords are a thousand and one nights away from the Pilgrims or anyone like them. The capacities which the Rumfoords have nurtured, which have brought them to power and wealth, are the same ones which allow Bertram Rumfoord to treat both Billy and the story of Dresden so dispassionately or Winston Rumfoord to use people for his own ends with the assurance that his machinations were for their own good. Bertram's insistence that Billy has echolalia demonstrates such attitudes: "Rumfoord was thinking in a military manner: that an inconvenient person, one whose death he wished for very much, for practical reasons, was suffering from a repulsive disease." It is easy to see how he can conclude that Dresden "had to be done," and how the Rumfoord approach, subjugating means to ends, individuals to programs, conscience to ambition, will always lead to Dresdens.

Tralfamadore, space and time travel, and visions of a fixed future which negates free will also come from *The Sirens of Titan*. The science fiction element in *Slaughterhouse-Five* shares the basic ingredients it provides in other novels: an outside perspective on human affairs; a means of projecting the mundane to bizarre extremes which expose its characteristics by exaggeration; a literal "universalizing" of given conditions. Billy's journey to Tralfamadore and his being placed in a zoo there act in part as parallels to his wanderings in Luxembourg and his internment in the German camp, emphasizing that the war experiences are not unique ones dependent upon particular circumstances but are emblematic of the general condition of man in the cosmos. The Tralfamadorian insistence that things happen simply because that is "the way the moment was structured" and that people in time are like insects trapped in a blob of amber also emphasizes the condition of man in broad existential terms. The space story provides a context for the war episodes. Picked up by the Tralfamadorians, Billy's only question is, "Why me?" His captors explain that there is no *why* – it just is. Soon afterwards, in the counterpointed narrative of the German prisoners, an American is unexpectedly struck by a guard. "Why me?" he asks. "'Vy you? Vy anybody?'" responds the guard. In short, the story of Billy's capture and of Dresden, with its insistent *whys* and its persistent absurd inevitability provides the perfect embodiment of the vision of existence which the Tralfamadorian episodes in Vonnegut diagram.

There is another aspect of the science fiction, also pervasive in *The Sirens of Titan*, which calls attention to itself in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. That is the element of evasion or escape. For while the science fiction stresses grim aspects of existence – inevitability, meaninglessness, alienation and isolation, the absurd – it remains itself an escape into imagination and fancy. This ambivalence of

science fiction contributes to the mixed tone common in Vonnegut, strongest in *The Sirens of Titan* but considerable in this novel, of cutting satirical exposure balanced by wistful expression of tenderness, of harsh visions of the existential void mingled with the lingering glimpses of a warmer world. At the same time that Billy's space journey extends the existential terms of his earthly journey, it also contains some of the happiest, most comforting moments of his life. The Tralfamadorians themselves seem kind, and apparently do their best to treat Billy with understanding. He feels as happy there as on earth, his little zoo world seems cozy, and his relationship with Montana Wildhack is a loving one. In fact, it looks almost like erotic dream come true combined with ideal matrimonial harmony, the sweet innocence of Adam and Eve recreated in the snug safety of a geodesic Eden. And while the Tralfamadorians confirm his experience of inevitable subjection to incomprehensible forces, they also provide him with an answer. The perpetual existence of all moments of time removes the negation of death. As surely as man dies man is always alive in those moments that he lived. That is the vision that Billy preaches in the final years of his life and which enables him to face the death he has foreseen without fear or regret.

If in these respects the time and space travel looks like wish-fulfillment or escape from reality, that is entirely appropriate. We must surely wonder, like his daughter and others in the novel, if all Billy's talk of Tralfamadore and time travel is not madness. When Billy commits himself he shares his room with Eliot Rosewater. Eliot has killed a fourteen-year-old German fireman and Billy has seen "the greatest massacre in European history," and both find life meaningless. "So they were trying to re-invent themselves and their universe. Science fiction was a big help." That comment could suggest that all the time and space travels are tricks of Billy's mind, "oubliettes" into which it escapes as the only way to make life bearable. The first time Billy "flips out" he is exhausted, cold, hungry, scared, and in pain: hallucinatory escape from reality in such circumstances seems completely plausible. Subsequently there are interconnections between "reality" and the time travel which help suggest the latter could be dreams or hallucinations derived from the former. The idea of a man and woman being kidnapped by space men and displayed in a zoo occurs in a Kilgore Trout novel Billy reads. Orange and black stripes appear on the locomotive of the POW train, on the tent used for daughter Barbara's wedding reception, and on the moonlit hall wall as Billy walks to the flying saucer. Some room remains for lingering suspicions that all the science fiction elements exist only in Billy's mind (as the Indianapolis conflagration exists only in Eliot's mind in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*), even though the story is told as if they were factual. That would not diminish their impact or their service to theme, and it would even intensify the poignancy of the sufferings inflicted on Billy by his experience. Nor does the possible ambiguity weaken the story. As with the moral uncertainties surrounding Campbell's confessions in *Mother Night*, we have it both ways, in effect, so that the range of psychological and thematic exploration is broadened.

The science fiction technique, then, dramatizes the general condition of man in an Absurd Universe captured metaphorically and literally in the Dresden episode, and expresses the inevitable desire to escape at least momentarily from such a vision of reality. *Mother Night* showed the same wartime nightmare and the same wish for evasion. The connection with that novel comes partly through the general images of human suffering in wartime, partly through the similar depiction of the rights and wrongs of both sides in the war, and through the character of Howard Campbell. In most respects, the Campbell of *Slaughterhouse-Five* seems consistent with the one seen in *Mother Night*, though curiously one detail does not fit – this time he is married to *Resi* Noth, not Helga. Another

detail carried over from the same novel is the “Blue Fairy Godmother.” In *Mother Night* that was Campbell’s name for the American intelligence officer who recruited him. This time it is the appellation for a British prisoner, deriving from the role he plays in the welcoming pantomime. Campbell’s main function consists of commenting on the nature of American prisoners in general, tracing their behavior to the influence of their native class system. That system is described in terms resembling those declared in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*. The American enlisted men, Campbell says, despise themselves because they see their poverty as a sign of their own failure. They love neither themselves nor one another, reject any leadership from among their ranks as pretension by someone no better than they are, and therefore make sulky, self-pitying prisoners. If the portrayal of men as prisoners of war is seen as a metaphor for the general condition of man, then the consequences of the system described in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* are shown in *Slaughterhouse-Five* not just for what they do to Americans as soldiers and prisoners but for their larger human cost.

Other repetitions abound. Those references to writing about days of catastrophe and to the Children’s Crusade from *Cat’s Cradle* have already been mentioned. As in that book, there is talk here of fabrication being necessary to explain life, when Eliot Rosewater tells a psychiatrist, “I think you guys are going to have to come up with a lot of wonderful *new* lies, or people just aren’t going to want to go on living.” The frightening incomprehensibility which demands lies in *Cat’s Cradle* is intensified in the senseless horror of Dresden. Well might be the questioning bird call, surely the existential “Why?” which punctuates other novels as it does this one, provide the last word – “*Poo-tee-weet?*”

In sum, the allusions to other novels serve to enlarge and complete the significance of the central action of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, while this novel in turn draws together what has been shown in the earlier ones. It also gathers the multiple episodes of its own story into its main symbolic event. All the contemporary events depicted – ghetto riot, Vietnam war, assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert F. Kennedy – become part of the existential absurdity crystallized in the firebombing of Dresden. Everything is united in a consistent, concise vision of the world according to Vonnegut. That vision remains descriptive more than interpretive, but the carefully assembled structural technique employed in *Slaughterhouse-Five* gives a short novel depth, complexity, and inclusiveness, all delivered with an impact intensified by compression.

Having shown us the hideous reality and the universal ramifications of the destruction of Dresden, what does Vonnegut offer us with which to meet such a world? On the face of it, very little. The general implications of this story might be that war and hate and various forms of cruelty are bad. There is nothing new in that, although the force with which these stock observations are made does revitalize their horror and perhaps reinvigorate our conviction that such things must cease. As the movie producer says to the author on hearing he has written an anti-war novel, “Why don’t you write an anti-*glacier* book instead?” Perhaps Vonnegut accepts the challenge in extending *Slaughterhouse-Five* into more than an anti-war novel. The pens of anti-war writers may never be mightier than swords, and the voices of men crying out against the absurdity of existence may echo away in the recesses of unheeding space, but there is morality and humanity in a man’s making the effort. As Vonnegut says of Lot’s wife, he loves her for looking back because it was such a human thing to do. Vonnegut looks back, and the result is a very human book. Both of them, he says, are turned into pillars of salt. The implication seems to be that to look back at such a catastrophe, at so

much human suffering, is to become immobilized by sorrow, to be so caught up in the horror and grief of what life has brought as to be unable to go on living. That might be what is meant by Billy Pilgrim's becoming "unstuck in time." Shocked by his experience, trapped in the memory of horrors, he cannot go on living moment by consecutive moment. At this point the quotations Vonnegut uses in the first chapter become relevant. The first is from Theodore Roethke's "The Waking":

I wake up to sleep, and take my waking slow.
I feel my fate in what I cannot fear.
I learn by going where I have to go.

The sleep he wakes to is surely death, which, along the pains of life, is what he cannot fear and also the event toward which he has to go. The other two quotations express, first, the view that life is a dance with death, and second, the wish to stop the action of life so that it will not come to an end. What these quotations seem to add up to is the view of that life is "a duty dance with death," an inevitable course leading to an inevitable end. To fear either life or death, to be immobilized by fright or horror or grief, means to give up living and become a pillar of salt.

We might conclude from this that Vonnegut advocates acceptance of the unchangeable courses of life and death itself, not looking back, enjoying the dance and the good moment life brings. As he says, "People aren't supposed to look back." But they do, and that they do is human and lovable. That undercuts the apparent assertion about the way life should be lived, as does the fact that it so closely resembles the system, derisively portrayed, by which the Tralfamadorians shut their eyes to the bad moments and travel in the times of happiness. Vonnegut speaks in the final chapter of being glad to have so many nice moments in his life, but there are not many offered in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. The one he mentions, of flying over East Germany in a Hungarian airplane, is punctuated with thoughts of bombings and the world's overpopulation, and set between accounts of political assassinations, Vietnam death tolls and Dresden corpse mines. As the novel ends, Billy is enjoying a happier moment in springtime sunshine, but the coffin-shaped wagon stands nearby and the bird overheard repeats the questioning "*Poo-tee-weet?*" The ambiguities persist to the end.

In general terms, however, the advocacy of keeping going, avoiding becoming unstuck in time through obsession with the painful past, and making the most of the happy moments, seems to be endorsed through the presentation of the British POWs. They are also undercut: the error which gives them five hundred Red Cross parcels a month instead of fifty detracts from the notion that they have succeeded entirely by their own efforts, and the German commandant's anglophiliac admiration of them adds to the touch of parody in their description. Yet the tribute paid them in the novel seems as genuinely intended as the criticism of the American prisoners, and the merits of their approach in their contrast to that of their allies stand. For five years they have kept going in circumstances which, parcels or no parcels, remain demoralizing, and, more than that, they have given meaning and purpose to an existence as absurd as any imaginable. Perhaps through them we are shown the value of giving life purpose and making happiness rather than constantly turning away to ask, "Why me?", "Do I feel happy?", or "What does life mean?" Their system works better than anything else we see in the novel. And yet, finally, we are left feeling it does not really carry much weight. Vonnegut stops well short of offering us a program for life, as if afraid that if he does he, too, might be guilty of giving us a set of lies which make life tolerable. In fact, there is far less affirmation in this novel than in *The Sirens of Titan*. There are indications of values placed on compassion, uncritical love and the joy of

living, but they seem pallid and weak in this context of nightmare. We are left with the stillness following the disaster, the vague promise of that tired, faded spring light, and the bird's eternal "Poo-tee-weet?"

Yet *Slaughterhouse-Five* is not a humorless book. It has its full measure of the usual delightful satiric barbs, slapstick scenes and comic preposterousness. The account of the drunk Billy searching desperately for the steering wheel of his car not knowing that he is in the back seat evokes laughter but seems like something we have seen before. Billy's coming unstuck in time while watching television, so that he sees a war film backwards then forwards, is funny, satirically sharp, and thematically to the point. But much of the humor remains dark or even embittered. Typical is the repetition of the Trafaladorian "So it goes" after each mention of death. The repeated phrase becomes something like an incremental refrain, building meaning with each restatement. At first it seems funny in an ironic way, then it begins to sound irritating, almost irrelevant. Gradually we realize that our irritation is right, that the punctuating refrain is forcing us to look at another then another death, and we are won over to the device, our resentment now directed to the fact which it emphasizes, that too many people are killed. "So it goes," initially almost a shrugging acceptance of the inevitable, becomes a grim reminder meaning almost the opposite of what it says, and finally another more poignant kind of expression of the inevitable. By the last chapter, when it is applied to the deaths of Robert Kennedy, Martin Luther King, and young men in Vietnam, the device which had first brought smiles leaves us close to tears. And so it goes.

In the first chapter, Vonnegut calls *Slaughterhouse-Five* a failure. We can understand why he might think so, since it is so evidently an attempt to capture the full measure of such a personally significant event and perhaps even a great deal of what he believes about life in general. Few men are likely to finish such an effort feeling they have said it all or said it right. He might also feel that technically the novel has inadequacies. It does. Some of them, such as in characterization, have been mentioned. Yet overall *Slaughterhouse-Five* remains a remarkably successful novel, and in some ways Vonnegut's best. It shows less of the warm humanity which we come to feel is part of Vonnegut's vision of life than we hope for and than we find in *The Sirens of Titan*. It finds less to affirm, too. But *Slaughterhouse-Five* is an enormously truthful book, and truth in this case leaves little room for faith or assurance that is the least bit forced. The novel flirts with the dangers of being episodic, disjointed, too diverse, and even too brief, for its content. In this respect it is a daring novel, but that artistic recklessness pays off. The structure does hold, and succeeds in pulling together not just its own components but ideas and themes from previous novels. And all without turning the book into a compendium. The compression gives a story which could become turgid vitality, yet at the same time intensifies its poignancy. Moreover, the novel neither falters from nor sensationalizes the horrors it depicts, and tenaciously avoids pedantic or moralistic commentary; no small achievement given the subject matter and the author's personal closeness to it.