

## ***Slaughterhouse-Five*** **by William Rodney Allen**

Nearly a quarter of a century passed between the night Kurt Vonnegut survived the firebombing of Dresden in World War II and the publication of his fictionalized account of that event, *Slaughterhouse-Five*. As Vonnegut says, “It seemed a categorical imperative that I write about Dresden, the firebombing of Dresden, since it was the largest massacre in the history of Europe and I am a person of European extraction and I, a writer, had been present. I *had* to say something about it.” But the problem was, as Vonnegut remarks in the novel itself, “There is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre.” Consequently he was frustrated in his early attempts to tell the single story he felt he had to tell: “I came home in 1945, started writing about it, and wrote about it, and *wrote about it* and WROTE ABOUT IT...The book is a process of twenty years of this sort of living with Dresden and the aftermath.” Precisely because the story was so hard to tell, and because Vonnegut was willing to take the two decades necessary to tell it – to speak the unspeakable – *Slaughterhouse-Five* is a great novel, a masterpiece sure to remain a permanent part of American literature.

The story of Dresden was a hard one for an American to tell for a simple reason: it was designed by the Allies to kill as many German civilians as possible, and it was staggeringly successful in achieving that aim. Because the government rebuffed his attempts shortly after the war to obtain information about the Dresden bombing, saying only that it was classified, it took Vonnegut years to realize the scale of the destruction of life on the night of February 13, 1945. What he eventually learned was that, by the most conservative estimates, 135,000 people died in the raid – far more than were killed by either of the atomic bombs the United States dropped later that year on Hiroshima or Nagasaki. Vonnegut was not killed himself in the attack by purest chance: he and a few other American POWs and their guards had available to them perhaps the only effective bomb shelter in the city, a meat locker two stories underground. They and only a handful of others survived the attack. This massive destruction of life was achieved by a technological breakthrough of sorts – the combination of two kinds of bombs that produced far greater devastation than either could have alone. As Vonnegut explained in an interview:

They went over with high explosives first to loosen things up, and then scattered incendiaries. When the war started, incendiaries were fairly sizeable, about long as a shoebox. By the time Dresden got it, they were tiny little things. They burnt the whole damn town down...A fire storm is an amazing thing. It doesn't occur in nature. It's fed by the tornadoes that occur in the midst of it and there isn't a damned thing to breathe...It was a fancy thing to see, a startling thing. It was a moment of truth, too, because American civilians and ground troops didn't know American bombers were engaged in saturation bombing.

In another interview he said, “When we went into the war, we felt our Government was a respecter of life, careful about not injuring civilians and that sort of thing. Well, Dresden had no tactical value; it was a city of civilians. Yet the Allies bombed it until it burned and melted. And then they lied about it. All that was startling to us.”

Yet as crucial as Vonnegut's experience at Dresden was to his life and his fictional career, he resisted the temptation to overdramatize it, to raise it to an apotheosis of the sort Hemingway did of his wounding in World War I at the Italian front. When asked if the events at Dresden changed him,

Vonnegut replied, “No. I suppose you’d think so, because that’s the cliché. The importance of Dresden in my life has been considerably exaggerated because my book about it became a best seller. If the book hadn’t been a best seller, it would seem like a very minor experience in my life.” Dresden, then, was no road-to-Damascus-like conversion to a totally new way of thinking for Vonnegut; he was, after all, a young man convinced like most Americans of the necessity of destroying Nazism by whatever means necessary. The change came gradually, as a long process of thinking about the nature of war and writing about it, at first unsuccessfully. Finally, Vonnegut was less affected by the actual experience of Dresden than he would be by the fame that came with the enormous popularity of his book on the subject.

As James Lundquist puts it, Vonnegut’s task in writing the novel was somehow to bridge “the increasing gap between the horrors of life in the twentieth century and our imaginative ability to comprehend their full actuality.” Indeed, what *can* one say about the madness in our time of human beings slaughtering their fellow human beings – coldly, methodically, scientifically, in numbers heretofore inconceivable? In his book *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Paul Fussell says that World War I was such a shock to those who experienced it that the only response they found adequate to describe it in literature was a searing irony. One thinks of such literary products of the war as Wilfred Owen’s *Dulce et Decorum Est*, a poem contrasting the martial phrase from Cicero that it is “sweet and proper” to die for one’s country with the grotesque, panic-stricken death of soldiers in a mustard gas attack. But if World War I was a shock with its machine guns, its heavy artillery, and its trench-warfare charges into no-man’s land, what of the next war with its saturation bombings, its death camps, its atomic bombs? Like the post-World War I writers, Vonnegut had to find a new way to convey the horror, a new form to reflect a new kind of consciousness. He used irony, to be sure, but he went further, by altering the fundamental processes of narration itself. More than a conventional reminiscence of war, *Slaughterhouse-Five* is an attempt to describe a new mode of perception that radically alters traditional conceptions of time and morality.

Put most simply, what Vonnegut says about time in the novel is that it does not necessarily “point” only in one direction, from past to future. As Lundquist observes, “The novel functions to reveal new viewpoints in somewhat the same way that the theory of relativity broke through the concepts of absolute space and time.” Twenty years after the publications of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, theoretical physicists like Stephen F. Hawking are becoming more convinced that there is no reason why under some circumstances the “arrow of time” might point from future to past rather than from past to future. If such a reversal is possible, then the famous description in *Slaughterhouse-Five* of a backwards movie (in which Air Force planes suck up bombs into themselves from the ground and fly backwards to their bases, where soldiers unload the bombs and ship them back to the factories to be disassembled) might be more than a wistful fantasy of a peaceful world. Of course, Vonnegut is less interested in new theories in physics than he is in his characters’ confrontations with a world that makes no sense in terms of their old ways of seeing it. Hence, rather than beginning his story by quoting Einstein, Vonnegut puts a particular person in a very particular situation: “Listen: Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time.”

But that striking opening sentence comes not in Chapter One, but in Chapter Two. Chapter One consists of Vonnegut speaking in his own voice about the difficulties of writing *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Beginning with his 1966 introduction to the reissued *Mother Night*, Vonnegut had begun to speak more openly about himself and about the autobiographical connections underlying his writing.

In the opening and closing chapters of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, however, he takes that process much further. By making the autobiographical “frame” of the novel part of the novel itself (rather than setting those sections apart as a preface and an afterward), Vonnegut, as Lundquist puts it, “conceptualized his own life the way he later does Billy’s, in terms of Tralfamadorian time theory. The structure of the chapter about writing the novel consequently prefigures the structure of the novel itself.” Vonnegut jumps from how he returned to Dresden in 1967 on a Guggenheim fellowship with his “old war buddy,” Bernard V. O’Hare, to what it had been like to try to write about Dresden just after the war, to his first meeting after the war with O’Hare in Philadelphia, to his time teaching in the Writer’s Workshop at the University of Iowa. Yet, as Reed observes, “There is surprisingly little difficulty in following this seemingly disjointed narrative. The prologue [of] 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.”

Perhaps most helpful is Vonnegut’s discussion in Chapter One of his failed attempts at writing a traditional narrative about Dresden – one with an Aristotelian beginning, middle, and end:

As a trafficker in climaxes and thrills and characterization and wonderful dialogue and suspense and confrontations, I had outlined the Dresden story many times. The best outline I ever made, or anyway the prettiest one, was on the back of a roll of wallpaper.

I used my daughter’s crayons, a different color for each main character. One end of the wallpaper was the beginning of the story, and the other end was the end, and then there was all that middle part, which was the middle. And the blue line met the red line and then the yellow line, and the yellow line stopped because the character represented by the yellow line was dead. And so on. The destruction of Dresden was represented by a vertical band of orange cross-hatching, and all the lines that were still alive passed through it, came out the other side.

There are many reasons why such a traditional structure did not work for the novel Vonnegut wanted to write, but the principal one is that the characters’ lives, like those of real people, do not themselves proceed in one direction: in reality one does as much “backward” traveling in time through memory as “forward” traveling in anticipation of the future. Thus, while not identical with it, *Slaughterhouse-Five’s* narrative mode is allied with the stream-of-consciousness technique pioneered by Joyce and Faulkner, which seeks to reproduce the mind’s simultaneous blending of the past through memory, the present through perception, and the future through anticipation. Vonnegut’s own life, and Billy Pilgrim’s, is characterized by an obsessive return to the past. Like Lot’s wife in the Bible, mentioned at the end of Chapter One, Vonnegut could not help looking back, despite the danger of being turned metaphorically into a pillar of salt, into an emblem of the death that comes to those who cannot let go of the past. To get to the heart of the matter of Dresden, moreover, Vonnegut felt he had to let of the writers’ usual bag of chronological tricks – suspense and confrontations and climaxes – and proceed by a different logic toward the future of the novel form.

Thus Vonnegut gives away what would be the traditional climax of his book – the execution of Billy’s friend Edgar Derby “for taking a teapot that wasn’t his” – in the novel’s first paragraph. Throughout the novel he intentionally deflates suspense by mentioning in advance the outcome of any conflict he creates. The readers learn early, for example, that Billy will be kidnapped and taken

to the planet Tralfamadore in 1967, where he will learn of the very different ways the Tralfamadoreans view the universe. He learns as well that Billy will be shot to death on February 13, 1976, by Paul Lazzaro, a paranoid sadist Billy had been captured with in the war. He even learns with Billy the ultimate fate of the universe: the Tralfamadoreans will accidentally blow it up while experimenting with a new type of rocket fuel. Thus, rather than being like a straight line, the narrative chronology of *Slaughterhouse-Five* is more like an ascending, widening spiral that circles over the same territory yet does so from an ever higher and wider perspective. Finally, like most science fiction writers, Vonnegut hopes to push the reader's perceptual horizon as far as he can toward infinity – toward the union of all time and space. There mystery remains, even though suspense disappears, since suspense is a function of a lack of knowledge at a single point in time and space.

Paradoxically, in creating the cosmic, nonlinear narrative Vonnegut uses fragments of all sorts of traditional narrative forms, much as a bird might use twigs, bits of string, and its own feathers to construct a nest, something very different than the sum of its parts. As Richard Giannone observes, "Graffiti, war memos, anecdotes, jokes, songs – light operatic and liturgical – raw statistics, assorted tableaux, flash before the reader's eye." The most important linear narrative underlying all of these is the Judeo-Christian Bible, which is itself a central motif in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. There time proceeds from the creation to man's fall to the birth, crucifixion, and resurrection of Christ to the end of time with the Second Coming. Giannone suggests that the Gospels were "an amalgamation of language forms that were available to early Christians to spread their good tidings, rather than a fixed ideal shape sent down out of the blue...[Yet] the old forms were inadequate to convey the momentous news, so primitive Christians made their own." Thus Vonnegut tries in *Slaughterhouse-Five* to do what the Gospel writers attempted to do in their time: construct a new form out of the fragments of old forms.

That Vonnegut was conscious of doing so – that he found the Christian, linear vision of time no longer adequate – is apparent by his remarks in the novel on a book by Kilgore Trout called *The Gospel from Outer Space*. According to Trout, the traditional Gospels are flawed because they seem to suggest that the moral lesson one should learn from Jesus's crucifixion is "*Before you kill somebody, make absolutely sure he isn't well connected.*" In Trout's revised version of the story, rather than being the Son of God, "Jesus really *was* a nobody, and a pain in the neck to a lot of people with better connections than he had. He still got to say all the lovely and puzzling things he said in the other Gospels." Yet when this nobody is crucified, the heavens open up with thunder and lightning, and God announces that he "*will punish horribly anybody who torments a bum who has no connections.*" In the course of the novel it becomes clear that the weak, hapless, clownishly dressed Billy Pilgrim is precisely this "bum who has no connections" – that he is, in effect, a sort of new Christ. Such observations as the fact that Billy lay "self-crucified" on a brace in his German POW boxcar, or that Billy "resembled the Christ of the carol" that Vonnegut takes as the novel's epigraph ("The cattle are lowing, / The baby awakes. / But the little Lord Jesus / No crying he makes.") make clear that this identification of Billy as a Christ-figure is Vonnegut's conscious intention.

Like Christ, Billy brings a new message to the world, although it is a very different one from his predecessor's. And like Jesus he is an innocent who accepts his death, at the hands of an enemy who reviles and misunderstands him, as an opportunity to teach mankind the proper response to mortality. Both Billy and Jesus teach that one should face death calmly, because death is not the end. In the Christian vision the self after death proceeds forward in time eternally, either in heaven or hell;

for Billy, however, “after” death the soul proceeds backward in time, back into life. As Billy learns from the Tralfamadorians,

When a person dies he only *appears* to die. He is still very much alive in the past, so it is very silly for people to cry at his funeral. All moments, past, present, and future, always have existed, always will exist. The Tralfamadorians can look at all the different moments just the way we can look at a stretch of the Rocky Mountains, for instance. They can see how permanent all the moments are, and they can look at any moment that interests them. It is just an illusion we have here on Earth that one moment follows another one, like beads on a string, and that once a moment is gone it is gone forever.

Thus Billy, the new Christ, preaches that human beings do have eternal life – even if there is no life after death.

The literary consequence of the Tralfamadorian conception of time is the Tralfamadorian novel, which consists of “brief clumps of symbols read simultaneously.” As the Tralfamadorians tell Billy, these symbols, or messages, when seen all at once “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.” *Slaughterhouse-Five* is of course itself an attempt to write this sort of book, as Vonnegut announces in his subtitle: “This is a novel somewhat in the telegraphic schizophrenic manner of tales of the planet Tralfamadore.” While human beings cannot read all the passages of the book simultaneously, its short length, its scrambled chronology, its deft juxtapositionings of different times to make thematic points, and its intricate patterns of imagery all combine to give the reader something of that effect. Once he finishes the novel – after a few hours, perhaps in one sitting – the reader can visualize all of Billy’s moments stretched out before him like the Rocky Mountains; further, he can see the author’s life in the same way, all the way from World War II to the assassination of Robert Kennedy in 1968, when Vonnegut was composing the last pages of *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

Yet while the novel boldly attempts to do away with traditional chronological narration on one level, it still gives the reader a story that builds toward the bombing of Dresden, which is recounted in greatest detail late in the book. Rather than being a traditional novel or a purely experimental, “Tralfamadorian” novel, *Slaughterhouse-Five* is more like one superimposed on the other. One can easily follow the traditional *Bildungsroman* of Billy’s life. Born in 1922, like his creator, he endured a childhood marked by intense fears – of drowning when his father subjected him to the “sink or swim method,” of falling into the Grand Canyon on a family trip, of the total darkness when the guides extinguished the lights in Carlsbad Caverns. These early images have great relevance for Billy’s fear and ineptitude in the war and afterward. His refusal to try to swim and consequent passive sinking to the bottom of the pool is a symbolic wish to return to the safety of the womb. Billy falls constantly in the novel – into ditches, from boxcars, from the sky in a plane crash – despite his intense fear of falling epitomized by his Grand Canyon experience. Finally, the darkness in Carlsbad Caverns prefigures that in the meat locker two stories underground in Dresden – the most important symbolic womb into which Billy retreats for safety. One of the many ironies of the book is that such a passive person should be one of the few to survive the destruction of the city. As Vonnegut says simply of his hero, “He was unenthusiastic about living.”

After this shaky childhood Billy attends college for only a few weeks before going off to war as an unarmed chaplain's assistant. In no time he is captured, along with a hapless tank gunner named Roland Weary, in the Battle of the Bulge, the last great German counteroffensive of the war. Freezing in inadequate clothing, hungry, frightened out of his wits, Billy becomes "unstuck in time" for the first time, finding himself living moments out of his past or his future. Weary dies in transit to the POW camp of gangrene of the feet, which he had claimed was caused when the time-tripping Billy abstractedly stepped on him. Before he dies, Weary tells his story to Paul Lazzaro, who vows to avenge Weary's death by tracking down Billy after the war and killing him. Lazzaro is an emblem of the fact that a soldier can never really escape his war experiences – that they will always "track him down" even years later. In the POW camp the dispirited group of Americans is greeted by some hale and hearty Englishmen who have been there most of the war, growing healthy on good Red Cross food (sent by mistake in excessive amounts), exercise, and English optimism. They are the opposite of Billy, the fatalistic, disheveled weakling who simply drifts from one disaster to the next in helpless resignation. After a falling out with the Englishmen over personal hygiene and philosophical attitudes, the Americans are sent to Dresden, a supposedly "open" city, where they soon have their rendezvous with the most significant day in the city's history, February 13, 1945.

After the war Billy does far better than one would expect, since he becomes an optometrist, marries the boss's daughter, and is soon driving a Cadillac, living in an all-electric home, pulling in over \$60,000 a year. But the thematic reason Vonnegut makes Billy so successful is perhaps more important than the slight problem of verisimilitude: Vonnegut wants to show that all Billy's material comforts – his Magic Fingers bed, the expensive jewelry he gives Valencia, his wife, his fancy car (which will be the cause of his wife's death) – can do nothing to smooth over the pain of what he has experienced. Shortly after the war Billy had checked himself into a mental hospital, where he received shock treatments for depression. Today his problem would be called posttraumatic stress syndrome. Late in the novel, as he feels agony while listening to a barber shop quartet sing "That Old Gang of Mine" at a party celebrating his wedding anniversary, Billy realizes that "he had a great big secret somewhere inside," even though "he could not imagine what it was." His secret is of course the awareness of the horrors of wars and the certainty of death – an awareness the frantic materialism of postwar America was desperately trying to cover up.

The cracks in the American dream show through Billy's apparently successful postwar life. Valencia is a parody of consumerism, since she constantly consumes candy bars while making empty promises to lose weight in order to please Billy sexually. Billy's son appears to be headed for jail as a teenager before he joins the Green Berets and goes to fight in Vietnam. On his way to the office Billy stops at a traffic light in a burned-out ghetto area and drives away when a black man tries to talk with him. Vonnegut was obviously responding to the incredible social tensions of the late 1960s, which saw the burning of major portions of several American cities in race riots, the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert Kennedy, and the seemingly endless acceleration of the war in Vietnam. A major reason *Slaughterhouse-Five* had the enormous impact it did was because it was published at the height of the conflict in Vietnam, and so delivered its antiwar message to a most receptive audience. In a book of powerful passages, there is no more powerful one than this at the end of the novel, in Vonnegut's autobiographical chapter 10: "Robert Kennedy, whose summer home is eight miles from the home I live in all year round, was shot two nights ago. He died last night." One of Robert Kennedy's promises in his presidential campaign was to stop the

war, and when he died that hope seemed to die with him. For Vonnegut, and for Billy, it must have seemed that Dresden was happening all over again in Vietnam.

In 1967, on the night of his daughter's wedding, Billy is picked up by a flying saucer and taken in a time warp to Tralfamadore, where he is displayed in a sort of Tralfamadorian zoo by his abductors. Since Billy had not been very happy on earth, he finds that during his stay of several years (in terms of Tralfamadorian time, not Earth time) he is "about as happy as I was on Earth." His happiness is increased when the Tralfamadorians kidnap a sexy movie actress, Montana Wildhack, and bring her to the zoo as Billy's "mate." So while Billy enjoys sexual bliss for the first time with the willing Ms. Wildhack, he gets instruction from the Tralfamadorians on the true nature of the universe. Billy and Montana appear as a sort of new Adam and Eve, who live in the confines of a perfect world, until Billy eats from the tree of knowledge, in effect, by learning the true nature of time and the place of conscious beings in the universe. He is expelled from his symbolic garden when the Tralfamadorians (for unexplained reasons) send him back to Earth. An enlightened Billy then begins his mission of preaching his new gospel to his fellowmen – who are understandably skeptical about his claims.

Vonnegut leaves room for the idea that Billy's trip to Tralfamadore is all in Billy's mind. This sort of "escape hatch" from fantasy into realism is characteristic of the sci-fi genre: in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, Twain has his hero receive a blow on the head and probably dream the novel's events. In *Slaughterhouse-Five* Billy had been in a mental hospital and received shock treatments. During his stay there he had met Eliot Rosewater, who makes a cameo appearance from Vonnegut's previous novel in order to introduce Billy to the sci-fi works of Kilgore Trout. One of the novels Billy reads, *The Big Board*, concerns an Earth couple kidnapped by aliens and displayed on their planet in a zoo. An event in 1968, moreover, suggests a physical explanation for the Tralfamadorian episodes: Billy survives a plane crash on the way to the optometrists' convention that kills everyone else and leaves him with a serious head injury. In Chapter One of the novel Vonnegut mentions the French author Céline, who had received a head wound fighting in World War I, and who had thereafter heard voices and had written his death-obsessed novels during his sleepless nights. Like Billy, Céline too was obsessed with time: Billy's Tralfamadore experience may be seen as the equivalent of Céline's – and Vonnegut's – attempts to deal with the problem of mortality through writing fiction. As Vonnegut observes of Rosewater and Billy, "They had both found life meaningless, partly because of what they had seen in war...So they were trying to re-invent themselves and their universe. Science fiction was a big help."

Billy's trip to Tralfamadore, then, finally begins to look more like a metaphor than a literal description of events. His space travel is simply a way for Vonnegut to describe the growth of his own imagination out of the Christian, linear version of time to the cosmic perspective of time as the fourth dimension. This is not to say, however, that Vonnegut offers the Tralfamadorian *attitudes* towards that vision as final truth. Tralfamadorians – "real" or imagined – are not human beings, so that their attitude of absolute indifference toward the terrors of the universe – even to the ultimate terror of its annihilation – could never work for humans. If *Slaughterhouse-Five* is a combination of the traditional narrative and the Tralfamadorian novel, it is also a synthesis of Christian and Tralfamadorian morals: the reader is not so much urged to choose the latter over the former as to superimpose the two. When Billy passionately implores the Tralfamadorians to tell him how they live in peace, so that he can return to give that knowledge to Earth, his hosts reply that war and peace

come and go at random on Tralfamadore as they do everywhere else. Their response to any frustration on Billy's part – to his profoundly human need to know why – is simply that “there is no *why*.” When Billy wonders why the universe must blow up, they respond that “the moment is structured that way.” The Tralfamadoreans claim that “only on Earth is there any talk of free will.” Such profound indifference could never suffice for human beings, nor does Vonnegut imply that it should.

*Slaughterhouse-Five* is built on the paradox that it appears to offer acceptance and even indifference as responses to the horrors of the twentieth century, when in fact it is a moving lament over those horrors – a piercing wail of grief over the millions of dead in World War II. Emblematic of this paradox is a short phrase from the novel that has become probably the best-known and most often repeated by his readers in any of Vonnegut's work: “So it goes.” In *Palm Sunday* Vonnegut explains that the phrase was his response to his reading of Céline's *Journey to the End of Night*: “It was a clumsy way of saying what Céline managed to imply...in everything he wrote, in effect: ‘Death and suffering can't matter nearly as much as I think they do. Since they are so common, my taking them so seriously must mean that I am insane.’” Every time someone dies in the novel – from Wild Bob to Valencia to Billy Pilgrim himself to Robert Kennedy – Vonnegut repeats “So it goes.” Once this pattern is established, Vonnegut has fun with it, as when he has Billy pick up a bottle of flat champagne after his daughter's wedding: “The champagne was dead. So it goes.” Thus the phrase finally embodies all the essential attitudes towards death in the novel – acceptance, sorrow, humor, outrage. If at times “So it goes” reads like a resigned “Let it be,” it more often comes through as the reverse: “Let it be *different* – let all these dead live!” So Vonnegut does let them live, in effect, by positing the Tralfamadorean idea that they are always alive in their pasts.

Despite its mask of Tralfamadorean indifference, *Slaughterhouse-Five* conveys at times an almost childlike sense of shock that the world is such a violent place. Children form an important motif in the book, which is subtitled *The Children's Crusade*. Vonnegut had chosen that ironic phrase as a way to reassure Mary O'Hare, Bernard's wife, that he was not going to portray war as a glamorous affair fought by “Frank Sinatra and John Wayne or some of those other glamorous, war-loving, dirty old men.” When the British POWs, after several years in captivity, see Billy and the other recently captured Americans, they confess that “we had forgotten that wars were fought by babies.” Before recounting the bombing of Dresden, Billy and his young German guard see a group of adolescent girls taking a shower. They are “utterly beautiful.” Yet when the bombs begin to fall, Vonnegut records that “the girls that Billy had seen naked were all being killed...So it goes.”

But *Slaughterhouse-Five* does not stop with the pathos of innocent children being killed. It refuses to be a self-satisfied antiwar book like, say, *Johnny Got His Gun*. While conveying a sense of outrage, horror, regret, and even despair over the insanity of war, Vonnegut does not think that stopping war is a realistic possibility or that, if it were, this would end the pain of the human condition. In Chapter One, when talking about his Dresden project to a movie producer, Vonnegut had gotten the response, “‘Why don't you publish an anti-*glacier* movie 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.” Even more significant is Vonnegut's admission that “if wars didn't keep coming like glaciers, there would still be plain old death.” Finally, while Vonnegut accepts war and death as inevitable, he refuses to endorse the sentimentalized, childlike attitude of acceptance of the inevitable epitomized in the prayer hanging on Billy's office wall and inside a locket on a chain

hanging around Montana Wildhack's neck: "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." As Vonnegut observes, "Among the things Billy Pilgrim could not change were the past, the present, and the future." Dresden has happened, is happening, and will always happen.

Yet if the war is always going on, it is always ending, too. Life comes out of death, as surely as Billy survives the bombing of Dresden in a slaughterhouse. In Chapter One Vonnegut describes the ends of the war, when thousands of POWs of all nationalities were gathered in a beetfield by the Elbe River. This moment of liberation of the soldiers of all countries would grow for twenty years in Vonnegut's mind until it became the central image in *Bluebeard*, his most recent novel. The last sound in *Slaughterhouse-Five* is not that of bombs falling, but of a bird chirping just after the war: "*Poo-tee-weet?*" By making the chirp a question, Vonnegut seems to ask all the survivors of the war, "Despite everything, would you like to try again?"

Peter J. Reed speaks for most critics of Vonnegut's writing when he says that "*Slaughterhouse-Five* remains a remarkably successful novel...[that] 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." Vonnegut was indeed close to the events of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, but it took him nearly a quarter of a century to get far enough away from them in time to have the proper perspective. The authority of that perspective perhaps most forcefully rings through the simple phrase Billy utters about Dresden nears the novel's end: lying in his hospital bed after his plane crash, listening to Bertrand Rumfoord belittle the "bleeding hearts" who would mourn the loss of innocent life in the Allied firebombings, Billy responds: "I was there." Finally, *Slaughterhouse-Five* gains its power not as an act of moralizing, but of witness.