

Tralfamadore is America: Cultural History in *Slaughterhouse-Five*

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Early scholars of *Slaughterhouse-Five* read it as Kurt Vonnegut's testament of acceptance. They see it as bleakly existentialist, as if Vonnegut believes and the novel implies that the world is without meaning or purpose. However, Vonnegut considered himself a socialist, which necessarily holds that there is meaning and purpose—not to mention cause and effect and chronology. It is not Vonnegut but Billy Pilgrim and the Tralfamadorians who believe life has no meaning or purpose. The narrator says, "There is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre" (19), but there are whole books written about them, for example the one written by Vonnegut. Todd F. Davis states, "The inhabitants of Tralfamadore make no attempt to fix meaning to any event" (76). By contrast, Vonnegut finds a lot of meaning. He finds that militarism is absurd. He finds that consumerism is absurd. He finds that misdistribution of income is absurd. This essay argues that Tralfamadore is a futuristic dystopia that parodies the United States. To that end, it begins by examining the cultural myths and ideologies implicit in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Then it considers how the history of ideas about the US landscape inform this novel.

Peter Freese describes Billy as "a latter-day Christ crucified by a world of cruelty and lovelessness and a postlapsarian Adam pining for a return to paradise" (155). As an anti-hero, one of the "listless playthings of enormous forces" (164), he is, in the slang of his day, just a little pill. Moreover, he is a grim pill. Indeed, the name *Billy* suggests "goat." As in John Barth's *Giles Goat-Boy*, Billy is a new kind of scapegoat. Traditionally, the sins of the others wash away and attach to the scapegoat. Then the society gets rid of the sins by removing the scapegoat through either banishment or death. America's postmodern scapegoats, instead of suffering death or banishment, are usually just losers. They fit into the mainstream just enough to exhibit traces of

it, and they suffer accordingly. Thus postmodern scapegoats bear the burden of their culture's contradictions and absurdities. They suffer not from exclusion but rather from inclusion. On his imaginary Tralfamadore, Billy is with a movie star. The motif of an Everyman marooned with a beautiful woman is common in American narratives (e.g., think of *Gilligan's Island*, the popular 1960s television show).

Before he imagines his new world, Billy suffers mentally for decades under the burden of trying to fit into his old world. His baptism is not a traditionally religious one but rather a secular travesty of it. His father baptizes him by throwing him into the deep end of a swimming pool, and Billy is later baptized again by being thrown into the deep end of consumerism. The ritual incantation, "Sink or swim," exemplifies social Darwinism, a myth that Vonnegut often reviled.

As innocent as a child, Billy is rather unaware of reality and often lives in a fantasy world. Also like a child, he falls asleep a lot. For example, he awakes in 1968 to hear his daughter tell him he acts like a child. As in Theodore Roethke's interpolated poem "The Waking," he wakes to sleep: his life is a dreamland. Sleepwalking through life, he dreams the American dream (on the problems with the American dream, see Gobat, Hurley, and Sieber). And when Billy enters adulthood by proposing to Valencia, he does not believe the ritual phrases he hears himself recycling. He has a sense that he is taking on suffering. But not knowing why he is suffering, he does not realize that his cross to bear is to live a life consisting of beliefs and values that grow from the turbulent confluence of Puritanism, consumerism, and the frontier (see, e.g., Bercovitch and Howe). Mistaking the cause of the disease for the cure, he makes his malady worse by redoubling his pursuit of happiness. More specifically, he makes the acquisition of luxuries a necessity. From his humble origins as a barber's son, he begins his rise into the upper-middle-class by marrying the boss's daughter. He buys her a Cadillac, unaware that it will be the death of her. Like almost all of his compatriots, this representative American buys his wife diamonds, unaware that there is death and destruction in Africa's diamond

mines just as there was in Dresden's corpse mines. He buys the big house and everything in it. A shopper in the American dream, he buys the story of the consumer paradise, the big lie that Eliot Rosewater refers to when he says we need "a lot of wonderful new lies" (101).

Like Rip Van Winkle, he is a perpetual child who is asleep—literally and figuratively. After the Revolutionary War, in Washington Irving's tale, Rip does not comprehend the changes in himself, his family, or his society. Likewise, after World War II, Billy does not understand the changes in himself, his family, or the world. Leslie Fiedler's influential argument is that the perpetual adolescent, "Rip Van Winkle presides over the birth of the American imagination" (26). It is axiomatic that Americans of the dominant culture are childish. Never maturing, Billy tries to stay in never-never land of Tralfamadore. As if he is living in timelessness, he imagines that there is no past, present, or future. David W. Noble argues, "We have had a constant self-definition as a nation from the 1830s to the present" (*Historians* 16). Similarly, Leonard Mustazza shows that Vonnegut's novels grapple with that myth of timelessness. Note the first word in the title of Mustazza's book: *Forever Pursuing Genesis: The Myth of Eden in the Novels of Kurt Vonnegut*. Wai-Chee Dimock has noted that "America marked not only the beginning of a 'New Heaven and a New Earth' but also an absolute, atemporal order of truth and justice. It stood at once as the culmination of progress and end to progress, fulfillment of history and emancipation from history. Unfolding in time, America remained ultimately timeless" (14).

As a representative American and as a scapegoat of American history, Billy Pilgrim makes his fatal sacrifice exactly two hundred years after the American Revolution begins—the birth of America. He contains multitudes of American artifacts, which are the raw materials that go into the construction of hegemonic myths. As an Everyman, he is a mosaic of what he has experienced in a society that is itself a mosaic. His mind consists of traces of events, rather like Tralfamadore's spaghetti mass of happy trails that earthlings do not see. All of his

experiences are still happening, but they are happening as memories. Like everyone, he is always a history book; all of the events in the history book of Billy Pilgrim always exist, although some are just in his mind. However, he cannot read all of those events at the same time any more than he could read a stack of stained-glass windows, or a stack of photographic slides, or a stack of transparencies. Like everyone, he cannot look at each moment at the same time, even though bits of each of them are meeting his mind's eye.

As a result, Billy cannot truly reinvent himself. He can rearrange himself by shrinking some elements, expanding others, and putting different elements in the forefront. That is exactly the technique of Marsden Hartley's famous painting, *Portrait of a German Officer* (1914). However, such rearranging invents not a new self but rather a new costume. In Hartley's painting, there is only a rearrangement of the officer's uniform. The clothes make the man. Billy's new costume of intergalactic traveler does not illustrate re-invention. It reveals a representative American's rearrangement of ideas and values implicit in American movies, pulp fiction, romantic songs, and so on.

Read as a satiric parody, Billy Pilgrim is not unstuck in time. He is trapped in it. He never leaves it any more than he ever leaves Earth. More specifically, he is trapped in American history. The values and beliefs that furnish his mind do not change; they just get re-arranged. As a representative American, he imagines a Tralfamadore that is a projection of America. Everything there, from artifact to idea, derives from everyday American objects and beliefs. As Loree Rackstraw notes, one of the bitter ironies of *Slaughterhouse-Five* is that Billy escapes a cataclysm like Dresden but then helps renew the same myths that enable such horrors (58).

Fiction has often used space travel as a voyage analogous to time travel. In particular, traveling to a primitive place has been viewed as a kind of travel into the past. This combination of time and space travel is most famous in Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. In *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, Mark Twain sends his protagonist

back to the Dark Ages as a kind of American missionary. (According to Ronald Reagan, America's mission depends on restoring "material affluence on a scale unequalled in history." Otherwise, we "will put an end to everything we believe in and to our dreams for the future" ["Creative" 267]. Garry Wills has made a counter-argument: "Since we had a special mission, we could assume special powers. . . . The virtue of our aims sanctified the means—so we could indulge in a righteous Hiroshima or two, in napalm and saturation bombing, in a Diem coup, or a Chile putsch" [*Inventing* ix–xx]. On the myth of America's "mission," see Tony Smith.) Twain's missionary of secular progress, , tries to bring Yankee ingenuity to the benighted, but the end is an apocalyptic shoot-out with Hank manning the weapon of mass destruction (WMD) of his time, a Gatling gun. As with Vonnegut, much of Twain's work exposes America's myth of itself as a redeemer nation bringing democracy to the world (see Harris on the theme of timelessness in Twain's work).

Similar to those stories, a narrative of America that historians study is the European myth about returning to Eden, regaining paradise, starting anew, and reinventing the world to make the future consistent with God's plan. Thus the myth of America is to go back to the future—into the past and future simultaneously. The early European immigrants would reestablish the innocence and purity of Eden by going forward into what they regarded as a new world, even though the natives had been there for ages. In that story, the new world was a magic and sacred place that would transfigure newcomers by purifying them, cleansing them of the old world, making them new by baptizing them into democracy. Unlike other nations, the myth goes, American history became a function of nature. For example, Perry Miller called it "nature's nation."

Vonnegut also uses spatial images to indicate temporal ideas. For example, the bug trapped in amber recalls a novel popular during World War II, Kathleen Winsor's *Forever Amber*. It also recalls another perpetual adolescent's anxiety, Holden Caulfield's apprehensiveness

about where the ducks and fish go in the winter when the water freezes. Ducks can travel with the seasons, but fish cannot survive in ice, and humans cannot survive in amber. Tralfamadorians use the Rocky Mountains, a seemingly endless stretch of space that might as well be infinite, as a metaphor for timelessness. Myra Jehlen refers to this as “America’s translation of time into space” (18). Indeed, at the beginning of America as a nation, a dominant myth was that it would take a thousand years to populate the West. A millennium might as well be infinite. But that myth was exploded when historian Frederick Jackson Turner pointed out in 1893 that the “errand into the wilderness” filled the open land after only a century (see Simonson).

Slaughterhouse-Five features two characters whose names are themselves reminders of the Rocky Mountains: Montana Wildhack and Wild Bob from Wyoming. Both characters have difficulty cutting through the amber and avoiding death. Wildhack has been reported as possibly dead, while all of Wild Bob’s soldiers die, and then he himself dies. The image of “the West” is itself part of the national mythology. For instance, Reagan often expressed the myth of the West: “Ideals of courageous and self-reliant heroes, both men and women, are the stuff of western lore. . . . Integrity, morality and democratic values are the resounding themes” (Murdoch 1); and “They built the west without federal planners” (“Additional” 6; see also Findlay, Limerick, Murdoch, and Nordholt). Wild Bob identifies with the mythic westerner Wild Bill Cody, who, with his typical immodesty, barbecued entire buffalo and had a town named in his honor: Cody, Wyoming. Wild Bob is from Sheridan, Wyoming, named after the Civil War general Philip Sheridan, who supposedly said, “The only good Indian is a dead Indian.” Sheridan is about twenty-five miles south of the Wyoming–Montana border. About fifty miles north is the Little Bighorn Battlefield, made famous by another Civil War general. Thus Wild Bob exemplifies those who still believe in the American myths of the frontier and its corollaries: manifest destiny and Social Darwinism. He wants the present and future to repeat a past that existed only in the imagination.

In F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, Jay Gatsby says, "Can't repeat the past? . . . Why of course you can" (84). His mission is to recapture the time before World War I when he held fresh green nature in the person of pure white Daisy in a pure white dress. He thinks of her as an expression of pure nature at the same time that he thinks of her as a wealthy urbanite who is "above the hot struggles of the poor" (114). For Gatsby, this denial of time includes the denial of birth. The fact that Daisy has married and borne a child is insignificant compared to his quest to regain his ostensibly innocent past. He says of Daisy's new life, "It was just personal" (116). By contrast, he regards his personal pilgrimage through life as metaphysical, transcendent, even sacred, and therefore timeless. Daisy's marriage was physical, mundane, even profane, and therefore time-bound. Scholars have long adhered to the view of David W. Noble and Leslie Fiedler that *Gatsby* reflects America's anxiety about generativity. They show that birth is a reminder of death and time because one generation replaces the other.

Billy, too, associates reproduction with death. It is on his wedding night that he imagines his tombstone's epitaph: "Everything was beautiful and nothing hurt" (122). His wife Valencia—a name of an orange, the Halloween color that is also one of the colors on the prisoners' box-car, the maps of bombing targets, and the tent at Billy's party—asks her conquering hero, her Wild Bob, for some war stories. One of Billy's stories derives from a narrative that is very popular in America, Alexander Dumas's novel *The Three Musketeers*. It goes through countless permutations, such as Roland Weary's projection of the story onto his parasitic relationship with the two scouts, to the television show aimed at Billy's children called *The Mouseketeers*, to the movie aimed at his grandchildren called *The Three Amigos*, and so on, like the song of Yon Yonson. For a long stretch of American history, the notion has metaphorically nourished American culture the way it literally nourishes Valencia: too much sweetness and not enough substance.

If neither war, nor imprisonment, nor forced labor, nor a plane crash can kill him, then to become dead to the world without being dead,

he has to imagine he is not there. He has to deny, ignore, and forget. He is like Harrison Bergeron's father when he is faced with his son's death, who says, "Forget sad things" (10). Forgetting life so he can forget death approximates timelessness because it makes time go faster; Billy can be as mystified by time as his mother, who wonders, "How did I get so old?" (44). Forgetting life, he imagines that his pilgrimage to Tralfamadore and his childish crusade to spread the gospel of Tralfamadore transcend the limits of time and place. However, he has only reinscribed the children's crusade of World War II into a new children's crusade. America's crusading spirit is not only tragic but also comic. There was another youthful crusader named Billy at the time, Billy Graham, who headed up what he called a "Christian crusade"; and, in his first inaugural address, Reagan said, "Can we begin our crusade joined together in a moment of silent prayer?" (260). Indeed, "Crusader Rabbit" was television's first serialized cartoon. Billy's son, who did not get squared away until given the opportunity to crusade in Vietnam, might well have watched those cartoons, one of many children's programs promoting truth, justice, and the American way. The episodes featured motifs of nature ("Crusader and the Schmohawk Indians"), science fiction ("Crusader and the Mad Hollywood Scientist"), and time travel ("Crusader in the Tenth Century").

Billy's crusade is to go where no man has gone before. Like Vonnegut's Cape Cod neighbors the Kennedys, who affirmed a new frontier, and like Billy's apparent pick for President, Ronald Reagan, who believed in the "high frontier" (the name for his star wars space initiative), Billy does not reinvent himself and his universe. Rather, he rearranges elements of America's values and beliefs. Like a child with Lincoln logs, he can build different homes, but always out of the same materials.

So it is that Tralfamadore parodies America in the 1960s. More specifically, Tralfamadore is a fantasy built on rearrangements of American myth. According to William Boelhower, "The American Dream is to this day an unchanged narrative segment lifted from sixteenth-century

cartographic logic” (46). If America continues its history of going into the future by rearranging the mythic materials of the past, it will resemble Tralfamadore. Billy Pilgrim’s regress does not solve his problems; it exemplifies them. Like many other people, he thinks he is pushing towards a utopia when he is really slouching towards a dystopia.

Tralfamadorians have evolved (but not progressed) until they have no head, which suggests they are not only brainless but also faceless. Likewise, they are so flexible that they might as well be spineless. Tralfamadorians evolved in an atmosphere of increasing entropy. After the holocaust victims die from poison gas, and after Valencia dies from poison gas, it is perhaps notable that the Tralfamadorians live in an environment that is all poison gas. Their one foot is adapted for the management of waste. They have only one eye because they are as single-sighted as Billy, whose primary function is to consume and fantasize and, as an optometrist, to make people see life the way he does. They have only one hand because they are inactive. They overlook the part of the Serenity Prayer that says we should accept what we cannot change. Rather than change what they can, they look on the bright side. However, their version of optimism is to ignore reality rather to be hopeful about improving it. (Therefore, they are actually pessimists.) They live as if difficulty is something they should ignore, like treating people in a ghetto with benign neglect. In their single-minded passivity, they have impaired depth perception. In addition, Billy’s talk of a is the kind of adolescent metaphysics that he would have heard about in Boy Scouts and Little League and on the radio, that he would have seen in movies and on television, or that he would have read about in pulp science fiction.

The Tralfamadorians often contradict themselves. They claim there is no future even as they pursue an improved future by experimenting with new rocket fuels. Their anti-intellectualism is so evolved that they deny causality even as they say that one of their rocket ships causes the end of the universe. Employing causality, Vonnegut’s narrator notes

that every action has a reaction: “This can be useful in rocketry” (80); Werner von Braun would have agreed.

Their contradictions have a consistent premise. They are true believers in the pursuit of what they think is their self-interest. As Wills says of Americans, “Selfishness is a duty with us” (*Nixon Agonistes* 230). Like people who say, “the poor will always be with you,” they ignore causality when they prefer to do nothing. Yet like people who say “you can’t stop progress,” they assert causality as inevitable. Like Billy, they believe that they cannot change the future. Like current Americans who want change but have been unable to produce it, Billy cannot change the future because he is so burdened with the sins of the fathers (in the form of the absurdities of his culture) that he cannot change much of anything. Tralfamadorians cannot touch the future because they believe it is impossible. They claim the cause of that impossibility is that events are pre-determined, since the moments are “structured that way” (117). Thus they raise the question: What structures can we change? The Tralfamadorians say none, and that this inability is eternal. But only eternal adolescents live in never-never land.

Yet with the Tralfamadorian version of the novel, they have accomplished the impossible, though only in Billy’s imagination. As Klinkowitz points out, their novels cannot exist because it is impossible to read hundreds of scenes simultaneously (*Vonnegut Effect* 83). A story might be timeless, but a plot is necessarily timeful. They believe that they have achieved timelessness, so they believe that their novels have too. In a future made from what Christopher Lasch calls “the culture of narcissism,” they confuse their response to a stimulus with the nature of the stimulus. Their myth is that they live in a pure timeless place where nothing comes between them and reality. They are literal minded, so they do not have to think; they can take for granted what meets the eye. Without knowing it, the Tralfamadorians see through history-colored monocles. They live in the illusion of direct contact with the world when in truth they see not reality but only their myths about it.

Like Americans who claim they are the world's exemplar at promoting philanthropy, democracy, and peace, they project their myth of America as a redeemer nation and then applaud themselves for something that does not exist outside themselves. Moreover, they do so even when their effect is the opposite of their intentions, such as in *Slaughterhouse-Five* when the marine addresses the Lyons Club on the subject of the Vietnam War and states that Americans have to stop the communists' plan to "force their way of life on weak countries" (59). So it is fitting for Wills to say, "It is when America is in her most altruistic mood that other nations better get behind their bunkers" because we might have arrived "at that fatal recurring moment in our country's diplomatic benefactions, the moment when it makes sense to start shooting people philanthropically, for their own good" (*Nixon Agonistes* 396, 397).

Psychologists tell us the recurring moments that are the most significant to us form the basis of the unconscious mind, and Alan McGlashan describes the unconscious as a "savage and beautiful country." The analogy between a journey into a landscape and a journey into the self is an old one. It has informed myths for ages. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the landscape of Billy's unconscious consists of the wide-open spaces of the mythic American Wild West. By imagining that the name of his love interest is "Montana," he associates himself with the image of a mountain man. Yet he can have it both ways, because she also suggests Dresden; both she and the city are baroque. Historians and literary critics have long noted the irony that American culture proceeds as if urbanization has not eroded the naturalness of nature's nation.

Like his fellow suburbanites in housing developments with names like "River Park" in towns with names like "Eden Prairie," who believe in nature and consumerism at the same time and place, Billy imagines that his modern home on Tralfamadore is paradise. Thus he imagines himself as a space-age pioneer, living off the land, subsisting on what nature gives him, a stoic surviving on bare necessities, like a

television, a recliner, and a movie star. Such is the new world he imagines through his rearrangement of the American dream.

In truth, he is more like a fossil, a bug trapped in amber, existing in a transparent museum amidst an atmosphere that is virtually a cosmic gas chamber. Quite literally, this place is a zoo. That is how he forgets about such things as fire-bombings and concentration camps. He is as unconcerned about Tralfamadore's atmosphere as he is when he drives away from the African American in the ghetto, leaving him in a cloud of poison gas, the same gas that kills his wife. However, he gets over it by replacing her with a trophy wife. In Billy's vision of a new world, government does not exist. Taxation does not exist. He does not have to work, so somebody else has to work for him, like the laborers at his Tastee Freeze junk food stand.

So it is that in 1968, Vonnegut anticipated the future of American thought. He saw that the not-so-brave new world would be much like the old one, that the central myth would still be the defeat of time.

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