

## CHAPTER TEN

# A POSTMODERN ICONOGRAPHY: VONNEGUT AND THE GREAT AMERICAN NOVEL

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“Call me Jonah”. The opening line of *Cat’s Cradle*, Kurt Vonnegut’s end-of-the-world masterpiece, unmistakably echoes that of *Moby-Dick*, Herman Melville’s end-of-the-world masterpiece. Indeed, such echoes are audible elsewhere in *Cat’s Cradle*, from the “cetacean” Mount MacCabe, which looks like a whale with a snapped harpoon protruding from it, to the great Ahab-like quarrel with God, humorously figured in Bokonon’s thumb-nosing gesture at the novel’s end. In pointing to *Moby-Dick*, as likely a candidate as ever was for the “great American novel”, Vonnegut registers his own entry into the contest, but here it is also bound up in the laughable impossibility of the project.

The novels of Kurt Vonnegut are not generally the first to come to mind when one thinks of the great American novel. Indeed, this latter, elusive thing—impossible and, perhaps, not even desirable—has long been a bit of a joke, the sort of thing an aspiring writer claims to be working on, or (even more likely) something a writer’s parents, friends, and others say that he or she is working on. The great American novel is always a dream deferred; it cannot really exist, it seems, for that very reality would probably undermine any novel’s greatness. The “great American novel” really belongs to the nineteenth century, not the twentieth. It existed there as a dream of writers and critics, desperate to carve a distinct national culture from the variously influential European traditions. By mid-century, many writers claimed that the great American literary tradition, one that would surpass its European forebears, was already beginning to emerge. Melville himself wrote, in 1850, “that men

not very much inferior to Shakespeare, are this day being born on the banks of the Ohio".<sup>1</sup> The closing years of that century are filled with lamentations that the messianic promise of an earlier generation had not come to pass.<sup>2</sup> The ideal great American novel would express an "American spirit", which is not the same as expressing a particular patriotic or nationalistic theme. It did not need to be set in America or even to feature Americans as its principal characters. It had, in a sense, to capture the essence of "America" in its totality. In the language of the narrator of *Moby-Dick*, the range must include "the whole circle of the sciences, and all the generations of whales, and men, and mastodons, past, present, and to come, with all the revolving panoramas of empire on earth, and throughout the universe, not excluding its suburbs".<sup>3</sup>

Few writers have attempted the task as set forth in *Moby-Dick*, but many writers have tried to evoke its project in partial renderings. Although the "great American novel" is by now a joke, the underlying project seems to animate the works of many twentieth century writers, from Dos Passos to DeLillo and so on. Each age writes its own histories, of course. In the postmodern era, an era defined in large part by the perceived impossibility of comprehensive representation, a fragmented version of the project seems the only feasible way to go. Vonnegut's entire career might be characterised as an attempt to produce something like "the great American novel", but of its own time. Rather than depicting a representative American symbolic narrative, comprehensively bound in a single, emblematically American work, Vonnegut's novels as a whole offer a postmodern iconography, a sustained though fractured narrative of characters and themes that underlie that older project. Like *Moby-Dick*, Vonnegut's novels present a sprawling image of the multiplicity of American life, expressing the human, all-too-human, condition of its varied inhabitants. Perhaps recognising, as did Melville, that comprehensiveness is not really possible, Vonnegut presents a collage of figures, icons whose meanings are gently elicited by the plots rather than being legible on their faces. Vonnegut's collage is also indicative of the characteristically postmodern *pastiche*, in which the various styles of older art forms reappear in surprising places.

Such *pastiche* extends also to Vonnegut's use of genres. Although his existential themes and heartbreakingly poignant sense of everyday life have won him critical praise, Vonnegut has often couched his observations in literature that seems marginal, featuring such B-movie genres as science fiction, dime-store magazine writing, slapstick comedy and even soft-core pornography (or, in the case of *Breakfast of Champions*, all of the above). Vonnegut employs these genres, but his work cannot be contained by any

of them. That is, it is not really viable to describe Vonnegut as a “science fiction” or “comic” author. Indeed, Vonnegut is not a *typical* novelist, and there is no *type* of novel that fits neatly with his sensibilities. Hence, Vonnegut’s career may be seen as generically uncategorisable.

This uncategorisable oeuvre presents a postmodern iconography, a scattered portraiture of American life at the very moment of its seeming transcendence (i.e., the postwar period of America’s reign as a leading world power, with all the absurdity and horror that accompanies such reign). Throughout his career, Vonnegut’s iconography advances a literary project—far too highfalutin a term, perhaps—to produce what Melville and others imagined the American novel could accomplish: an expression of the multitude and diversity of American life in its time. This is the project of the ever-elusive great American novel, and although Vonnegut has not produced this legendary work, he has reasserted the value of such a project in the postmodern world.

### Postmodernity

It is far from certain that Vonnegut would characterise his own work as postmodern. Although his work does manifest many elements that are associated with postmodern fiction, such as metafictional techniques, use of collage or pastiche, and so on, Vonnegut has eschewed certain aspects of the postmodern and embraced many that we tend to view as modern or modernist. David Cowart has suggested that Vonnegut’s work be viewed as a bridge between modernism and postmodernism.<sup>4</sup> This seems plausible, but it is also clear that Vonnegut’s work embodies a kind of postmodern sensibility, a fellow-feeling for its place and time, that marks it as postmodern in a recognisable way. Understood historically, Vonnegut’s work cannot function in the same way that the modernists’ had. Of course, historical understanding may already be a modernist concept.

The term, *postmodern*, has a notoriously slippery meaning, owing in part to the variety of uses to which it is put and of contexts in which it is asserted. In literature, the term began to be used by critics to identify post-World War II writers quite distinct from the modernists of a previous generation, modernists whose work was beginning to dominate academic literary criticism. Thus could the Beats, for instance, be distinguished from Joyce and Faulkner. In France, especially following Lyotard but drawing from the work of Deleuze, Derrida and Foucault, among others, postmodernism becomes a label to describe the cultural and philosophical condition of a world in which *le grand récit* of modern societies (here understood in terms of the Enlightenment) no longer held true. And,

perhaps most famously, in architecture, the term carried a polemical meaning (hinted at in these other usages), directly attacking the conventions and pretensions of modernism.<sup>5</sup> In all cases, the label was meant to register a break with the modern, not merely to indicate posteriority.

Fredric Jameson has characterised postmodernism as a cultural dominant, the artistic expression of late or multinational capitalism. Jameson specifically understands postmodern art as being fully integrated into commodity production. Whereas the modernists struggled with the problem of the work of art in the machine age, inventing forms which, in some cases, were meant to fully resist commodification, the postmodern condition is one in which the artistic and the commercial have become inextricably intertwined. (Here one almost inevitably thinks of Andy Warhol and *Campbell's* soup.) Architecture, of course, lends itself most effectively to this condition, since architecture always required a mixture of aesthetics and economics; the great postmodern buildings are monuments—in more ways than one—to the economic system in which they are produced. It is no wonder that finance capital and bank buildings come together in such gaudy skyscrapers, or that the flow of global capital can be articulated so forcefully in lavish hotels designed for the collective wish-fulfilment of international travellers.

In addition to labeling a historical period, *postmodernism* has several aspects that distinguish it from its predecessors, modernism and realism especially. Any enumeration of such aspects is doomed to remain incomplete, since the very nature of the postmodern involves seemingly endless proliferations, like the lists found in DeLillo's novels or the brands of colas found in supermarkets. However, a few salient features are worth observing here. For one thing, as Jameson notes frequently, postmodernity is characterised by a certain lack of historical sense. As Jameson says of his own analysis, "It is safest to grasp the concept of the postmodern as an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place".<sup>6</sup> The domination of the "now" and the inability to think historically have a haunting, almost elegiac sense—at least from the modernist perspective; there is a disconnection with the past, a loss of shared history, that inevitably involves a break with a perceived community. Vonnegut will touch upon this aspect of the postmodern condition again and again.<sup>7</sup>

This lack of historicity leads to a second characteristic of postmodernism: the subversion of time by space. Postmodernism is often characterised by a profound sense of spatiality. Whereas modernism is the era of time, of temporal flux, memory and historical possibility, the

postmodern is all about space, juxtaposition, extension and positions, as Foucault famously wrote.<sup>8</sup> In the postmodern, space has usurped time's constitutive role in human experience, which becomes a matter of figuring out one's place in an ever-more-complex network of interrelations. Much of the bewilderment encountered by characters in the novels has to do with their sense of being lost, of not knowing where to go, a homelessness of a sort. To be sure, that homelessness existed before; it can be seen in *Don Quixote* and in Thomas Wolfe. But in the postmodern, there is an even more alarming realisation: there may not be any underlying referent. That is, not only can you not go home again, but there was never a home to begin with.

A third characteristic, what might be thought of as the psychology of the age, is visible in the seeming fragmentation of the subject. The age of realism might be characterised by the process of individuation, by the birth of the modern, bourgeois individual. The modernist era is marked by the intensification of that individuality, most visible in the form of interiority—expressed through such formal literary techniques as stream-of-consciousness—which, at its extreme, is associated with a kind of madness turned inward. If neurosis, or paranoia, is emblematic of the modernist condition, then schizophrenia is surely the model of postmodernism. The idea, most fully developed and even celebrated in Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*, but also articulated in any number of postmodernist literary productions (John Barth, Thomas Pynchon, Vonnegut himself), seems most fitting in the present era, an era characterised in part by its being so very "in the present". Without history and without home, the subject breaks up into so many little facets, lacking coherence.

A final point about the postmodern condition, one with perhaps special relevance to Vonnegut, is the notion of pastiche. Pastiche, or the imitation of past styles or genres, comes to characterise the postmodern (especially in architecture, but by extension, the other arts as well); in the postmodern age, older concepts like originality are suspect if not discarded outright. It would seem that, as an artistic practice, pastiche might exert some critical energy, attacking and reforming older styles while forming entirely new ones through a kind of collage. But, as Jameson notes in contrasting pastiche with parody, the critical capacity of postmodern art seems lost by losing the ground upon which to base itself. As Jameson puts it:

Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a particular or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language. But it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of its satirical impulse, devoid of

laughter and of any conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality still exists. Pastiche is thus a blank parody, a statue without eyeballs.<sup>9</sup>

Of course, it makes sense that without a real sense of history, the uses of the past amount to mere pasteboard masks. Vonnegut, of course, remains a master parodist, but his use of pastiche—especially with respect to genres and literary conventions—marks an aspect of his own postmodernity.

The postmodern condition shines forth in Vonnegut's novels, even where Vonnegut himself would most likely cling to a more properly modernist aesthetic, one in which social problems are still identifiable, narrative maintains its representational power, and the solutions are worth pursuing. In dealing with the present condition, Vonnegut revisits themes of the modernist tradition—the effects of industrialism and technology, the break up of traditional (so-called organic) communities, the relations between historical and psychological structures, between social totality and personal experience—but he must do so within a postmodern framework. It is almost as though Vonnegut is a reluctant postmodernist. Or, perhaps, like the rest of us, he has had postmodernity thrust upon him.

## Machines

Vonnegut's first novel provides a nice point of entry into the discussion of his postmodern iconography. Often overlooked, *Player Piano* outlines a number of themes that will animate Vonnegut's later work. In some respects, *Player Piano* seems to be another entry in that now clichéd category of Fifties, middle-class representations of bourgeois ennui or social doldrums. There's the predictable wife-sleeps-with-co-worker affair, the usual button-down boring lifestyle of middle management, the unfulfilling mission of keeping up with the Joneses. However, this is not another *Man in the Grey Flannel Suit* (and it appeared three years before that novel). *Player Piano* not only delves more deeply at the heart of the malaise known as the Fifties, but it also registers a distinctive political attitude that affects Vonnegut's later writings.<sup>10</sup>

Because of the emphasis on technology, specifically on the ability of man-made machines to outperform men in various workplaces, *Player Piano* is often characterised as science fiction (a view with which Vonnegut expressly disagreed).<sup>11</sup> The actual technology is not all that different from what would have been available at the time, and is laughably obsolete by the standards of even the late Sixties. Nevertheless, the issue at the heart of the novel is the pointlessness of life without

purpose. By becoming obsolete, the vast and growing majority of Americans are out of meaningful work. They can get menial jobs, joining the “reeks and wrecks”, working on road crews or serving as waiters at large, corporate functions. Because of the efficiency of the machinery, there is no physical want; the spiritual longing is for purposive work. The protagonist, Paul Proteus, is one of the few with a meaningful job, a manager at a large, multifunctional factory. Yet Proteus feels pressure, from his wife, his coworkers, and even from the memory of his father (a luminous figure from the industrial past), to climb the corporate ladder. His dissatisfaction with his own lot is compounded by his sense that the overall progressive project is itself not worthwhile. He feels guilty that the machine age that he and other technologically minded engineers made possible is making life meaningless for others, and he longs to return to the soil himself, buying an abandoned farm outside of town. Eventually he becomes involved with a revolutionary organisation, a group of anarchist Luddites, whose goal is to destroy the machines and return to the dignity of manual labour.

Making Vonnegut’s allegory complete, the revolution does happen, at least in the fictional Ilium, New York. The revolutionaries shut down and destroy the machines, and temporarily take over the town in the name of human dignity. True to a form that Vonnegut would become well known for, however, the revolution winds up being destroyed by human nature itself. Here, the natural curiosity and ingenuity of the common man leads some of the working class revolutionaries to start fixing the machines they had so recently broken. At first, repairing the machines is a puzzle, a task to be accomplished just to see if it could be done. The sense of accomplishment that comes with fixing a machine leads man to fix others, to design better ones, to build machines that could themselves design and build others. Thus, the revolutionaries restore almost immediately the very things they had struggled against. And they do it with pride.

The story is emblematic of the politics of Vonnegut’s novels in general. It is no surprise that the Utopian impulse leads to dystopian ends. Indeed, by the mid-twentieth century, that is itself a cliché. But for Vonnegut, the issue is always that humans are themselves so “naturally” unable to do the right thing. Or rather, it is entirely within their nature to do the thing that will eventually cause them harm. It is as if humans are programmed to self-destruct. Vonnegut will return throughout his career to the notion that humans may or may not be machines, programmed by God, by chemical reactions, or whatever. In *The Sirens of Titan*, a machine (Salo from Tralfamadore) tries to embrace humanity, but the psychotic fiction of *Breakfast of Champions*—that all humans (but one) are merely

robots—is the more prevalent view. If humans perform acts of cruelty, stupidity, or even kindness, what matter? It is not their fault, Vonnegut seems to say. It is the way they were made.

Thus, Vonnegut's peculiar politics: whereas he clearly tends to the Left, was revered by college students in the Sixties for his radicalism and has become even more openly political in his old age (see *Man Without a Country*, for instance), Vonnegut has never really allowed for a political solution to anything. In some measure, this could simply be written off as pessimism, since Vonnegut longs for a political solution that he does not believe can actually happen. But it is more profound and more dangerous than this: Vonnegut believes that the wrong thing will inevitably happen, that it cannot be otherwise. This is a profoundly anti-Utopian position, not one grounded in realism either.<sup>12</sup> This might also be a peculiarly postmodern feature of Vonnegut, where his politics have been driven deeply into an unconscious. A writer who desperately wants to support causes championed by the Left, Vonnegut cannot help his general despondency over the Left's inability to solve the problems. This leads to another curiosity of Vonnegut's philosophy, which might be put in a suitably paradoxical expression: misanthropic humanism.

## People

This misanthropic humanism is characterised by a fundamental sense that human, all-too-human behaviour inevitably leads to ruin. If the basic humanity is then the problem, it is perhaps the quirky, oddball humans in whom the best hope lies.<sup>13</sup> This view is then illustrated in his novels by an abundance of *characters*, in multiple sense of the word. Vonnegut's novels are populated by odd and memorable characters. Some make only fleeting appearances, fading away without much development; others are more fully developed, their personalities unfolding throughout the pages of an entire book. Vonnegut is perhaps most famous for recurring characters, who not so much recur as disappear and reappear, often in unlikely places, in more than one novel. The most famous of these is Kilgore Trout, often viewed as Vonnegut's own alter ego, who appears in no fewer than six different novels, but who might be said to "star" in only one (*Breakfast of Champions*). Similarly, Eliot Rosewater, Howard W. Campbell, Rabo Karabekian, and more than one Tralfamadorian get face time in multiple novels.

Often Vonnegut reintroduces characters who may or may not be the same person we have seen before. For example, In *The Sirens of Titan*, Winston Niles Rumfoord's space-traveling companion and beloved pet is a dog named Kazak. Kazak is also the name of a ferocious Doberman

guard dog who makes a brief but memorable appearance in *Breakfast of Champions*; a seeing-eye dog named Kazakh shows up in *Galápagos* as well. The Rumfoord family figures prominently in Vonnegut's work. Surely Professor Bernard Copeland Rumfoord, of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, is a relative of the space-traveller. Bokonon himself, when he was still called Lionel Boyd Johnson, had worked as a gardener on the Rumfoord estate. Khashdrahr Miasma is the name given to a young doctor from Bangladesh in *Breakfast of Champions* and to the interpreter for (and nephew of) the Shah of the fictional land of Bratphur in *Player Piano*. Minor characters from some books later get starring roles in other ones (e.g., Rabo Karabekian appears in *Breakfast of Champions* and stars in *Bluebeard*), while starring actors in some books have cameos in later ones (e.g., *Mother Night*'s Howard W. Campbell gives a memorable speech in *Slaughterhouse-Five*; Eliot Rosewater, of *God Bless You Mr. Rosewater*, also appears in *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Breakfast of Champions*).

This practice of reintroducing characters has the salutary effect of rewarding Vonnegut's longtime fans. It does not, however, presuppose that Vonnegut is creating a semi-closed world in which his own literary creations lead independent lives that occasionally intersect. (One might think of Tolkien as the ultimate example of this, where whole families and races go about their lives and occasionally reconnect. Indeed the genres of fantasy and science fiction seem most apt for this kind of creation of an entirely enclosed and self-sufficient "world".) There are enough "mistakes" in these recurrences to make one doubt whether the person is appearing again or merely the name (as with Kazak and Khashdrahr Miasma above). The Tralfamadorian pilot, Salo, in *The Sirens of Titan* bears no resemblance at all to the Tralfamadorians of *Slaughterhouse-Five*; one wonders if they are the same Tralfamadorians. To take another example, when Campbell reappears in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, we learn that he was married to "a famous German actress named Resi North".<sup>14</sup> Careful readers of *Mother Night*, however, remember that Campbell was married to Helga Noth (no "r") and that Resi was Helga's nihilist little sister.

Interesting as it is to note such minor inconsistencies, nice work for a continuity editor in the world of filmmaking, it is not really worth belabouring, since Vonnegut never promised his readers a continuous tale, carried out over a dozen or so novels. Indeed, consistency is probably far from the point. If Vonnegut's characters get strewn throughout his works, then they do not do so according to iron-clad laws, but through the vagaries of history. Vonnegut's philosophy of history, that is, allows for his oddballs to bounce around, to find themselves in different places at

different times, often without warning or with no particular reason. As theories of history go, this may be as convincing as any.

## History

Among Vonnegut's most remarkable narrative techniques, that of skipping around in time and space, relates to the Tralfamadorian view of time in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. On the distant planet of Tralfamadore, we are told, time is viewed not as a river, but as a mountain range. This apt spatial metaphor identifies time with space, showing that all moments are essentially present at once. As Vonnegut has Billy Pilgrim describe it in *Slaughterhouse-Five*:

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 (27).

This view of history does not merely add an interesting, science fiction element to the plot. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, this principle actually determines the emplotment of the narrative. The novel's first line—after the autobiographical first chapter, that is—reads: “Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time” (22). That sounds the clarion, letting the reader know *how* this story will be told precisely *as* it is being told. That is, the “story” of *Slaughterhouse-Five* will be about Billy Pilgrim's time-tripping, but the story will also itself be a matter of time-tripping, jumping here and there between Billy's wartime experiences, his childhood, his life in a Tralfamadorian zoo, his marriage, his optometry practice, and so on.

*Slaughterhouse-Five* makes the most and best use of this technique, which is actually consistent with Vonnegut's view on memory in general. Actually, the view of history as an everlasting present tense, or as a spatial formation in which all tenses may be present at once, is somewhat similar to Henri Bergson's theory of memory. In memory, all moments coexist in more or less concentrated forms. Thus, memories closer to the present consciousness seem more concrete, concentrated into easily recognisable images; more distant memories are more disparate, fuzzier we might say. As the very expression, distant memory, suggests, space and time commingle in this theory. All memories are in fact present at once; they are just dispersed over a landscape that spreads out before the consciousness.<sup>15</sup> Time is essentially space.

As noted above, the inhabitants of Tralfamadore had been introduced in *The Sirens of Titan*, in which one Tralfamadorian, Salo, makes possible the plot by supplying Winston Niles Rumfoord the technology to carry out his plan. *The Sirens of Titan* had helped establish this view of time and space by inventing the chrono-synclastic infundibulum, literally a funnel in which time curves inward. Rumfoord and his dog, Kazak, inadvertently run into the infundibulum while piloting a private spaceship to Mars. Now man and dog live on, forever, as wave phenomena, pulsing between the sun and Betelgeuse. They appear on Earth (and other planets) when the planet's path intersects with the infundibulum; because Mars's orbit seems to coincide perfectly with the great time-funnel, Rumfoord and his cosmic hound can "live" there all the time, even while appearing elsewhere.

The being-everywhere-at-once sensibility plays on the feeling, however unjustified, that time is literally standing still. This vision, dramatised in the plight of Rumfoord and of Billy Pilgrim, leads to the psychological state that such a historical condition would imply. Billy *has* become unstuck. He is multiple places in time at once. The feeling that this is a somewhat schizophrenic condition is not accidental.

## Psychology

In Lacan's famous definition, schizophrenia involves a breakdown in the signifying chain. That is, the once predictable meanings, or the correspondences being signifiers and signifieds, no longer hold. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the time-tripping narrative lends itself to a notion of schizophrenic narration, the breaking down of the expected signifying chain. Modernism gave us the stream-of-consciousness narrative, with its insistently personal, even neurotically inward, unfolding of an individual ego through the visible machinations of the individual's mind. With the postmodernist narration, time does not ebb and flow, a river winding its way through the valley, but rather jerks and twists and lurches backwards and forwards, up and down. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, this lurching is accomplished through quick breaks, jumping from place to place. But *Slaughterhouse-Five* also maintains a modernist sensibility, as the various pieces of the puzzle fit into place, making the picture whole by the end of the novel. Vonnegut's sequel would be more schizophrenic still.

*Breakfast of Champions* is, among other things, *about* schizophrenia. The tale's protagonist, Dwayne Hoover, is in the midst of a schizophrenic episode, a mental breakdown that will, by the novel's end, manifest itself in a horrifically violent rampage. But *Breakfast of Champions* is not really about Hoover in the way *Slaughterhouse-Five* is about Billy Pilgrim. *Breakfast of Champions* is a collage in other senses, fitting together

completely disparate images in a chaotic ensemble. Many of Vonnegut's recurring characters appear in this novel, most notably Kilgore Trout, but also Eliot Rosewater (now sober), a dog named Kazak, Rabo Karabekian, and even a Francine Pefko, who appeared as a bewildered secretary unable to tell the difference between science and magic in *Cat's Cradle*; many of the Midland City townsfolk will reappear in *Deadeye Dick* as well. Most notable of all is the insertion of Vonnegut himself in the novel. Vonnegut had appeared in *Slaughterhouse-Five* as well, but he had played no active role in the events unfolding in Billy Pilgrim's life. (He merely mentions that he'd been in Dresden with Billy during the war.) Here Vonnegut the Writer joins the action, watching his characters interact, and speaking directly to his creation, Kilgore Trout.

*Breakfast of Champions* takes Vonnegut's use of collage, with pastiche as an underlying effect, to another level. Multiple story lines, leading to a particular, climactic point, are an old technique. Multiple characters who find that their lives are more closely connected than previously though are old hat for Vonnegut. What is newer (and postmodern) is the insertion of the writer as an interactive character. It is not just metafiction, fiction that acknowledges itself as such on its pages; it is hyperfiction, or better *patafiction*, insofar as it highlights the absurdity of the techniques of fiction itself, much in the way that Alfred Jarry's pataphysics parodied the methods and scope of metaphysics. Given the relationship between the fictional and the absurd in Vonnegut, the term *patafiction* may not be all that outré. Famously, Vonnegut's novel also includes childish drawings by the author. These drawings are often silly in the utmost, such as his apostrophe-like illustration of "asshole" or his examples of what a "beaver" looks like. In the preface to *Breakfast of Champions*, Vonnegut concedes that the book is an attempt to clear out the junk that has been accumulating in his head.<sup>16</sup> But disburdening himself of the cultural detritus clogging his mind, however therapeutic it might be, is going to read like a form of schizophrenia. There will be lots of breaks in the signifying chain. Perhaps the viewing an \* as an asshole is already a symptom of the break.

*Breakfast of Champions* represents a postmodern iconography in itself, the breakdown of signification amid the breakdown of a character's mind and the breakdown of American industrial society in general, represented by the collapse of a Midwestern city's economy into a fragmented, consumerist culture where roadside attractions and toxic chemical spills are more vibrant than any meaningful work in town. This is schizophrenia of the social, rather than merely psychological, sphere.

## Community

If *Breakfast of Champions* represents a type of apocalypse, it is different from Vonnegut's other apocalypses, such as *Deadeye Dick* or *Galápagos*. The best example of the genre is *Cat's Cradle*, which may also be Vonnegut's best novel. Here the iconography is elaborated with all of the skill of a literary artist mixed with the methodological rigour of an anthropologist.<sup>17</sup> It is the study of a new kind of community, one which has different social and spiritual rules. The connection to *Moby-Dick* has already been noted, but it worth remembering that Melville's Ishmael goes to sea, at least in part, to prevent his own suicide; at sea he finds a community made up of "isolatoes", individuals without a home but with a common purpose that holds them together. It seems clear that Vonnegut intended the resonances to *Moby-Dick* to signify a quest for community, even as the quest involves the destruction of the world through the desire for knowledge of it.

Bokononism, the religion that Vonnegut both invents and embraces in *Cat's Cradle*, supplies a vocabulary that answers for the faults of other religions. A brief recitation is in order. A *karass* is a group of people who, unbeknownst to its members, are somehow working together to do God's will. A *wampeter* is the thing around which the karass moves or comes together (in the novel, the wampeter is ice-nine; elsewhere, Vonnegut names the Holy Grail as an example).<sup>18</sup> A *granfalloon* is a false karass, a group that has no purpose whatsoever but whose members believe is really significant; the first example in the book is Hoosiers (people from the state of Indiana), but Vonnegut adds: "Other examples of *granfalloon*s are the Communist Party, the Daughters of the American Revolution, the General Electric Company, the International Order of Odd Fellows—and any nation, anytime, anywhere".<sup>19</sup> *Foma* are lies, or rather "harmless untruths", the foundation of Bokononism, or any religion, incidentally. Such untruths become necessary fictions (in David Hume's sense); they are necessary to our functioning as humans.

Granfalloonery is itself one of the most powerful concepts in the Vonnegut universe, which is to say, our own. What Vonnegut recognises clearly is the profound need for community, for a sense of purpose and of belonging. This is evident in all of his novels, from *Player Piano* to *Timequake*. In *Cat's Cradle*, he ridicules the idea, showing how silly such things as school spirit, club membership and nationality are. "If you wish to study a *granfalloon*", sings Bokonon, "Just remove the skin of a toy balloon".<sup>20</sup> Later, Vonnegut seems to recognise how powerful, and even effective, such a need for community is. In *Slapstick*, he expresses this elegantly in the President's "Lonesome No More" campaign, through

which every citizen will be assigned a team name and a number, which will provide everyone with a family (those sharing a family name would be cousins, and those sharing a family name and number would be siblings). David Cowart has suggested that Vonnegut's entire career, especially his later career, is suffused with the hopeful idea of family (as community).<sup>21</sup> And here is where Vonnegut's pessimism, as he has called it, runs out of gas. The positive side of the Bokononist theory is that there are real, purposive communities (karasses) that we do in fact belong to; what Vonnegut seems to realise also is that the granfalloon serves its purposes as well.

Vonnegut's overall corpus, therefore, does get at what Melville had in mind when he audaciously attempted to include the whole world in the representational scope of his great novel. Like Melville's, Vonnegut's world is undoubtedly American; but, also like Melville, Vonnegut sees not the American-ness, but the worldliness, as the most important aspect of the literary project. The goal is to show our world, and that it is an American world is noteworthy, yes, but not essential (nationhood being no more than a mildly comforting, and sometimes disconcerting, granfalloon after all.) In order to present that image of the world, Vonnegut makes great use of collage, the piecing together of various and discrete images in order to form a new, unique overall image. In this sense, Vonnegut remains a modernist: he laments the fragmentation of our personal lives, of community, and he wishes to put it back together. This becomes his imaginary solution to real problems, to paraphrase Althusser's great redefinition of ideology. But Vonnegut remains postmodern also, not just because several of his books instance the reflexivity of language or some other defining postmodernist characteristic, but because his work is so assiduously *of* the postmodern culture it presents.

Returning to my initial point, Vonnegut does not provide a "great American novel" in that nineteenth century sense; even taken as a whole, Vonnegut's work does not really achieve such lofty, if now dubious, goals. What he has done, over the course of a number of discontinuous, uncategorisable novels, is project an image of what society looks like in the postmodern age. This postmodern iconography is Vonnegut's contribution to the American novel, and perhaps it exemplifies his "greatness" after all.

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<sup>1</sup> Melville, "Hawthorne and His Mosses", in *Moby-Dick*, 543.

<sup>2</sup> For a recapitulation of the nineteenth century debates, see Brown, "The Great American Novel".

<sup>3</sup> Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 379.

<sup>4</sup> See Cowart, "Culture and Anarchy", 186.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, MacCabe's Preface to Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* (1992).

<sup>6</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism*, ix.

<sup>7</sup> In *Jailbird* (1979), for instance, the narrator feels that any reference to his, and America's past, will seem like prehistoric references to today's (that is, 1977's) youth, who are as likely to think that dinosaurs roamed the Earth as they are that Sacco and Vanzetti mattered to so many people in the 1930s.

<sup>8</sup> See Foucault, "Of Other Spaces", 22.

<sup>9</sup> Jameson, 17.

<sup>10</sup> Vonnegut's magazine fiction of the 1950s, in which he offers a number of vivid portraits of that age, may be found in *Bagombo Snuff Box* (1999).

<sup>11</sup> See Vonnegut, *Wampeters, Foma, and Granfalloon* (1974), 1-5.

<sup>12</sup> But see the revolutionary spirit playfully put forth in the short story, "Welcome to the Monkey House" (1968).

<sup>13</sup> This theme appears often in Vonnegut's later works; see, for example, *Jailbird* or *Hocus Pocus* (1990).

<sup>14</sup> Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, 165. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, the well known metaphor of the cone, in Bergson, *Matter and Memory* (1988), 152; for an analysis, see Deleuze, *Bergsonism* (1991), 59.

<sup>16</sup> Vonnegut, *Breakfast of Champions*, 5.

<sup>17</sup> *Cat's Cradle* (1963) was, in fact, accepted by the University of Chicago as a Masters thesis in anthropology in 1971, which is especially ironic, since Vonnegut, studying at that institution after the war, had been denied the degree on the grounds that his thesis lacked academic rigour.

<sup>18</sup> See Vonnegut, *Wampeters*, xv.

<sup>19</sup> Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle*, 67.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>21</sup> See Cowart, 171.

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