

**“We are what we pretend to be”:**

**Existential Angst in Vonnegut’s *Mother Night***

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Existentialism, a label that at once suggests both a philosophical and literary or aesthetic movement, has been remarkably influential on post-war American literature, yet its features are sometimes difficult to present to students. It is sometimes hard to find the right balance between dense German or French philosophy on the one hand, and glib slogans and overgeneralizations (e.g., “the meaninglessness of life”) on the other. Grappling with concrete examples from a single text offers a pedagogical entrée into the subject. One rather accessible author who has always explored themes central to existentialism, without necessarily being viewed as an existentialist, is Kurt Vonnegut. Vonnegut’s novels wrestle with such questions as the attempt to understand one’s self, the relationship of one’s self to one’s society, the pervasive anxiety that accompanies an unenviable human freedom, and above all the utter absurdity of existence. In his novels, Vonnegut revisits these themes over and over, sometimes extending their arguments to ridiculous lengths, but always—amid the laughter and confusion—leaving room for sober reflection on the human, all-too-human condition. The darkness of the American condition becomes all the more visible in the false light of the optimistic rhetoric of Americanism, and Vonnegut’s work holds up a dusky mirror to this complex reality. In his postmodern iconography,

Vonnegut establishes existential angst, the pervasive mood of anxiety that accompanies human freedom, as a key feature. This anxiety is tied to the crisis of authenticity, of being and acting true to oneself, that plagues the characters in his novels. The sense of wonder, the creative impulse, and the abject dread of nothingness come together in the minds of Vonnegut's protagonists, and unraveling the threads of this existential skein of emotions and ideas is often the real action of the novels. Although these themes can be found throughout Vonnegut's *oeuvre*, no novel exemplifies Vonnegut's existentialism more than *Mother Night*, the purported confessions of a Nazi war criminal who is also an American war hero.

*Mother Night* operates as an existentialist text by elaborating a number of themes generally associated with the philosophy, and by telling a tale that simultaneously highlights the absurdity of human existence and the deep sense of pathos with respect to it. The narrative is established as the confessions of an American-born Nazi war criminal, a Third Reich propagandist whose radio broadcasts fanned the flames of hate throughout Europe, but also possibly contained hidden information valuable to the American and Allied forces. Howard W. Campbell, Jr., surely one of Vonnegut's most original characters, represents the ultimate figure of divided selfhood. He is a writer, a playwright who is recruited to serve as an anonymous double-agent during the war, secretly broadcasting useful information to the Allies while openly serving the Nazis. In what are supposed to be his own words, he acknowledges that "he served evil too openly and good too secretly, the crime of his time" (*Mother Night* xii). The

chief aspect of Campbell's malaise, and of Vonnegut's exploration of existential angst in *Mother Night*, is the crisis of authenticity, occasioned by wearing so many masks so often. The absurdity of existence is highlighted in Campbell's meticulous analysis of his own self and its relations to his world.

Campbell, a playwright secretly recruited to work for the Americans as a spy during World War II, gained his fame and infamy by working as a Nazi propagandist, spewing the vilest lies and fomenting violent hatred over the airways. His horrific diatribes carried secret messages, unknown even to him, that gave the Allies information during the war, but no one other than Campbell and his "Blue Fairy Godmother," the U.S. agent who recruited him, actually knew what was going on. Campbell made an excellent Nazi, and his fame and high regard among the upper echelons of Nazi leadership helped to seal his fate. He knew that he could never be forgiven his crimes, since these are real, even if they were in the service of another, perhaps greater, good. His time in New York City, living like a ghost, merely accentuates the absurdity of his already absurd condition. The events related in *Mother Night*, involving his final months before committing suicide, highlight the existential angst and crisis of authenticity in this original character.

I

Before examining Campbell's case more closely, it might be useful to define the terms of the existentialism Vonnegut explores in *Mother Night*. Existentialism, famously, is not a school of thought; it has no list of agreed-upon

principles or precepts. However, for the term to have any meaning, several features must be acknowledged. One is the founding Sartrean principle that “existence precedes essence.” Actually, Jean-Paul Sartre’s slogan derives from a line in Heidegger’s *Being and Time*: “The ‘essence’ of Dasein lies in its existence” (67). What Heidegger means is that the fundamental or essential aspect of being-in-the-world, of actually existing people, is that they exist. Nothing more. Hence, what makes us who we are—our “human nature,” to use an antique notion—is that we question who we are. For Sartre, it follows that, with no inherent human nature, no eternal or transcendent meaning to our existence, we must create our own meaning. There is no inherent meaning to one’s existence, no essential being other than the *existing* being, so one cannot look outside of actually existing reality for answers to the question of the meaning of life, and so on. Moreover, man is *situated* in the world and cannot stand outside of it. Hence all actions take place in relation to an actually existing world, without reference to an otherworldly ideal.

A basic consequence of this worldview is that man, who embodies no essential human nature and whose life has no essential meaning, must have the freedom to create his own meaning. Such freedom is not necessarily a blessing, and it is primarily experienced as a generalized mood of anxiety (*Angst*, in German, though the word has entered English via the existentialist usage). Sartre dramatized this anxiety as *nausea*, in his novel of that name. The anxiety one feels comes from not knowing whether one’s actions are correct, thereby acknowledging—albeit negatively—that one must have the freedom to choose

the right or wrong path. By feeling anxious about making a mistake, therefore, we acknowledge that we are free. This also causes a profound sense of alienation, or, in Heidegger's resonant phrasing, *Unheimlichkeit* (usually translated as "uncanniness," but which might be aptly, if inelegantly, translated "not-being-at-home-ness"). "In anxiety one feels 'uncanny' [*unheimlich*]. [...] But here 'uncanniness' also means 'not-being-at-home' [*das Nicht-zuhause-sein*]" (Heidegger 233). Because the world in which we are always situated is not of our own making, and because—unlike the cosmos of the Ancient Greek philosophy—we have no essential place in that world, we are estranged from the world and from ourselves. There is a form of homelessness, of not feeling "at home" in the world, that constitutes our relationship to the world, and this makes a pervasive feeling of alienation, as well as angst, a fundamental condition of our existence. Georg Lukács, writing from a Hegelian tradition in *The Theory of the Novel*, argues that "transcendental homelessness" is the fundamental characteristic of life in the modern world. This alienation or estrangement is further registered through the existence of others, other selves that can view me and make me an object. My first-person perspective on myself and the world is disrupted by another's, making me aware of a third-person version of myself and the world. Famously, Sartre announced that "*l'Enfer, c'est les autres*" ("Hell is other people" [*No Exit* 47]), as the alienation experienced in seeing myself from a third-person point of view makes me recognize the extent to which I am an object. My objective being no longer directly coincides with my subjective being, as I must own that *who I am* or *what I do* is fundamentally conditioned by *who*

one (Heidegger's *das Man*) is or what one does. My self is thus reflected back at me in a strange form, as when Sartre's Garcin, viewing the distorted reflections of Inez's and Estelle's gaze (*le regard*) in the bronze ornament, declares that Hell is other people (*No Exit* 46–47).

From the maxim, "existence precedes essence," we understand the absurdity or fundamental meaninglessness of life, and we also understand that, with no inherent meaning, we must create our own meaning via our own *projects*. This freedom to create meaning brings with it anxiety over whether we are acting appropriately. Compounding this angst is the overall sense of alienation from the world, from ourselves, and from the other selves we encounter. From these concepts follows the crisis of authenticity. In the existentialist lexicon, *authenticity* names the attitude in which one acts in accordance with one's own self, rather than in accordance with what others similarly situated might do. The German term, *Eigentlichkeit*, highlights the degree to which one is true to one's own (*eigen*) self. In other words, am I acting as I would act, or am I just acting as someone in general might act? For the existentialist, there is no essence that could serve as a standard of action; there is no transcendent purpose against which to measure our own actions, no Platonic ideal to compare our simulacra to. But through my interactions with the world, I can distinguish how I would act as myself from how I would act as merely anyone. Authentic behavior, then, would refer to acts done strictly as myself, observing Polonius' advice to Laertes: "To thine own self be true" (*Hamlet* I.iii.85).

Authenticity in this sense does not refer directly to what we do, but the attitude in which we choose to do it. By acting authentically, I affirm my self, taking ownership of the act and incorporating that act into my very being. The same act may very well be accomplished inauthentically, if I were to perform the act simply because it is what one does, or because I am fulfilling the role assigned to me. The resolute choice to act is what Sartre refers to as commitment, and an inauthentic person irresolutely occupies a role established by others, rather than commits himself to being in that role. Typical of inauthentic behavior are actions done in “bad faith.” Bad faith, for Sartre, means the denial of our angst-ridden freedom. Acting in bad faith, we assume that we have to behave a certain way, rather than commit to incorporating our actions into our own being. By choosing to act in bad faith, we are still expressing our freedom, but paradoxically doing so in order to deny our freedom as well. For instance, if I say, I had to behave this way because it was expected of me, I am making an excuse for my freely chosen actions by suggesting that I was not free. Sartre does not accept the Nazi excuse, “I was only following orders,” for this reason. It is inauthenticity or bad faith, *par excellence*. Authenticity, *Eigentlichkeit* or “own-ness,” is the condition of being our *own* selves, rather than an anonymous “oneself.”

## II

*Mother Night* purports to be the autobiographical confessions of Howard W. Campbell, Jr., written while awaiting trial as a Nazi war criminal in a

Jerusalem prison in 1961. Vonnegut establishes this form not only by having the narrative be Campbell's first-person history of his life and times but also by including an "Editor's Note," signed by "KURT VONNEGUT, JR." himself, explaining some textual variances and other circumstances relating to the publication. In its original 1961 paperback edition, the book appeared as memoirs, with a lurid marketing label on the cover that reads: "An American Traitor's Astonishing Confession." Vonnegut pretends only to be the editor of those memoirs, claiming emphatically that the words are Campbell's own. This "Editor's Note" serves both to enhance the reality of the fictive narrative by introducing the editor's "objective" voice and to distance Vonnegut from the role as author. As "editor," Vonnegut may step outside of his own writerly self, offering to clean up someone else's manuscript—"I have corrected some spelling, removed some exclamation points, and all the italics are mine" (x)—while taking no credit himself. The operation itself dramatizes what *Mother Night* calls the schizophrenia that Campbell and other spies must experience, the alienation of seeing oneself as other, of knowing that there are (at least) two persons in everyone. Vonnegut, the writer who has created Howard W. Campbell, Jr., is also the editor of "the American edition of the confessions of Howard W. Campbell, Jr.," as if he has merely been assigned to edit an existing historical text, one that may or may not have already been released elsewhere, in other editions, with other editors. If Campbell himself was not what he seemed to be, neither is his creator.

Indeed, the opening lines of the "Editor's Note" are almost defensive, taking pains to show the reader how difficult the editorial task really was.

In preparing this, the American edition of the confessions of Howard W. Campbell, Jr., I have had to deal with writings concerned with more than mere informing or deceiving, as the case may be. Campbell was a writer as well as a person accused of some extremely serious crimes, a one-time playwright of moderate reputation. To say that he was a writer is to say that the demands of art alone were enough to make him lie, and to lie without seeing any harm in it. To say that he was a playwright is to offer an even harsher warning to the reader, for no one is a better liar than a man who has warped lives and passions into something as grotesquely artificial as a stage. (ix)

Rarely has an “author” been so clear in warning his readers that what follows may be unreliable. Rarely has an “author” suggested to his readers that what follows may very well be lies, and dangerous lies at that. As a writer, Vonnegut may be ironically self-critical in his view that writers are merely artistic liars, but, in his “editor” persona, he hastens to add that “lies told for the sake of artistic effect—in the theater, for instance, *and in Campbell’s confessions*, perhaps—can be, in a higher sense, the most beguiling forms of truth” (ix, emphasis added). Although the notion that art, in using artifice and fiction, may also reveal higher truths is itself something of a cliché, Vonnegut’s assertion here serves to redeem, in advance, the lies we may or may not be about to read. It is a bold assertion, juxtaposed to the warning, and its bold presentation is allowed to stand for itself. If Vonnegut-the-writer wishes to claim for himself and for Campbell the prerogative of the truth-teller whose lies are to be not only forgiven but embraced, Vonnegut-the-editor quickly steps in: “I don’t care to argue the point. My duties as an editor are in no sense polemic. They are merely to pass on, in the most satisfactory way, the confessions of Campbell” (ix–x).

The remainder of the “Editor’s Note” is given to seemingly quotidian matters of textual variances. After conceding that he has corrected Campbell’s spelling and punctuation, and acknowledging that several names were changed or invented to protect the innocent, Vonnegut-the-editor discusses some poems, reproduced exactly in the English but requiring extensive reconstruction in Campbell’s original German, in the volume. This is, of course, a bizarre note. Vonnegut himself knows English well, with only a smattering of German; his character, Campbell, is fluent and even gifted in German, but cares little for his English writing. So, the author and the character blend together and separate from one another in that odd, schizophrenic *pas de deux*, as Vonnegut’s English and Campbell’s German run up against one another, adding greater uncertainty to the very thing that the “editor” is trying to make clear.

Vonnegut-the-editor then mentions two omissions from the text, and in mentioning them, almost *un-omits* them, making their absence more visible than they would have otherwise been. First, he claims that his publisher’s lawyers have advised that he remove an unsubstantiated claim made by an insignificant character. “Witnesses agree that such a claim was made, but made without any apparent basis in fact” (xi). Indeed. In an entirely fictional work, the fictional confessions of a fictional character, this fictional omission—for fictional legal reasons—is all the more bizarre. Lies told for the sake of artistic effect might offer beguiling forms of truth, but let us not expose ourselves to lawsuits over it. The second omission involved the pornographic content of the newly written “Chapter Six Hundred and Forty-three” of Campbell’s *Memoirs of a Monogamous*

*Casanova*, and the editor has removed them on the grounds that Campbell himself, “right in the body of the text” (xi), authorized the bowdlerization. Campbell’s authorization—“I leave it for an editor of taste and delicacy to abridge with innocent polka dots whatever might offend” (100)—retroactively establishes Vonnegut himself as “an editor of taste and delicacy.”

Two final points close the “Editor’s Note.” The first is that the title is Campbell’s own, and that it comes from a line in Goethe’s *Faust*. Although Vonnegut does not say so exactly, the phrase appears in another autobiographical moment, where another character of questionable morals and veracity explains who he is and where he comes from. Mephistopheles, in his first appearance before Faust, explains his own origins:

I am part of the part that once was everything,  
Part of the darkness which gave birth to light,  
That haughty light which envies mother night  
Her ancient rank and place and would be king—  
Yet it does not succeed: however it contend,  
It sticks to bodies in the end.  
It streams from bodies, it lends bodies beauty,  
A body won’t let it progress;  
So it will not take long, I guess,  
And with the bodies it will perish, too. (*Faust* 161, lines 1349–58)

Movingly poetic, for Vonnegut or Campbell to name these “confessions” after Mephistopheles’ primal darkness, *Mutter Nacht*, and to evoke with disdain the usurper Light, is telling. For Campbell’s memoirs and Vonnegut’s existential anxiety relate to the sense of inevitable, diabolic darkness. Mother Night, the primordial and eventually victorious darkness, is set beside a final image in the “Editor’s Note,” the image of Mata Hari, less diabolical than Mephistopheles

though, perhaps, equally infamous. Vonnegut-the-editor tells us that the dedication of the memoirs, to Mata Hari, is Campbell's own, although the editor has found a note ("in a chapter [Campbell] later discarded") suggesting another figure. Campbell writes, "She whored in the interest of espionage, and so did I," but that he now feels the book should be dedicated "to someone less exotic, less fantastic, more contemporary—less a creature of silent film.

I would prefer to dedicate it to one familiar person, male or female, widely known to have done evil while saying to himself, "A very good me, the real me, a me made in heaven, is hidden deep inside."

I can think of many examples [...]. But there is no single name to which I might aptly dedicate this book—unless it would be my own.

Let me honor myself in that fashion, then:

This book is rededicated to Howard W. Campbell, Jr., a man who served evil too openly and good too secretly, the crime of his times. (xi–xii)

This self-dedication by Campbell is allowed to serve as the end of the "Editor's Note" signed by "KURT VONNEGUT, JR."

### III

Before Chapter One of Campbell's confessions, one final preliminary appears, an epigraph, which, in the context of *Mother Night*, can only be a hollow joke.

Breathes there the man, with soul so dead,  
Who never to himself hath said,  
    "This is my own, my native land!"  
Whose heart hath ne'er within him burn'd  
As home his footsteps he hath turn'd  
    From wandering on a foreign strand?  
    —SIR WALTER SCOTT (16)

The answer to Scott's question is, of course, Yes. Campbell begins his confession by stating his name, and (like Mephistopheles) then offers a bit of background. "I am an American by birth, a Nazi by reputation, and a nationless person by inclination" (17). The nationlessness to which Campbell inclines remains with Vonnegut himself, who was—as his final book's title put it—*A Man Without a Country*. Campbell clearly has no heartfelt sense of homeland for the United States or Germany or elsewhere, and he feels a mild disgust for those who really do. To conclude an argument with his neighbor about the nature of patriotism, Campbell at one point draws a swastika, and hammer-and-sickle, and the stars-and-stripes in the dust on window-panes. "I had given a hearty cheer for each symbol, demonstrating to Kraft the meaning of patriotism to, respectively, a Nazi, a Communist, and an American. 'Hooray, hooray, hooray,' I'd said" (69). The novel's epigraph thus does not label its author or protagonist so much as alienate him.

Of course, Campbell had one country he truly loved, to which he remained loyally patriotic to the point of obsessive. It was his *Reich der Zwei*, his "Nation of Two," that he founded with his beloved wife Helga. In turning away from any notion of nationhood beyond the romantic and erotic love the two shared, Campbell triumphantly estranges himself from his fellow man. The image is romantic, to be sure, but also somewhat pathetic inasmuch as it represents an almost total withdrawal into a sexualized solipsism, a merging of bodies that excludes the rest of the world entirely. The young playwright's early work, *The*

*Goblet*, which is described later in the memoirs, provides an example of what such a *Reich der Zwei* looks like. In the play, “a blindingly pure young maiden” guards the Holy Grail, and she will relinquish it only to a knight who is equally pure. Such a knight arrives, and the two fall in love with each other, but that loves causes them to have impure (sexual) thoughts, involuntarily disqualifying either of them from keeping the Grail. Presumably because of their new impurity, the Grail disappears, and the two lovers consummate their damnation “with a tender night of love.” Confident that hell-fire awaits them in the afterlife, they vow to make this life worth it, at which point the Grail returns, “signifying that Heaven does not despise a love like theirs.” They live happily ever after (147–148). Such a romantic fairy tale reveals its flipside a few pages later when a real couple is juxtaposed to the idealized one. When Resi Noth realizes that her knight, Campbell himself, is not willing to live or die for principle, for pure love, she decides to show him how it is done, poisoning herself with cyanide (166). Thus falls, for at least the second time, the nation of two, Campbell’s only homeland.

The opening chapters of *Mother Night* introduce the Israeli soldiers who are currently guarding Campbell in his Jerusalem prison. Thus, his odyssey begins *in medias res*, rather near the end of his long voyage, in 1961. Vonnegut uses these guards as avatars, each embodying an existential theme that will then carry on elsewhere in the novel. The first comes to stand for History with a capital “H,” that history which is thoroughly human in that it is manmade but also inhuman in its merciless superseding of individual human lives. The war, ended

sixteen years earlier, is “ancient history,” yet the brand new prison also has stones in it that were cut in the time of King Solomon (18). The first guard, an eighteen-year-old named Arnold Marx, is fascinated by history; he spends his leisure on archaeological expeditions to learn more about his nascent republic’s long past. Marx is astonished that Campbell had never heard of “Tilgath-pileser the Third,” an ancient Assyrian, but it turns out that the young amateur has never heard of Campbell’s old boss, Joseph Goebbels.

Another Marx, Karl Marx, famous said, “Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please” (Marx 15). Campbell discovers a piece of doggerel he had written in the 1930s that also reflected on history, a poem titled “Reflections on Not Participating in Current Events.”

I saw a huge steam roller,  
It blotted out the sun.  
The people all lay down, lay down;  
They did not try to run.  
My love and I, we looked amazed  
Upon the gory mystery.  
“Lie down, lie down!” the people cried.  
“The great machine is history!”  
My love and I, we ran away,  
The engine did not find us.  
We ran upon the mountain top,  
Left history far behind us.  
Perhaps we should have stayed and died,  
But somehow we don’t think so.  
We went to see where history’d been,  
And my, the dead did stink so. (95)

For someone who spent the war being intimately involved in the history, including the steam-rolling aspects of it, Campbell’s sentiments are absurdly ironic. On the

one hand, the meaningless and horror of the events remains evident, but so are the actions of “my love and I” as well as those of those who “lay down, lay down.”

Campbell’s afternoon guard, Andor Gutman, had been in Auschwitz, where he nearly served in the *Sonderkommando*, the “special detail” of prisoners who shepherded others into the gas chambers and then removed the corpses before being executed themselves. He notes that many, including he himself, volunteered for such grisly duty, though he cannot explain why. Upon reflection, he suspects the announcement for the *Sonderkommando*, which occasionally interrupted the beautiful music played over the camp’s loudspeakers, must have made the detail seem like a good job. “‘*Leichenträger zu Wache*,’ he crooned, his eyes still closed. Translation: ‘Corpse-carriers to the guardhouse.’ In an institution in which the purpose was to kill human beings by the millions, it was an understandably common cry” (21). The same sing-songily uttered phrase is crooned to Campbell by Mrs. Epstein, the Auschwitz survivor to whom he turns himself in, when he is taken away to stand trial in Israel (187).

Campbell’s evening guard, Arpad Kovacs, is also a war survivor, but one of energy and levity. He takes pride in hope he spent the war, pretending to be a Nazi while secretly spying on or sabotaging Nazi plans. He had used false papers to join the Hungarian S.S., and he therefore had sympathy for Campbell. He hated, almost as much as the Nazis themselves, the passive Jews who simply allowed themselves to be killed. He called them *briquets*, since they simply allowed themselves to be burned. “Tell them the things a man does to stay alive! What’s so noble about being a briquet?” (22). Kovacs himself was

almost proud of what a fiercely anti-Semitic Aryan he had managed to become: “I was such a pure and terrifying Aryan” (23). He was put in charge of a special detachment whose job it was to find out who was leaking information (it was he, of course); he managed to get fourteen S.S. men shot based on his recommendation. Here is a hero for the war who establishes a distinct contrast with Campbell image of himself. Refusing to be a victim, Kovacs schemed to become a double-agent, and managed to fool the Nazis. He is, perhaps, an example of what Campbell could have been, had Campbell possessed any definite principles.

The final, overnight guard tells a tale of the absurd right out of Albert Camus’s interpretation of the Sisyphus myth. Bernard Mengel, a Polish Jew who had managed to survive the war by playing dead so well that a German soldier removed his gold teeth, also helped in the execution of Rudolf Hoess, the commandant of Auschwitz. He tells of tightening the straps around Hoess’s ankles just prior to the hanging, but he says he felt no satisfaction in the deed. “‘I got so I couldn’t feel anything,’ said Mengel. ‘Every job was a job to do, and no job was any better or any worse than any other’” (25). After hanging Hoess, he packed to go home, and he fastened a leather strap to close his suitcase. “Twice within an hour I did the very same job—once to Hoess and once to my suitcase. Both jobs felt about the same” (25). In his explication of the myth of Sisyphus, Camus understands the absurdity of meaningless toil without cease also carries with it an element of joyful wisdom. True, there is punishment in knowing that all one’s efforts are ultimately futile, but the joy comes in owning the fact. If there is

no ultimate purpose, then one can make one's own fate. Satisfaction is a job well done; whether in helping to execute a Nazi war criminal or in fastening one's suitcase, the task can be its own reward.

Campbell's opening encounters with his guards sets the stage for his discussion of Purgatory, his long period of death-in-life between the end of the war and his extradition to Israel to stand trial. The rest of the book combines the story of a few months leading up to his arrest in New York City with flashbacks designed to flesh out the narrative of his war crimes, which also were—secretly—heroic acts of espionage. The juxtaposition of Campbell's own playacting, his schizophrenic division of his own self, and the authentic behavior of his four prison guards is striking. Each shows aspects of Campbell's own existential angst, from his interest in but flight from History, to his voluntary embrace of a horrible duty, to his remarkable ability to pretend to be something else, and finally to his acceptance of the utter absurdity of his, and the human, condition. Campbell's persona is prefigured in these opening chapters, and his biography, spread out over the rest of the work, merely dramatizes these characteristics.

#### **IV**

In 1966, in a new introduction written for the re-release of *Mother Night*, Vonnegut tells a bit about his own experiences in Germany during the war—the full story would later be told in *Slaughterhouse-Five*—and provides the “moral” of *Mother Night*: “This is the only story of mine whose moral I know. I don't think it's a marvelous moral; I simply happen to know what it is: We are what we

pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be” (v). This is a crucially significant moral, I think, for a novel that deals so directly with the nature of selfhood, with the anxiety over one’s actions, with the questions of authenticity, and with the consequences of *being who one pretends to be*.

Howard W. Campbell, Jr., as suggested above, is a rather unreliable narrator. Not only is he mendacious for the sake of art, but he deludes himself. In his alternative dedication, to himself, he sees himself as an evil-doer who was secretly a good person, beloved in Heaven’s eyes. But he also recognizes that his activity was not *merely* playacting. At one point he distinguishes his own venomously racist speeches and writings from that of the Reverend Lionel Jones, D.D.S., D.D. This benighted bigot, unlike Campbell, was “ignorant and insane.” “Those whose orders I carried out in Germany were as ignorant and insane as Dr. Jones. I knew it. God help me, I carried out their instructions anyway” (61). This admission is a momentary peeking through of Campbell’s bad conscience, where he knows that—whatever secret good he may have accomplished through his public evil—he was also truly reprehensible, more so perhaps than even the Nazis who so fervently believed his hateful rhetoric.

In a meeting with his Blue Fairy Godmother at the end of the war, Campbell learns a bit more about what he was really doing during the war. He asks “Frank Wirtanen,” the U.S. agent who had recruited him before the war had even begun, how many people actually knew that Campbell was really “good” during those times. Wirtanen answers, only three (himself, a general, and

President Roosevelt, whom Campbell in his speeches had bestowed the more Jewish-sounding name “Rosenfeld”).

“Three people in all the world knew me for what I was—” I said. “And all the rest—” I shrugged.

“They knew you for what you were, too,” he said abruptly.

“That wasn’t me,” I said, startled by his sharpness.

“Whoever it was—” said Wirtanen, “he was one of the most vicious sons of bitches who ever lived.”

I was amazed. Wirtanen was sincerely bitter.

“You give me hell for that—knowing what you do?” I said. “How else could I have survived?”

“That was your problem,” he said. “Very few men could have solved it as thoroughly as you did.”

“You think I was a Nazi?” I said.

“Certainly you were,” he said. “How else could a responsible historian classify you?” (138)

In other words, you are what you pretend to be.

Campbell had earlier suggested that one of the main reasons he had agreed to serve as a secret agent for the U.S. was that he was a ham, that he loved the opportunity to playact. “As a spy of the sort he described, I would have the opportunity for some pretty grand acting. I would fool everyone with my brilliant interpretation of a Nazi, inside and out” (41). Campbell’s pretending was so good that it eventually fooled himself, and the schizophrenia he describes, the wide separation of his “several selves” (136), breaks down the distinction of authentic or inauthentic behavior. So what if Campbell-the-American-spy was actually good, at the same time that Campbell-the-Nazi-propagandist was evil? The line blurs. Wirtanen says to him later in the same scene recounted above that spies rarely did what that did for either money or patriotism. Why did they do it? “Each person has to answer that question for himself—” said Wirtanen.

'Generally speaking, espionage offers each spy an opportunity to go crazy in a way he finds irresistible'" (140).

Vonnegut's moral, *we are what we pretend to be*, is fitting for an existentialist work. The terrible freedoms that accompany a world without inherent meaning, an existence whose essence lies precisely in existence, make the "authentic" acts we do as ourselves function as *pretending* in any event. By saying "I am a Nazi," Campbell did indeed affirm his own, authentic Nazism; even if that were simply a part he played, he played it authentically. His memoirs conclude with the newly found hope of freedom, a letter from the real person Campbell had known as Frank Wirtanen, his Blue Fairy Godmother, appears and confirms Campbell's entire defense against the war crime charges. He will be a free man. Campbell's reaction to the news of his impending freedom evokes Sartre's metaphor: "I find the prospect nauseating" (192). Rather than accept such freedom, Campbell opts for a final, free act—the very act that Camus regarded as illusory freedom—suicide. "I will hang Howard W. Campbell, Jr., for crimes against himself" (192), and, as we learn for sure in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Campbell did indeed hang himself. The end of Campbell comports with his lifelong sense of divided self. An American who was a German, he was also a patriotic man without a country, a monogamous polygamist, a high-minded romantic who produced outright pornography, and on and on. To the motto, *esse quam videri*, he could have no answer, since his *being* was entirely caught up in his *seeming*. A motto for modern man, whose existence precedes and utterly conditions its essence: be careful what you pretend to be.

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