

“You must remember this”: Trauma and Memory in *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*

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A central issue that World War II raises for novelists is how to represent the ultimately inexpressible horrors of that war and, at the same time, engage the reader in a dialogue that might produce the *saeva indignatio* (savage indignation) that Jonathan Swift, for example, considered the affective preliminary to ethical social action. Scholars are convinced that Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* leads to such a vision of human responsibility issuing from indignation. As Robert Merrill puts it, “Yossarian deserts because he finally realizes there are greater horrors than physical pain and death” (50). In Heller's own estimate, those greater horrors are “the guilt and responsibility for never intervening in the injustices he [Yossarian] knows exist everywhere” (qtd. in Merrill 51). At the end of the novel, when Yossarian decides to go to Sweden, he does so specifically to run to his responsibilities: “Let the bastards thrive,” says Yossarian, “since I can't do a thing to stop them but embarrass them by running away” (Heller 462). In this case, the ethical decision is to estimate what one can credibly do to work against a mad, destructive system and then do it.

Critics of Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, on the other hand, are not unanimously so willing to grant the ethical engagement of the novel. *Slaughterhouse-Five* has produced two very different schools of thought on Vonnegut's ethical focus. On the one hand, Tony Tanner argues that the novel leads to quietism, which springs from a sense of hopelessness (128). Sharon Seiber appears to associate that hopelessness with predestination and fatalism (148). James Lundquist connects that hopelessness to black humor and argues that such humor is, in effect, an expression of human inadequacy in the face of the complexities of the universe (18–19).¹ Such inadequacy, Seiber suggests, can produce only a sort of

impotent, uneasy chuckle at Billy's expense but most decidedly not the savage indignation of Swift (152). Robert Merrill and Peter A. Scholl, on the contrary, vehemently oppose the idea that the novel advocates quietism. To be sure, they say, Billy Pilgrim escapes into a quietistic fantasy world (146), but for them, Billy himself is an object of satire. His serenity, they say, is bought at the price of complicity in the "indifference to moral problems which is the ultimate 'cause' of events like Dresden" (148). By contrast, the narrator of the novel, whom Merrill and Scholl take to be Vonnegut, inserts himself into the narrative again and again to demonstrate precisely the distance between Billy's serenity and his own restless, inevitable grappling with the evil of the world. Stanley Schatt differs from Merrill and Scholl to the extent that he makes Billy ultimately as incapable of serenity as Vonnegut himself. Whatever serenity seems to be present in the novel, says Schatt, belongs to a disembodied narrator who sympathizes with the Tralfamadorian view of things, quietistic in the sense that it sanitizes existence by encouraging one to avert the gaze from unpleasant events (87–88). More complex is Tim Woods's argument, derived from Derrida's treatment of history as supplement or "other," that the novel is "a dramatization of Vonnegut's deeply felt need and commitment to justice and ethical responsibility in opening oneself to the other, in recognizing one's indebtedness to the other" (117).

Leaving aside specific points of disagreement, I concur with those critics who see in Vonnegut, as in Heller, an impulse toward ethical, responsible behavior. However, I argue that the central issue with which the two novels concern themselves is not so much taking responsibility as getting to the point at which responsible action is possible. As I see it, to be ethical requires that one develop Swift's indignation against the injustices of the world and, in the context of these two novels, against the complacencies that lead to depravity and world war. To do that, one must squarely and unblinkingly face the memories of what one must fight against. As an instance of what I mean, consider the decisive moment in *Casablanca*, when Rick is converted from a self-indulgent cynic to a loving, committed one. At that moment he asks Sam to play—not to play again, but just to play—"As Time Goes By," a song that for Rick opens the doors of memory on a past that had been too painful to remember consciously. As the flashback to that past transpires and Rick, along with the audience, revisits Paris on the verge of German occupation, it becomes increasingly clear that Rick's mutilated emotional life, which we have seen in the first part of the film, is a direct result of the pain of that past. The flashback makes us see that Rick's behavior in *Casablanca* has been poised delicately between leaving his love behind and still feeling his love as an affliction of the heart. I want to emphasize here that the particular circumstances of Rick's pain are romanticized and, ultimately, too sentimental to carry the burden of what I want to address in this paper. But I begin by referring to Rick's plight because in the refrain of Sam's song, "You must remember this," is the kernel of Freud's double-edged insight into the effects of trauma on its victim. Rick's demand that Sam play the song and his effort finally to contend with

a past too traumatic to recollect and yet too formative to leave behind is at the center of what I want to consider in regard to *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

These two novels make the effort to recover memory that is central to their narrative structures. In *Catch 22*, Yossarian's decision is ultimately, as he puts it, to stop "running away from my responsibilities. I'm running *to* them. There's nothing negative about running away to save my life" (461, emphasis in original). But that decision comes in the final chapter of the novel, specifically at a point in the narrative when Yossarian has finally remembered, clearly and with no ambiguities, the death of Snowden, the central traumatic event of his career as bombardier. Heller, in fact once said, "Snowden truly dies throughout *Catch-22*" (qtd. in Merrill, 46). That comment points to the fact that, throughout the entire novel, Yossarian's memory has worked its way around Snowden's death, giving the reader flashes of the event, sometimes as off-handed references but more often as grotesquely comical ones like the sudden eruption of the phrase, "Where are the Snowdens of yesteryear" (Heller 35–36). But until the full revelation of the event in the next-to-last chapter, Snowden's death is never actually recollected or enacted in its full horror. To the extent that they puzzle the reader and make Yossarian seem bizarre beyond understanding, one result of those sometimes comical prefigurements of the horror is that they serve as "a kind of trap," as Merrill puts it, that makes the reader complicit in the carelessness of the General Dreedles and Colonel Cathcart of this world. Then, when the horror becomes clear, the recurrence of the references to the event effects a conversion in which "we come to feel something like shame for our indifference" (Merrill 47, 53). Thus, the indignation that we felt at the horrors produced by self-interested officers turns inward and prompts in us a desire to act against those horrors. It is, however, important to recognize that throughout the novel Yossarian is as much in the dark as is the reader about the actuality of Snowden's death. The novel circles around and around the death precisely because Yossarian can neither remember it nor forget it.

In that sense, Snowden's death is for Yossarian like Ilsa's abandonment for Rick— although the implications of Snowden's death are much more serious. David Seed has analyzed the lesson of Snowden's death, as finally recollected by Yossarian. At that moment, as Seed reminds us, Yossarian quotes Edgar's remark in *King Lear*, "the ripeness is all." But Seed points out that the circumstance of Snowden's death "blocks off" the sense that the passage has in *Lear*, the attempt to induce a philosophical acceptance of death. On the contrary,

One important metaphysical theme of *Catch-22* is the physical vulnerability of man. [. . .] Death in this novel is presented as a conversion process whereby human beings become mere matter and are assimilated into the non-human. [. . .] Snowden [. . .] spills his guts, which happen to be full of ripe tomatoes, and so Heller implies that man may become no more than the fruit, vegetables and meat he consumes. Where Edgar pleads for acquiescence, however, Heller sets up Yossarian as a voice of refusal, of resistance to the inevitability of death. (Seed 41)

As Merrill concludes, Snowden's secret is that "[i]t is the spirit that counts, not 'matter'" (52)—and Yossarian's acceptance of the responsibility to stay alive is, in effect, a paradoxical affirmation of the spirit's capacity to transcend the limits of matter. Thus, Yossarian's remembering becomes the impetus for the ethical challenge that he takes up in the final chapter. In that regard, it is worth noticing that in a book in which, for the most part, the names of characters are the titles of chapters, not until Yossarian remembers Snowden's death is a chapter titled "Yossarian"—the final chapter in some sense, because Yossarian finally acts rather than reacts.

One could argue that the first chapter of *Slaughterhouse-Five* begins where the final chapter of *Catch-22* ends. The subject of that first chapter is precisely the real, biographical difficulty that Vonnegut encounters in attempting to remember the bombing of Dresden, the central traumatic event of his novel. The chapter is really pure autobiography. In a 1973 interview with David Standish, Vonnegut acknowledged that for some time he was unable to remember the actual bombing of Dresden: "[T]here was a complete forgetting of what it was like[. . .] the center had been pulled right out of the story" (70). Not until that failure of memory is made good can Vonnegut write *Slaughterhouse-Five*—and, Merrill and Scholl argue, precisely because Vonnegut can write such a book, he takes an ethically responsible stance that denies the quietism of Tralfamadorian philosophy. In a literal contradiction of the Tralfamadorian ethos, he pointedly looks at those "unpleasant" moments, not because he revels in them but because they so powerfully determine who he is and what he does. Vonnegut's admiration for Lot's wife, who does look back (21–22), underscores the point. The first chapter of *Slaughterhouse-Five* makes clear that, as with Rick's and Yossarian's, Vonnegut's memory of trauma had not disappeared. On the contrary, if the absent presence of trauma produces Rick's cynicism and Yossarian's madness—for I think one has to agree with Seed that until the moment of remembering, Yossarian is indeed mad (33)—then the repressed memory of the bombing of Dresden produces in Vonnegut a "disease," as he calls it in the novel:

I have this disease late at night sometimes, involving alcohol and the telephone. I get drunk, and I drive my wife away with a breath like mustard gas and roses. And then, speaking gravely and elegantly into the telephone, I ask the telephone operators to connect me with this friend or that one, from whom I have not heard in years. (4)

The symptoms of Vonnegut's disease reproduce the dynamic of trauma: the alcohol deadens the memory that the phone calls seek to arouse. If one takes Merrill and Scholl's position that Vonnegut, as he inserts himself into the novel, is a man with "greater resources" than weak, quietistic Billy Pilgrim in *Slaughterhouse-Five* (146)—in effect, that Vonnegut is like Yossarian at the end of *Catch-22*—then one must also acknowledge that Vonnegut's recovery of the memories that will enable ethical action is a mighty struggle against the impulse to suppress and repress.²

Addressing the symptomatology of trauma in his book, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud describes the case of a little boy who, traumatized by being abandoned by his mother, reenacted the scene of the trauma over and over and over again. So striking was the event for Freud that it forced him to reconsider his original, relatively unproblematic idea of the pleasure principle, which had indicated that people who experienced traumatic events would avoid them or any object that might recollect the trauma (9). Working through the implications of the little boy's reenactments, Freud concluded that, for a child, such repetitions may reflect a self-conscious effort to dominate the traumatic event, for, he said, children "can master a powerful impression far more thoroughly by being active than by merely experiencing it passively" (29). But when the repetition is not a conscious reenactment of the traumatic event, the fact of repetition points toward neurosis (30). And, said Freud, the more powerful the trauma-precipitating event, the more likely that the conscious memory will be repressed as too dangerous for the psychic well-being of the individual, and the more likely that those repressed memories will express themselves in unconscious reenactments of the traumatic event (14–15).

Yossarian's behavior before recollecting Snowden's death and Vonnegut's behavior in trying to remember the bombing of Dresden duplicate the symptomatology of trauma that Freud described. The fictional character and the real novelist must revisit the traumatic event over and over again precisely because it has determined their lives in profound ways; yet, because of its horrific power, the event has also erased itself from their consciousness. The narrative structure of *Catch-22*, like that of Vonnegut's own life, is determined by vertiginous circlings around their respective central traumatic events. As James Mellard says of Yossarian, "[I]t is the protagonist's *moral* life, his *inner*-life, his *psychological* needs that account for the novel's delaying tactics" (36, emphasis in original). Once having achieved a clear memory, the result for the traumatized person is therapeutic in the sense that it enables him to confront the horror that he has endured and to act on that knowledge. So too, about his own experience Vonnegut says that writing the novel "was a therapeutic thing. I'm a different person now. I got rid of a lot of crap" (qtd. in McGinnis 56). Freud said that the task of the therapist who is treating trauma is "to force as much as possible into the channel of memory and to allow as little as possible to emerge as repetition" (13). I am not confusing the therapy that Freud and Vonnegut mean with the "don't worry, be happy" school of latter-day psychobabble. The Tralfamadorians speak from the position of psychobabble therapy: Don't dwell on bad moments; don't worry, be happy. On the contrary, as Merrill and Scholl make clear, the therapeutic aspect of Vonnegut's experience in remembering Dresden is to arouse the indignation that makes it possible to write *Slaughterhouse-Five*, a self-consciously, relentlessly antiwar book, written at the height of the Vietnam War, and geared to argue specifically against that war as well as against war generally (147 and passim).

In his book on the Holocaust, Dominick LaCapra considers the motivation to tell and retell the story of so horrible an event and concludes that “one may entertain the possibility of modes of historicity in which trauma and the need to act out (or compulsively repeat) may never be fully transcended but in which they may to some viable extent be worked through and different relations or modes of articulation enabled” (14n10). To paraphrase LaCapra’s terminology, retelling the story need not be neurosis and is positively therapeutic if it works toward making the teller or the reader conscious of the past and therefore able to work against the cause of the trauma—in the case of LaCapra’s book, the Holocaust; in the case of Heller and Vonnegut, the horrors of World War II generally. From that point of view, the writing of *Slaughterhouse-Five* is like Yossarian’s taking off for Sweden, not a running away from responsibility but an acceptance of responsibility according to the capability and limitations of the individual concerned.

On the other hand, it is possible, indeed necessary, to hear a “don’t worry, be happy” turn to what seems to be the philosophy of Billy Pilgrim or of the Tralfamadorians that he echoes or of Kilgore Trout, the science-fiction writer from whose stories the Tralfamadorians may be derived: the diffuse source of the quietism, for which no one in particular seems ultimately responsible, is itself an indictment of the behavior it makes possible. At the heart of that philosophy is the idea that time travel is available to human beings and because it is possible to travel from one point in time to another, it is silly to remain at a point that is in any way unpleasant. As a Tralfamadorian says to Billy, “That’s one thing Earthlings might learn to do, if they tried hard enough: Ignore the awful times, and concentrate on the good ones” (117). One consequence of that perspective on time, however, is that all events and occurrences are always already determined. The Tralfamadorians even know that one of their own kind will one day push a button that will destroy the universe; when Billy asks why they do nothing to prevent that event, his Tralfamadorian guide tells him that it would be impossible to do so: “He has *always* pressed it, and he *always will*. We *always* let him and we *always will* let him. The moment is *structured* that way” (117, emphasis in original). As Woods argues, despite the temporal freedom that the Tralfamadorians enjoy, they also affirm that “[t]ime is linear too” (107). The determinism of the Tralfamadorian system is therefore absolute: They can visit and revisit particular points of time, but they cannot alter the linear causality of time. Indeed, the Tralfamadorians are completely puzzled by two characteristics of human beings: first, that human beings ask “why” things happen (76–77); second, that human beings believe in free will (85–86). Their acceptance of the inevitability of events is conveyed in the phrase “so it goes,” which becomes something of a refrain in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, appearing after every instance of a death of any sort, whether it be the end of the universe or the desiccation of the bunch of flowers in Billy’s hospital room.

In that phrase is encapsulated the quietism of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, which critics such as Tanner and Sieber attribute to Billy. According to Tanner, Billy “[a]ban-

dons the worried ethical, tragical point of view of Western man and adopts a serene, conscienceless passivity. If anything, he views the world aesthetically" (128). For Sieber, Billy's "time travel" liberates "Billy's imagination; no longer subject to the serial constraints of time and space, Billy is free to create a kind of dream landscape in his imagination where anything is possible" (148). One might add that a specifically structuralist aesthetic is at work in the Tralfamadorian point of view. As Louis Althusser says about his structuralist approach to ideology, ideology always has the same function: to interpellate subjects. The particularities of an ideology are really irrelevant, therefore, because the effect of ideology is always already the same. At the level of functionality, at least, one can make no real distinctions among any particular ideological systems: communism and fascism, Christianity and Islam, capitalism and feudalism—all are exactly equivalent in forming subject positions (127–86). In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, it does not matter whether the universe or the flower dies. In either case, "So it goes." From such a point of view any possibility of savage indignation at the horrors of the world simply disappears.

Tanner's point, I think, seems to hold valid for Billy but, in fact, does not. I prefer to argue that the novel presents Billy as a man who, once he recovers his memories, finds a way to make his indignation work effectively toward ethical action. At any rate, Billy is not an aesthete pure and simple. One of my students asked recently, can Billy control the destination of his flights in time so that he does as the Tralfamadorians urge humans generally to do?³ On the contrary, Billy often ends up moving from a fairly pleasant situation to a profoundly disturbing one. For instance, Billy's first episode of time travel takes him from the middle of the Battle of the Bulge—admittedly not a pleasant situation—to a very early traumatic experience, in which his father, to teach him how to swim, throws Billy into the deep end of a pool. As the narrator tell us, "It was like an execution" (44). If the point of Tralfamadorian time travel is to gaze only at pleasant spots of time, then Billy must have, at best, an imperfect command of the techniques of time travel. We are told from the first page of Billy's story that he is "spastic in time" (23). He has no control. The result of Billy's lack of control is a narrative structure remarkably like the narrative structure of *Catch-22* and of Vonnegut's life as he tries to recollect his experiences in Dresden. Billy constantly circles around that central traumatic moment, almost recollecting it but, as is typical of traumatic memories, not quite managing to seize on the event. Furthermore, I argue that Billy's time travel—like Yossarian's involuntary nudism and uncontrollable echolalia, which surfaces in Billy as well when he is in the hospital with Rumfoord, or like Vonnegut's midnight drunkenness—is a symptom of the disease from which he suffers.⁴ In effect, Billy Pilgrim is insane, precisely because his time traveling prevents him from coming face to face with the traumatic event around which his whole life has formed itself. Vonnegut gives a good indication of Billy's disease: that he suffers from narcolepsy (56), that he has fits of uncontrollable weeping (61), that he has a nervous breakdown that leads to his hospi-

talization (24, 100 ff.). These are all indices of the effect of trauma on Billy's life. Billy is, as it were, a guest at his own existence, a "specter" in his own life, incapable of taking responsibility for himself or of acting against the horrors of existence for the same reasons that Yossarian cannot act before he comes face to face with the traumatic death of Snowden, or that Vonnegut cannot write until he confronts his memories of Dresden.

Billy finally faces up to the trauma of the bombing of Dresden. The recollection takes place in perfectly psychoanalytic fashion, by means of a free association that begins with a barbershop quartet that is singing at Billy's eighteenth wedding anniversary: "Billy thought hard about the effect the quartet had had on him, and then found an association with an experience he had had long ago. He did not travel in time to the experience. He *remembered* it *shimmeringly*" (177; emphasis added). What Billy remembers is the full horror of the incendiary bombing of Dresden, in the course of which 135,000 people died—more people, Vonnegut tells us, than died in Hiroshima or Nagasaki (188). As in Yossarian's recollection of Snowden's death, the consequences of Billy's nontime-travel memory are profound. Although Yossarian's reaction to the memory of his traumatic experience is to acknowledge his own complicity in the event, Billy cannot do so because, except in the very general sense that Billy is a human being, he is not complicit in the bombing. Billy's whole life, from the moment that his father throws him in the pool to the moment of the airplane crash of which he is the only survivor, has made him a passive observer of his own existence, a fact that he is spastic in time turns into the novel's central trope. And yet, simultaneously, Billy's memory makes him feel complicit so that, for instance his involuntary crying can be traced directly to his post-Dresden experience (197). The effect of Billy's memory of Dresden, in short, is to transform Billy in two opposed and mutually exclusive ways.

On the one hand, for once in his life, he begins to act: hitherto, as he tells his concerned daughter Barbara, "I didn't think the time was *ripe*" (30, emphasis in original). As in Yossarian's anti-Edgardian recognition that "the ripeness is all," Billy's moment of ripeness makes ethical action possible. His first act takes place in a hospital, as he is recovering from the airplane accident. There he meets Bertram Copeland Rumfoord, the official historian of the U.S. Air Force, whose book on World War II has glossed over Dresden "[f]or fear that a lot of bleeding hearts [. . .] might not think it was such a wonderful thing to do" (191). Billy's action arises from his position of powerlessness: "There in the hospital, Billy was having an adventure very common among people without power in time of war: He was trying to prove to a willfully deaf and blind enemy that he was interesting to hear and see" (193). Initially, Rumfoord dismisses Billy's efforts to communicate as mere echolalia. If that were true, then Billy would be, like Yossarian naked in the trees and echoing meaningless sounds, still mad. But Billy persists. Billy ultimately forces Rumfoord to recognize that he is interesting to hear and see because he recalls a memory that Rumfoord's history has forgotten: "You

must have had mixed feelings, there on the ground,” says Rumfoord (198). On the other hand, although Billy makes what is for him a hitherto unique effort to be recognized and to be deemed authentic, his response to Rumfoord’s grudging acceptance of another point of view on Dresden is, to say the least, comforting: “It was all right. [. . .] *everything* is all right, and everybody has to do exactly what he does. I learned that on Tralfamadore” (198; emphasis in original). The passivity, quietism, and determinism of Billy’s comfort seems to run completely counter to his effort to be heard by Rumfoord. Once Billy leaves the hospital he will be heard by the whole world: he goes to a radio station to tell the whole world, or as much of it as might be listening, the glad tidings of the new Tralfamadorian gospel that he wants to promulgate. Soon he starts to write letters to editors of newspapers. He becomes so active that by 1976, the year of his death at the hands of Paul Lazzarro, his Judas Iscariot, Billy has founded a new religion, with many followers.

The message of Billy’s religion springs from Tralfamadorian ideas of time and determinism. When he predicts his own death to his adoring followers, he argues against their sense of sorrow: “If you protest, if you think that death is a terrible thing, then you have not understood a word I’ve said” (142). The comment makes explicit the sense of inevitability that makes Tralfamadorians passive, quietistic; but, at the same time, Billy’s comment obviously echoes Christ’s reprehending the Apostles for forgetting his miracles: “Having eyes, see ye not? and having ears, hear ye not? and do ye not remember?” (Mark 8.18). I argue that in *Billy Pilgrim*, Vonnegut is representing the complex relation of transcendence to the time-bound immanence of human experience. He is affirming that “linear temporality is *not the only way* that temporality can be thought: linear concepts need to be supplemented with non-linear concepts” (Woods 107, emphasis in original). In bringing the message of Tralfamadore to human beings, Billy is not urging a detached acceptance of death or of the horrors of war. On the contrary, he is re-presenting the gospel message of Christ to the disciples: remember that every person has duties and responsibilities, which spring from one’s time-bound engagement in the world and are to that extent determined for us, but the performance of those takes one beyond the limitations of linear time and of the world. So, as he bids farewell to his disciples, Billy reminds them that “[i]t is time *for you* to go home to your wives and children, and it is time *for me* to be dead for a little while—and then live again” (142–43; emphasis added). In effect, Billy’s comments to his followers are geared to answering the question that Tralfamadorians cannot understand: Why? Unlike the Tralfamadorians, Billy has a hard-won, time-bound, memorial sense of the horrors of life from which human beings cannot escape and in response to which they need tidings of comfort and joy. Billy’s message, in other words, is as “quietistic” as the New Testament.

The mocked, scorned, “self-crucified” (80) Billy must be seen as a spiritual pilgrim who follows in the footsteps of Christ. In the metaliterary references that mark his own participation in the passion of Billy, Vonnegut tells us why the parallel must be present in the novel. On the one hand, in the unsavory context of

references to the first pornographic photograph ever made, only two years after the invention of photography, Vonnegut reminds us that many myths tell the same story (41). That the time is ripe for a new myth to explain humankind's position in the universe is made clear by the explicit failures of the old myth, the Judeo-Christian tradition that, as one of Kilgore Trout's novels tells us, "was dead as a door nail" (203).⁵ By that token, and in the context of the hospital visit during which Billy meets Eliot Rosewater, the man who introduces him to the novels of Kilgore Trout, Vonnegut points out that, given the horrors of the twentieth century, human beings need a whole new mythology: "I think you guys are going to have to come up with a lot of wonderful new lies," says Rosewater to a psychiatrist, "or people just aren't going to want to go on living" (101). What Rosewater calls "lies" are the stories that people tell to make sense of the world around them. In the twentieth century, such "lies" have a scientific cast to them simply because "science" has taken over the explanatory role that religions once had. Rosewater, after all, is talking to a psychiatrist, not a priest. They are lies only in the sense that a religion is a "lie" to a nonbeliever. From the point of view of the believer, the "lies" represent a mythic system under which things fall into place and come to have meaning. That is what a mythology is—"lies" that organize the data of the senses so that we can believe that we have a place in the universe privileged by understanding. In his wonderful book on *The Origins of Knowledge and Imagination*, Jacob Bronowski calls such lies the "metaphors" that, once they are given mathematical form, produce the algorithms that give us a scientific understanding of the universe. Such metaphors and their algorithmic expressions, Bronowski says, must always be lies in the same way that any model must be a fiction, at best only a partial re-presentation of reality, and yet the only access to truth that we have. What Billy invents, then, is the new "lie," the new myth that will make current once again the same old story that all founding myths present: Just as Osiris died and was reborn, or as Adonis died and was reborn, or as Christ died and was reborn, so Billy, too, dies and, he says, will be reborn. Not in terms of pornography, then, Vonnegut reiterates the idea that many myths tell the same story. If we go on to ask why that is the case, why some truth, the same truth, about humans in relation to the universe must always be told in partial, "lying" representations of reality, then we ourselves end up experiencing the paradox of Billy's memory: the transcendent is comforting because it is trans-historical and must always be the same; but how we arrive at that transcendence remains contingent, historical, memorial. Ultimately, then, Billy's is not a structuralist response to war, but, rather, a profoundly humanistic one. As Vonnegut said to the graduates of Bennington College in 1970, "I beg you to believe in the most ridiculous superstition of all: that humanity is at the center of the universe, the fulfiller or the frustrator of the grandest dreams of God Almighty" (qtd. in Freese 153).

As I see it, the delicacy of Billy's response to Rumfoord is an index of why the twentieth century needed a new myth. For Billy to have convicted Rumfoord of guilt would have served no purpose: Rumfoord would deny his culpability, reit-

erate his own deterministic analysis of the horror of Dresden—"It had to be done" (198), he says to Billy—and finally just refuse to hear or see Billy at all. Such is the justification for Rumfoord's history, which skips over, actively represses, and censors Dresden because it would be too discomfoting. As Vonnegut sets out to recover the memory of Dresden, he discovers that the nation as a whole has done just as Rumfoord has: Vonnegut cannot get information on the bombing because "the information was top secret still." "Secret?" asks Vonnegut in the opening chapter of the novel, "My God—from *whom*?" (11; emphasis in original). Vonnegut suggests that the secret is suppressed from the consciousness of the nation just as trauma is suppressed from the consciousness of the victim. For the nation as a whole, the bombing of Dresden is traumatic: if it cannot be recollected consciously, it will be reenacted, whether in Billy's uncontrollable fits of weeping or in the uncontrollable riots in the ghetto of Ilium or in Vietnam, where Billy's son finds himself a combatant Green Beret. Yet, neither Vonnegut nor Billy can compel his audience to hear and to see. Billy's comforting approach, therefore, is not quietistic; rather it takes the most direct route to opening Rumfoord's eyes, to making him remember. Billy's gospel, in short, is not very different from Yossarian's running away to responsibility or from Vonnegut's story telling, therapeutic for him in particular but also for the nation as a whole. All three men, fictional or not, are negotiating their way around one of the possibilities that the twentieth century, and the experience of World War II in particular, have raised in an unprecedentedly forceful manner: that all of us are guest observers of our own existences. In *Casablanca*, Rick puts that idea in a compact way: the lives that he and Ilsa lead do not amount to a hill of beans. Even as he says that, because he has remembered, Rick is moving toward an ethical action that forces one to see that individual choice is much more than a hill of beans. Both *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* present the blockages, material and psychological, to ethical action that we all must navigate; but they also refuse to accept the idea that we are nothing but a hill of beans.

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NOTES

1. Thus, also Seiber, who suggests that "Billy has been stripped of his humanism through the devastation of war" (149).

2. Woods argues persuasively that later Derrida presents the same case, that simultaneously feeling the present of an alienated past is essential to "justice" and "responsibility." See especially Woods's quotation from Derrida's *Specters of Marx*: "No justice—let us not say no law and once again we are not speaking here of laws—seems possible or thinkable without the principle of some *responsibility*, beyond all living present, within that which disjoins the living present, before the ghosts of those who are not yet born or who are already dead. [. . .] Without this *non-contemporaneity with itself of the living present* [. . .] what sense would there be to ask the question "where?" "where tomorrow?" "whither?" (qtd. in Woods 119; emphasis in original).

3. Sieber, who says that Billy "is a seasoned time-traveler" (147), seems to answer affirmatively.
4. Although I think that Vonnegut does not make the (fictional) facticity of Billy's time travel clear, nonetheless I generally disagree with Kevin A. Boon's point about time travel, that "the evidence makes the question undecidable" (10).
5. See Freese (145–64) for a comprehensive reading of the variety of "lies" (religions) that Vonnegut creates.

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