

Thus Spoke Billy Pilgrim: Kurt Vonnegut's Nietzschean Thought

by

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Thought

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ABSTRACT

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Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* is often regarded as quietist in its supposed acceptance of the horrors of war and the futility of human action. But in reading this novel from a Nietzschean perspective informed by *The Birth of Tragedy* and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, what is initially seen as fatalism is a recognition of the tragic nature of reality, reflecting the Silenian notion that if one must be born, it is best to die soon. In the recognition of this tragic worldview, Vonnegut's novel can be read as the sort of New Attic Tragedy that Nietzsche so values, with the narrator's acknowledgement of the artifice of the text a reproduction of the Dionysian chorus, which, in an absurd universe, provides metaphysical comfort to the audience. Furthermore, the similarities between the non-linear Tralfamadorian conception of time echoes Nietzsche's eternal recurrence, which both reinforces the tragic worldview and reconciles the narrator's trauma with Silenian reality through the redemptive creation of an eternally recurring art that evidences *amor fati*.

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Introduction

Since the initial wave of criticism surrounding Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* coalesced around the idea that it advocates a secular "quietism" in light of atrocities like the firebombing of Dresden at the center of both the novel and Vonnegut's experience in World War II, much ink has been spilled in producing a counter-reading to this interpretation, with mixed success. Charles Shields epitomizes this quietist criticism when he writes, "Yes, making destruction a bit more tolerable – that's the take-away of much of Vonnegut's *oeuvre*" (27). Rather than putting forth any kind of solution to fix the corrupt institutions, compromised individuals, and meaningless universes in his fiction, according to Shields, Vonnegut's only prescription is laughter. Kathryn Hume summarizes this view, noting that the world of Vonnegut's fiction is arbitrary, inhabited by helpless characters who cannot effect any of the progressive goals of Vonnegut's personal politics. "Intellectual quest is derailed by presuppositions," Hume writes, "the forward motion dissipates into stasis, and what supplants it is melancholy emotion." In this fictional world, however, a sad acceptance is the only reasonable reaction, a quietist rejection of agency and will.

On the surface, this initial critical response to *Slaughterhouse-Five* is a sound reading of a novel that appears to blatantly reject the idea that meaningful change is possible. Indeed, in a book where the narrator writes of the ostensible protagonist, "Among the things that Billy Pilgrim, could not change were the past, the present and the future," denying the very idea of human action to produce a nihilistic reading is tempting. However, such a reading is hard to square with the undeniable moral uplift of the end of

the novel, and to combat this discourse of *Slaughterhouse-Five* as quietist, a variety of explanations have been put forth.

Countering this notion, Alberto Cacicedo sees a move towards more moral and responsible action, “not so much taking responsibility as getting to the point at which responsible action is possible” in the text (358). Martin Coleman identifies this quietist reading, saying, “A typical reading...holds that the author advocates passive acceptance of overwhelming circumstances that do unspeakable – unnarratable and unaccountable - harm to human beings”; in place of this reading, Coleman offers that the work is not cynical, nihilistic, or quietist, but is “a work of deep moral significance,” that demonstrates “a way to live honestly and meaningfully in a radically contingent universe” (682). Yet these readings seem to dodge the issue, as the central conflict of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, a novel characterized by Billy Pilgrim’s inability to process his experience at Dresden, can be succinctly summed up by Charles M. Tung’s definition for modernist quietism: “In a life in which the lack of a present makes taking initiative impossible, the only relief is to dream about going backwards” (404). How then can simply “getting to the point where responsible action is possible” counteract a quietism built into the central conceit of the story, Billy Pilgrim, unable to change his past, present, or future, dreaming of going backwards in time?

So is there any solution to the passive nihilism of Billy Pilgrim? After all, the quietism of the modernists, exemplified by the likes of Hemingway and other hyper-masculine “glamorous, war-loving, dirty old men” who Vonnegut promises will have no part to play in his book, is not what one would expect from him, an author who loves nothing more than undercutting dramatic moments, by means of meta-fictional capering

and a gleeful desire to destabilize the narrative, that would be deadly serious in a World War II novel from the likes of Norman Mailer (18). “To narrate a typical war-novel of literary realism — in the vein of Stephen Crane’s *Red Badge of Courage*, which ‘poor old Edgar Derby’ reads to Pilgrim in a German hospital — risks rationalizing, minimizing, or romanticizing his trauma,” writes Wilson Taylor in “Oscillating to Eternity: Apocalypse and Eden in Vonnegut’s Telegraphic Schizophrenic Novel.” Here, the disappearance into the past is not quietism. As Taylor writes, “A facile linearity risks smoothing these jagged edges and offering false appeasement to Vonnegut’s existential dread.” As such, the view of time in Vonnegut’s novels rejects this traditional linearity.

In place of a straightforward temporal view, Taylor nods towards a different source of “appeasement” for Vonnegut’s “existential dread” when he notes the similarity between the conception of time as put forth by the aliens from Tralfamadore who supposedly abduct Billy Pilgrim and Friedrich Nietzsche’s notion of the eternal recurrence:

Throughout the novel, Pilgrim is haunted by eternal recurrence — the endless repetition of history celebrated by the Tralfamadoreans. Pilgrim is condemned to the perpetual reliving of his trauma, what Nietzsche in *The Gay Science* identifies as “the greatest weight.” Milan Kundera, who toys with eternal recurrence in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, posits, “If every second of our lives recurs an infinite number of times, we are nailed to eternity as Jesus Christ was nailed to the cross. It is a terrifying prospect.” Vonnegut agrees — “If what Billy Pilgrim learned from the Tralfamadoreans is true, that we will all live forever, no matter how dead

we may sometimes seem to be, I am not overjoyed.” In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut presents Pilgrim as similarly “nailed to eternity.”

If “taking initiative,” as Tung calls it, is impossible because Billy Pilgrim is “nailed to eternity,” an eternity that looks like Nietzsche’s famous thought exercise, then it stands to reason that a solution would be found there as well. After all, if the defining feature of quietism is the relinquishment of will, an adequate response could conceivably be found with the philosopher most concerned with the will.

Vonnegut denies that he was influenced in any conscious way by Nietzsche, and the only mention of him in his fictive world comes in his last novel, *Timequake*, during an aside about humanism:

The German philosopher Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, who had syphilis, said that only a person of deep faith could afford the luxury of religious skepticism. Humanists, by and large educated, comfortably middle-class persons with rewarding lives like mine, find rapture enough in secular knowledge and hope. Most people can’t (84).

Despite both men adhering to what can broadly be characterized as secular humanism (though this is a somewhat controversial, albeit defensible, claim in regards to Nietzsche), the fact that Vonnegut reduces the whole of Nietzsche’s significance to the idea that he died of syphilis reveals a deliberate ignorance on Vonnegut’s part. This diagnosis itself is the subject to historical speculation: Eva M. Cybulska writes in “Nietzsche: Madness as Literature,” that when the 44-year-old Nietzsche was admitted to an asylum in the city of Jena, he claimed to have been infected with syphilis twice. But Cybulska and others take exception with this self-diagnosis. She writes

The medical profession was only too eager to swallow this most successful of “fish-hooks”. A metaphor instantly solidified. Despite no evidence other than Nietzsche’s disturbed mental state and his own confession, the diagnosis has stuck for more than a hundred years. To use his own expression, “the untruth became a condition of life”. Why would Nietzsche, who most probably died a virgin, have taken upon himself such a “sin”? (510).

Cybulska offers an oedipal explanation for Nietzsche’s claim to be suffering from syphilis, but such a claim generates a caricature too tempting for those who would reject Nietzsche out of hand for reasons religious, political or, in Vonnegut’s case, out of antipathy towards anything seen as contributing to German militarism. One must only look at Vonnegut’s treatment of Wagner for confirmation of this.

In *Bluebeard*, the World War II veteran and writer Paul Slazinger reveals the depth of his hatred for popular author Polly Madison, saying, “This woman is a monster... but her books are marvelous! She’s the new Richard Wagner, one of the most awful people who ever lived” (120). While allowing for Wagner’s artistic prowess, Slazinger is sickened by the ends to which the art is applied. Though it is risky conflating the opinion of the character with that of the author, Vonnegut’s similar dismissal of Nietzsche is revealing, showing that despite Nietzsche’s relative tolerance when compared to Wagner’s deep-seated anti-Semitism, the Nazi appropriation of Nietzsche’s ideas keeps Vonnegut from looking closely at the philosophy. “We are healthy only to the extent that our ideas are humane,” Kilgore Trout, Vonnegut’s fictional alter-ego, asserts in *Breakfast of Champions* (16); whether or not Nietzsche suffered from syphilis,

Vonnegut sees a sickness in the inhumane interpretation of Nietzsche's ideas, as it occurred via a process similar to Trout's innocuous science fiction inspiring the insane Dwayne Hoover's violent rampage.

Despite this obvious reluctance to look closely at Nietzsche's ideas, there is much in common between the two beyond eternal recurrence. As such, a Nietzschean reading will help to shed light on many of Vonnegut's more difficult works, especially *Slaughterhouse-Five*. But why enter into such a project if Vonnegut is not directly influenced by Nietzsche? If Vonnegut's conception of Nietzsche is rooted in the popular image of the German philosopher as a humorless, anti-Semitic proto-Nazi, how much can be revealed by such a reading? Despite Vonnegut's dismissal of Nietzsche, I would argue that since both Nietzsche and Vonnegut are concerned with the existential challenges that inevitably come with the task of imposing meaning on what seems to be an absurd and arbitrary universe, then it would stand to reason that they would come to similar conclusions, even utilizing similar sources and mechanisms to formulate their solutions.

A telling example can be found in the curious overlap of Billy Pilgrim's happiest moment and Nietzsche's darkest. When Billy Pilgrim commits himself to a mental institution three years after the end of the war, "alarmed by the outside world," the man in the next bed, Eliot Rosewater, a character who appears in several of Vonnegut's novels, is similarly affected by his experiences during and after the war. Rosewater turns Billy Pilgrim on to the science fiction of Kilgore Trout, but he is also a proponent of another novel that outlines the dilemma of the absurd universe that both Vonnegut and Nietzsche need to confront:

Rosewater said an interesting thing to Billy one time about a book that wasn't science fiction. He said that everything there was to know about life was in *The Brothers Karamazov*, by Feodor Dostoevsky. "But that isn't *enough* any more," said Rosewater (127-129).

In Rosewater's view, Dostoevsky's story of the Karamazov family may no longer be enough to make sense out of a potentially meaningless world, but it is an important and early diagnosis of the concern, especially in the occasional nihilism that creeps into the rationalist Ivan Karamazov's worldview. It is not hard to hear Vonnegut in the voice of Ivan in "Rebellion," the fourth chapter of the fifth book of *The Brothers Karamazov*, a section that can be read as informing *Slaughterhouse-Five* in light of Rosewater's assertion. "I could never understand how one can love one's neighbor," Ivan tells his pious brother, Alyosha. "It's just one's neighbours, to my mind, that one can't love, though one might love those at a distance" (219). It is easy to hear Vonnegut in such a pronouncement. While Vonnegut proclaims himself a humanist, such a belief might be hard to square with the parade of human grotesqueries on display in each of his novels, and his famous remark at the start of *Slaughterhouse-Five* that while studying anthropology at the University of Chicago, "[T]hey were teaching that there was absolutely no difference between anybody. They may be teaching that still" (10). This apparent misanthropy is hard to align with his humanist ideals, but it is a result of looking closely at the absurd universe that Ivan, Vonnegut, and Nietzsche see.

Further into "Rebellion," Ivan tells of acts of brutality that the Turkish army is said to have inflicted upon Bulgarian peasants, a massacre of children described in more detail than any of the historical carnage that Vonnegut invokes in his novels, including

the actual Children's Crusade that Vonnegut and the O'Hares read about in the first chapter of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. He then takes issue with the Russian punishment of inflicting beatings with a rod:

Our historical pastime is the direct satisfaction of inflicting pain. There are lines in Nekrassov describing how a peasant lashes a horse on the eyes, "on its meek eyes," everyone must have seen it. It's peculiarly Russian. He describes how a feeble little nag has foundered under too heavy a load and cannot move. The peasant beats it, beats it savagely, beats it at last not knowing what he is doing in the intoxication of cruelty, thrashes it mercilessly over and over again. "However weak you are, you must pull, if you die for it." The nag strains, and then he begins lashing the poor defenseless creature on its weeping, on its "meek eyes." The frantic beast tugs and draws the load, trembling all over, gasping for breath, moving sideways, with a sort of unnatural spasmodic action - it's awful in Nekrassov. But that is only a horse, and God has made horses to be beaten (223).

This act of cruelty, in which the perpetrator gains what Ivan sees as sensual pleasure from beating the victim, in this case, a horse, finds an echo in Billy Pilgrim's experience in the immediate aftermath of the war. Billy and several other American prisoners of war are riding on a coffin-shaped green wagon that they have found outside of Dresden, pulled by two horses (Vonnegut 248). As they go searching for souvenirs in the wrecked landscape to which the Russian Army is racing ever closer, Billy finds himself happier than he has ever been. Indeed, if he were able to see time as the Tralfamadorians do, able to choose to

ignore sad times and only concentrate on the best ones, “he might have chosen as his happiest moment his sundrenched snooze in the back of the wagon” (249). However, the Americans come across a pair of married German doctors who “were noticing what the Americans had not noticed – that the horses’ mouths were bleeding, gnashed by the bits, that the horses’ hooves were broken, so that every step meant agony, that the horses were insane with thirst” (251). Regardless of whether the pain of the horses is the result of cruelty that the fatalistic Ivan is learning to accept or Billy Pilgrim’s American carelessness, the result is the same. It should be too much for Billy Pilgrim and his own “meek eyes.”

Comparing these similar acts of cruelty in *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *The Brothers Karamazov* helps us to understand the historical roots of the kind of fatalism that Vonnegut is confronting in the novel, which we can use to inform our understanding of the meta-fictional process that, as we shall see, he uses to counteract that quietism. But it becomes even more important when we consider it in relation to a famous anecdote that is an important part of Nietzsche’s legend.

Nietzsche suffered a mental breakdown on the morning of January 3, 1889 in Turin, Italy. The story goes that Nietzsche saw a cab driver lashing his horse and, bursting into tears, Nietzsche threw his arms around the animal and collapsed in a mental breakdown from which he never recovered. This moment marked the end of Nietzsche’s “sane” life, and Eva M. Cybulska notes that the act of shielding a horse from being beaten “appears to be a sheer re-enactment of a scene from *Crime and Punishment* by Dostoyevsky [sic] (a book he read two years previously).” That scene is one of Raskolnikov’s dreams, wherein he and his father pass a cemetery and see a large wagon

parked in front of a tavern. A small horse is hitched to the wagon, and when a seven drunken men attempt to make a quick getaway, they whip the horse and it collapses and dies. They continue to beat the carcass and the young Raskolnikov forces his way through the crowd, throwing himself upon the dead horse and kissing it (511).

Just as Nietzsche and Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov find themselves crying over a beaten horse, Billy Pilgrim weeps as well, even though he "hadn't cried about anything else in the war" (Vonnegut 252). So why does this common root in Dostoevsky matter? What does this reveal, other than the fact that both Vonnegut and Nietzsche read Dostoevsky and that horses are of metaphorical significance to all three? The most direct answer is that in their efforts to use art to understand the world – an obsession that permeates the works of both Vonnegut and Nietzsche – both these men turned to the same author. Later in the chapter, Ivan explains his understanding of his place in the universe:

I am a bug, and I recognize in all humility that I cannot understand why the world is arranged as it is. Men are themselves to blame, I suppose; they were given paradise, they wanted freedom, and stole fire from heaven, though they knew they would become unhappy, so there is no need to pity them. With my pitiful, earthly, Euclidian understanding, all I know is that there is suffering and that there are none guilty; that cause follows effect, simply and directly; that everything flows and finds its level—but that's only Euclidian nonsense, I know that, and I can't consent to live by it! (225).

Here, we have a blueprint for the problem that both Nietzsche and Vonnegut face, a suspicion that we are the “bugs in amber” that the Tralfamadourians say we are (Vonnegut 97), that causality is an illusion, and that attempting to understand the universe from a Euclidian / Socratic perspective is a dead end. Clearly, there is evidence that Dostoevsky’s ideas mattered enough for these men to work them into their own art and lives, and it would stand to reason that this is not the only point where a similar overlap occurs. Indeed, when trying to understand Vonnegut’s body of fiction, which, while evidencing some consistent concerns, can still be seen as contradictory and advocating a dangerous passivity, any points of correlation with Nietzsche, an artist notorious for his own unabashed contradictions, will prove useful.

We see this in the conclusion of Eva Cybulska’s look at Nietzsche’s breakdown. “Life as literature? Madness as literature?” she writes. “Nietzsche often urged that we should fashion our lives in the way artists fashion their work, so that we become ‘the poets of our life.’ And this is precisely what he did” (511). Even if Vonnegut did not follow Nietzsche, he does follow this path, for, as we shall see, the self-referential element of Vonnegut’s fiction, wherein he writes a version of himself into his novels, offers the solutions to some of the more serious criticisms of his work, especially *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Nietzsche believes that life should be lived as if one is creating a piece of art; as we shall see, Vonnegut, in a similar process, creates art the way Nietzsche says life should be lived, by incorporating his own life – or, his “life” – into that art.

When it comes to reading Vonnegut from this Nietzschean perspective, there has been some scholarship, especially in relation to *Slaughterhouse-Five*, though it does not seem to be a common area of inquiry. Robert T. Tally’s *Kurt Vonnegut and the*

American Novel: A Postmodern Iconography makes some compelling connections between the Tralfamadorian view of time and Nietzsche's eternal recurrence, persuasively writing that "*Slaughterhouse-Five* is a book of retrospection, of 'looking back,' not merely in the sense that Kurt Vonnegut looks back on his own wartime experiences and the Sodom-and-Gomorrah-like destruction of Dresden in 1945, but also insofar as looking back, or *returning*, is a fundamental aspect of what Vonnegut sees as human nature, or the human condition in postmodernity." Here, he identifies the structure of the novel echoing the metaphor at the heart of the text, an essential point in understanding *Slaughterhouse-Five*, but his view of Billy Pilgrim grants the character a degree of self-awareness that cannot be fully supported by Vonnegut's characterization. Tally writes that "Billy Pilgrim's salvation, and by extension, our own, comes with the recognition of fate, the love of fate... the affirmation of life that is the eternal return," yet it is not convincing to accept that Billy moves beyond this recognition to *amor fati*, the love of fate that Nietzsche deems essential when seeking affirmation through the challenge of eternal recurrence. "For Vonnegut, the novel must involve a recognition of the fate of its characters, and this involves the sort of *amor fati* that allows one to embrace the eternal return," Tally writes, yet it is not Billy Pilgrim who learns to love his existence (ch. 5).

A more persuasive, though still incomplete, reading of *Slaughterhouse-Five* through a Nietzschean lens is found in Wilson Taylor's "Oscillating to Eternity: Apocalypse and Eden in Vonnegut's Telegraphic Schizophrenic Novel." Unlike Tally, Taylor understands that expecting self-affirmation from Billy Pilgrim is a senseless act. "In the end, *Slaughterhouse-Five* is an attempt to transmute, through literature, the

suffering and absurdity of history,” he writes. “Vonnegut’s anxieties are embodied in the haunted Billy Pilgrim, but Vonnegut’s fate is not that of Pilgrim’s.” This is a significant distinction, for even though, as we shall see, Billy Pilgrim fails from a Nietzschean perspective, the narrator, a version of Vonnegut, is able to cultivate an active and creative version of *amor fati* that works via the author’s acknowledgment of the artifice of his fiction. “The Tralfamadorian *amor fati* represents a resignation to history, including suffering and war, that Vonnegut finds deeply unsettling,” Taylor notes, but Vonnegut transforms it into an affirmation through the very act of writing.

As such, throughout this examination of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, much emphasis will be placed on Nietzsche’s focus on the creation of art as essential for human survival; accordingly, the moments where Vonnegut explicitly comments on the production of and purpose of art in *Slaughterhouse-Five* and other novels, especially *Breakfast of Champions*, *Bluebeard*, *Timequake*, and *Cat’s Cradle* will prove especially important. Furthermore, this paper will focus on three of Vonnegut’s central ideas in the novel, with each section drawing upon Nietzsche’s writing, as well as secondary sources, to explore the Nietzschean ideals and assumption embedded in Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five* that work to combat fatalism, quietism, and nihilism. A careless reading of the text assumes that Vonnegut fails to overcome these forces and is resigned to them, but such a reading is impossible when considering the solutions offered by Nietzsche.

This is not to say that this hopelessness is not a component of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and the first chapter of this paper is devoted to identifying the problem of an absurd and deterministic universe as portrayed in the novel, and translating it into Nietzschean terms. The suffering of both Billy Pilgrim and “Vonnegut,” the narrator, is rooted in their

identical experience of surviving the firebombing of Dresden (though their shared experience of living in America in the twentieth century more than contributes to this feeling of displacement), and the subsequent belief that life is meaningless, the central concern of postwar literature, takes on added resonance when seen not in the context of midcentury existentialism, but in the acknowledgment of suffering that Nietzsche attributes to the pre-Socratic Greeks in *The Birth of Tragedy*. Both Vonnegut and Nietzsche contend with the abyss, suspecting a “Silenian” emptiness, to use Nietzsche’s term, which is characterized by the idea that what is best in life is not to have been born, and, barring that, one should simply wish, like Billy Pilgrim, to die quickly (Nietzsche 8).

Suspecting this terrible truth at the core of modern existence, Vonnegut attempts to answer Eliot Rosewater’s challenge to his psychiatrists at the mental hospital when he says, “I think you guys are going to have to come up with a lot of wonderful *new* lies, or people just aren’t going to want to go on living” (129). To understand this new meaning that Vonnegut devises, we will see how he uses the tragic worldview and the art it engenders to affirm human existences. Billy Pilgrim, embroiled in a rationalistic, science-fiction-inspired quietist dream world, is unable to come to any sort of tragic understanding of existence, but “Vonnegut” as narrator is able to use the Apollonian and Dionysian art impulses to counter this Socratic understanding of reality that Nietzsche finds so reprehensible. While we will use several of Vonnegut’s novels, especially *Breakfast of Champions* and *Bluebeard* to show these anti-rational forces working in his fictive world, the main focus shall be on how these forces contribute to the development of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, especially in considering how the narrator takes on the role of the tragic chorus (as Nietzsche understands it). In this creative act, we shall see that, as

Taylor notes, “In the end, *Slaughterhouse-Five* is an attempt to transmute, through literature, the suffering and absurdity of history. Vonnegut’s anxieties are embodied in the haunted Billy Pilgrim, but Vonnegut’s fate is not that of Pilgrim’s.” This transmutation is possible through Vonnegut’s use of a process that echoes the one advocated by Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy*.

This delineation of the fates of Billy Pilgrim and the narrator is possible partly because of the unsubtle way that Vonnegut inserts a version of himself into the narrative. If Billy Pilgrim is stuck in a hallucination that allows him to escape to Tralfamadore and into his own past, then the criticism of *Slaughterhouse-Five* as quietist holds; there is no affirmation without the narrator’s changing view. As such, the final chapter of this paper will again hinge on the importance of the narrator’s Nietzschean understanding of existence to act as a counterbalance to the mistakes that Billy Pilgrim makes. This final discussion will center on the Nietzsche’s eternal recurrence, the challenge that asks us if we would be able to live our lives over again with no changes an infinite number of times, requiring us to equally affirm all the good and all the evil in our lives. Though Billy Pilgrim is unable to evidence what Nietzsche refers to as *amor fati*, this love of fate, Vonnegut, in the act of writing the novel and creating a text that in itself is a sort of eternal recurrence, is able to affirm a past that includes the unimaginable horror of Dresden. While Billy Pilgrim appears to have many of the messianic qualities that we see in Nietzsche’s Zarathustra, the teacher of eternal recurrence, it is the narrator who most accurately reflects the ideas contained within Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, which shall serve as the primary source that will be used to interpret *Slaughterhouse-Five* in the final chapter of this discussion.

Chapter One: Vonnegut's Silenian Conception

Wayne D. McGinnis is certainly not the first to note the relationship between the notion of time in both Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* and the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, time, as it is revealed to Billy Pilgrim, exists in a fixed state that cannot be changed under any circumstances, while Nietzsche's Zarathustra learns of the eternal recurrence of the same, the idea that time repeats itself in an endless, unvarying loop. As we shall see, the narrator of the novel comes to terms with this crushing circularity in a way similar to that advocated by Nietzsche through Zarathustra, ultimately advocating "renewal through imagination," since, as McGinnis notes, "the location of the circle is in the human mind, which is where Zarathustra's eternal return of the selfsame ultimately occurs" (61-62). Here, human awareness provides the solution to a cosmological problem.

It is worth exploring the relationship between *Slaughterhouse-Five* and the eternal recurrence, but it is necessary to first pause on this notion of human awareness of the universe as a cornerstone of the both Vonnegut and Nietzsche's philosophies. Vonnegut, in particular, draws attention to this idea, putting it into the mouth of his most blatantly autobiographical characters: Kilgore Trout, a hack science fiction writer and all-purpose holy fool, and a fictionalized version of Vonnegut himself. In *Breakfast of Champions*, Vonnegut writes himself into the bar of a Holiday Inn where he observes Trout. Vonnegut (or "Vonnegut") says,

I went easy on him, didn't wave, didn't stare. I kept my glasses on. I wrote again on the tabletop, scrawled the symbol for the interrelationship between matter and energy as it was understood in my day:

$$E=Mc^2$$

It was a flawed equation, as far as I was concerned. There should have been an “A” in there somewhere, for *Awareness* – without which the “E” and the “M” and the “c,” which was a mathematical constant, could not exist (247).

Here, Vonnegut undercuts cold and rational science by positing it as a by-product of the mind. He goes a step further in *Timequake*, his last novel, which begins with a cosmic hiccup forcing the previous ten years to recur exactly as they had before, requiring humans to relive those years with no change, save the awareness that these events had already happened. When the “timequake” ends, Kilgore Trout is celebrated as a hero for his efforts to inspire people to begin living their lives again. Several passages of the book are devoted to a celebratory clambake thrown in Trout’s honor, including the final pages of the novel. In this chapter, Trout asks for a volunteer to pick two random stars out of the sky, and for that volunteer to look from one to the other. A fictionalized Vonnegut serves as the volunteer, selecting two “maybe ten feet apart.” Trout notes that it took only an instant for “Vonnegut” to look between them.

“Even if you’d taken an hour,” he said, “something would have passed between where those two heavenly bodies used to be, at, conservatively speaking, a million times the speed of light.”

“What was it?” I said.

“Your awareness,” he said. “That is a new quality in the Universe, which exists only because there are human beings. Physicists must from now on, when pondering the secrets of the Cosmos, factor in not only

energy and matter and time, but something very new and beautiful, which is *human awareness*.”

Pushing this uncharacteristically sentimental notion a bit further, Trout explains that the better word for this substance is *soul* (242-243). It's a comforting premise, much more comforting than we would expect from the notoriously cantankerous Vonnegut, but, if McGinnis is right, that *Slaughterhouse-Five* is a novel where the “human imagination,” inextricably rooted in this awareness, “makes self-renewal possible,” then it is a hard-won victory, especially given that, as we shall see, both Nietzsche and Vonnegut view the universe as inherently tragic. Rather than focusing on the quasi-inspirational, human-centered cosmology that these two examples seem to put forth, understanding Vonnegut's novels – particularly *Slaughterhouse-Five* - from a Nietzschean perspective requires the consideration of human awareness, preoccupied with the horrors of existence, that is a driving force in both Nietzsche and Vonnegut's work. To that end, we must turn to Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*, an early work exploring the necessity of a tragic art in a hostile universe.

In part three of *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche cites the myth of Silenus to characterize the understanding of the universe held by pre-Socratic Greeks:

There is an ancient story that King Midas hunted in the forest a long time for the wise *Silenus*, the companion of Dionysus, without capturing him.

When Silenus at last fell into his hands, the king asked what was the best and most desirable of all things for man. Fixed and immovable, the demigod said not a word; till at last, urged on by the king, he gave a shrill laugh and broke out into these words: ‘Oh wretched ephemeral race,

children of chance and misery, why do ye compel me to tell you what it were most expedient for you not to hear? What is best is beyond your reach forever: not to be born, not to *be*, to be *nothing*. But the second best for you – is quickly to die (8).

In Nietzsche's telling, the unfiltered Dionysian impulse to nothingness and annihilation reveals to the Greeks "the terror and horror of existence." Indeed, if this is the best that life has to offer, then the optimistic awareness of "Vonnegut" and Trout seems naïve at best. Vonnegut, of course, is aware of problems with the optimistic view, and he devotes much of his fiction to grappling with this Silenian understanding of existence. As McGinnis writes, Vonnegut is concerned with the idea that "beyond man's interior universe is only the emptiness of space eternal," and that he "deals heavily with survival by the arbitrary imposition of meaning on meaningless reality" (59). The construction and form this reality takes echoes the process outlined in *The Birth of Tragedy*.

Before dealing with the method by which both Vonnegut and Nietzsche impose meaning on Silenian reality, we must first see that this tragic reality is indeed present in *Slaughterhouse-Five* and Vonnegut's other fiction. In Chapter Five, Billy Pilgrim checks himself into a mental hospital to deal with a crisis rooted in "find[ing] life meaningless, partly because of what [he] had seen in the war" (128). While surviving the firebombing of Dresden, a human-created disaster, is certainly at the core of his malaise, Vonnegut uses abysses throughout the novel to imply the existence of an infinitely massive and indifferent natural universe as well. When Billy's involuntary time-traveling drops him into his experience as a terrified child staring into the void of the Grand Canyon during a family vacation, he is neither awestruck like his mother, nor underwhelmed like his

father. Rather, “Billy hated the canyon. He was sure that he was going to fall in. His mother touched him, and he wet his pants.” In an existentialist joke, Vonnegut then has a French tourist (who might as well be named Sartre) ask if anyone commits suicide by jumping into this void. “About three folks a year,” answers the park ranger. Directly after viewing this abyss, Billy jumps to a later moment on his family vacation in the West, a tour through the near-complete darkness of Carlsbad Caverns, where Billy “was praying to God to get him out of there before the ceiling fell in” (113). Even as an adult mired in suburban discontent, Billy’s Coupe de Ville sports a bumper sticker that says “Visit Ausable Chasm,” another natural wonder notable as much for its emptiness as for what it contains (72). Throughout the novel, Billy peers into physical abysses, inciting the sublime terror of Silenian truth that is only reinforced by his experience of human atrocity.

These physical abysses echo the fabric of existence, as it is understood by Nietzsche and Vonnegut. Philip J. Kain, noting that “Nietzsche’s belief in the horror of existence is largely, if not completely, overlooked by most scholars,” concludes that Nietzsche views the universe as “alien.” Rather than finding ourselves in a cosmos designed for life or able to be perfected through human action to make it a place where we can feel “at home,” it is “not designed for human beings at all, nor were they designed for it. We just do not fit. We do not belong. *And we never will*” (50). This is a belief that resonates in Vonnegut’s fiction as well, and Kathryn Hume attempts to characterize it in “Vonnegut’s Melancholy.” According to Hume, Vonnegut’s “fictive worlds” are built on the following presuppositions: “the random nature of the world and life in it; people’s helplessness and lack of control; and each individual’s isolation and inability to

collaborate fruitfully in larger social organizations.” Indeed, Vonnegut’s major characters are surrounded by a personal abyss, a “chilly space separating them from other people,” and *Slaughterhouse-Five* demonstrates this personal abyss, even more persuasively than the cosmological one, through Billy Pilgrim’s unrelenting alienation.

Besides the Ausable Chasm sticker and a message to “Support Your Local Police Department,” Billy Pilgrim’s back bumper is adorned with “Impeach Earl Warren” sticker, a gift from his Bircher father-in-law (72). Billy drives his Cadillac, adorned with the slogans of a radical anti-collectivist organization, through Illium’s burned-out “black ghetto” where he ignores a tap on his window from a pedestrian (75). He arrives at his destination, a luncheon held by the Lions Club, a nominally apolitical service organization, where the guest speaker is a Marine major who “was in favor of increased bombings, of bombing North Vietnam back into the Stone Age, if it refused to see reason” (76). Besides holding a politics committed to reactionary individualism and anti-communism, we see Billy’s failure to relate to any other characters in the early going, before even discovering the “truth” of time, that there is no free will, that all events are predestined, and that there is nothing that can be done to change this reality. Truly, both Nietzsche and Vonnegut would subscribe to the notion that the “cosmos is horrible, terrifying, and we will never surmount this fact. It is a place where human beings suffer for no reason at all. It is best never to have been born” (Kain 50).

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche is quick to point out that the ancient Greeks acknowledged this tragic world without hesitation. Indeed, he sees in their theology an acceptance of Silenian reality, writing,

He who approaches these Olympians with another religion in his heart, seeking among them for moral elevation, even for sanctity, for disincarnate spirituality, for charity and benevolence, will soon be forced to turn his back on them, discouraged and disappointed. For there is nothing here that suggests asceticism, spirituality, or duty. We hear nothing but the accents of an exuberant, triumphant life, in which all things, whether good or bad are deified (8).

We first see this “deification” in *Slaughterhouse-Five* in Vonnegut’s repeated assertion of “So it goes” for each death in the novel, from the massacre of lice and bacteria in a delousing station (107) to the incineration of everyone in Dresden (226-227). Indeed, Vonnegut reveals his understanding of tragic reality in the massacres – fictional and historical - that occur and recur in all of his fiction. Charles Berryman asks, “Is there a novelist more concerned with visions of destruction and mortality?” (99).

No there is not, and massacres real and imagined form the backbone many of his novels. Vonnegut is not above creating a science-fiction-inspired butchery and apocalypse, as in the cases of *The Sirens of Titan*, where Winston Niles Rumfoord stages an alien invasion of Earth from an ill-equipped Martian army in a plot to guarantee that the people of Earth, guilt-stricken over their brutal and easy victory, would swear off war forever; and in *Cat’s Cradle*, where the entire world is engulfed by the deadly substance ice-nine. The abyss of historical massacre also reminds Vonnegut’s characters of the tragic nature of reality, for if one was never born at all, then the horrors of the bombing of Hiroshima would not be of concern for characters in *Galapagos*, nor would surviving the Armenian genocide have affected Rabo Karabekian’s parents. In the fictional Billy

Pilgrim's survival of Dresden – and the real-life Vonnegut's survival of the same – we see an historical perspective revealing the “random nature of the world and life in it,” as Kathryn Hume says, a world where nothing can be done to prevent these massacres and other terrible events, where the best that one can do is ask, “Why me?”

“Why me?” is a question that appears first in *Slaughterhouse-Five* and, later, in *Breakfast of Champions*, and it is an utterly unreasonable one in Vonnegut's fictive world. “Vy you? Vy anybody?” answers a German guard to an American soldier he hits with the butt of his rifle (116). “That is a very *Earthling* question to ask,” a Tralfamadorian replies when Billy asks the same question, wondering why he has been brought aboard their flying saucer. “Why *you*? Why *us* for that matter? Why *anything*?” (97). This question, unanswerable though it may be when contemplating horrors of every magnitude, is the inevitable result of living in a Silenian world. As he writes in *Breakfast of Champions*, “People were always asking that as they were loaded into ambulances after accidents of various kinds, or arrested for disorderly conduct, or burglarized, or socked in the nose and so on: *Why me?*” (44). Humans demand answers to fill such an abyss, as Vonnegut well knows.

This obsession with the abyss might be surprising when looking at Vonnegut. For an artist whose popular image is, before anything else, so closely associated with being funny (darkly or not), no matter how much we might laugh at his novels, it is wrong to consider Vonnegut as primarily a comedic voice. Quoting Eugen Ionescu, R. B. Gill writes, “Human beings saturated in meaninglessness cannot be anything but grotesque, their sufferings cannot be anything but derisively tragic” (78). If this is the case, then comical details like Billy Pilgrim's physical appearance – “preposterous – six feet and

three inches tall, with a chest and shoulders like a box of kitchen matches,” balding, with a bristly beard, looking like a “filthy flamingo” (41-42) – take on a decidedly darker tone.

But is it tragedy? Well, it is certainly not comedy. Gill writes that Vonnegut is an “heir to the viewpoints of post-war comedy,” and that while some of his works have “moved closer to traditional comedy,” he remains “too faithful to [his] dark heritage to develop a truly comic outlook” (77). Indeed, he goes on to say that “such ‘comedy’ shares a basic worldview with pathos and tragedy; with traditional comedy it shares only laughter, a physiological response to psychological tension” (78). According to Thomas F. Marvin, this kind of humor compels the reader to “confront the pain and suffering that humans inflict on one another” (qtd. in Shields 27), rather than effect the social and personal reconciliation one would expect in a traditional comedy.

Traditional comic endings of this kind are elusive in Vonnegut’s body of work. Kathryn Hume writes, “Vonnegut is too honest to produce false happy endings, and his bleak results challenge readers to consider whether or not happier philosophies are built upon strictly imaginary foundations.” To varying degrees, Vonnegut skewers these comic philosophies and happy endings. For example, the post-modern Bokonon religion of *Cat’s Cradle*, with one of its central tenets being its own un-truth, is conveyed almost entirely through short rhymes set to calypso music. “I wanted all things / to seem to make sense, / So we all could be happy, yes, / Instead of tense. / And I made up lies / So that they all fit nice, / And I made this sad world / A par-a-dise,” goes one calypso, and it forces us to question – though, not necessarily reject, interestingly enough – the worth of these “happier philosophies” (127).

The comic conclusion of *The Sirens of Titan* also represents one of Hume's false happy endings, as Malachi Constant, now elderly, penniless, and freezing to death, is granted, thanks to a hypnotic suggestion by the Tralfamadorian Salo, a dying vision of the best friend that he could not remember (or remember murdering with his bare hands). As Malachi Constant passes out at a bus stop, a vision of a golden flying saucer descends on him, and a robust Stony Stevenson greets him, inviting Malachi to ride with him to paradise. Constant asks what it's like, and Stevenson answers, "Everybody's happy there forever... or as long as the bloody universe holds together." Stony assures Constant that his wife is there waiting for him (325-326). This vision of heaven, while comforting to Constant in his final moments, is fiction, covering up the ultimately meaningless absurdity of Constant's journey across the solar system and back. And while we will delve into the unique tragic workings of *Slaughterhouse-Five* shortly, it is worth noting that Billy Pilgrim's inner calm upon learning about the "true" nature of time is rooted in his fantasy of an impeccably ordered universe delivered to him in trauma-induced visions of the planet Tralfamadore.

Comedic assurance is missing from Vonnegut's fiction, and in the one instance where he explicitly explores the notion of comedic or dramatic mode in his own work, the scene Vonnegut writes is telling. Upon receiving an invitation to speak at the Midland City Arts Festival in *Breakfast of Champions*, Kilgore Trout contemplates the letterhead, featuring comedy and tragedy masks:

"They don't want anything but smilers out there," Trout said to his parakeet. "Unhappy failures need not apply." But his mind wouldn't

leave it alone at that. He got an idea which he found very tangy. “But maybe an unhappy failure is exactly what they *need* to see” (37).

With few exceptions, showing unhappy failures is what Vonnegut does. His work is populated with failures, universal and personal, and his novels deal with the inevitable shortcomings of their characters. At its root, as the narrator “Vonnegut” says in the first chapter of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the book is a “failure, and it had to be,” as it was conceived in the spirit of looking back to understand a massacre (28). Without failure, then the work would be comedic, leaving nothing but dark jokes at the expense of the dead, nihilistic comedy.

But the question remains, just because the work is not comic, does this make the work tragic? Kathryn Hume doesn’t seem to think so. When addressing Vonnegut’s melancholy, she writes that the root of the emotion becomes clear when considering his attitudes toward people. “Basically,” she writes, “he seems unable to believe in them or work up strong emotions over them. Heroism and tragedy are both impossible; those forms demand powerful positive emotions and commitments that are inconceivable in his world of isolation and randomness.” While this is true if we are dealing with Aristotelian idea of tragedy, “isolation and randomness” are precisely the qualities that, to Nietzsche, make tragedy inevitable. For Nietzsche, there is no tragedy without an indifferent cosmos, as we have seen, and individuation, as we shall see shortly. Vonnegut has these in abundance.

But before we look at the natural art forces that, for Nietzsche, generate tragedy, we must first deal with an obvious problem with reading a novel like *Slaughterhouse-Five* through the framework established of *The Birth of Tragedy* for the simple fact that it

is a book. How is it possible to apply this critical framework designed for performative art to a novel?

Ann Rigney holds that in Vonnegut's language of minimalism, understatement, and repetition, there is a provocation. "In this sense, the novel is not a representation at all, but a performance directed toward readers," she writes (21). With simple, caricatured language and description, the success of the novel is in its "performativity (what a text does in the here and now)," and much like theatrical performance, we should "see Vonnegut's work in terms of the sort of cultural work it does in the present" (20). The work that it does in the present, "mixing generic registers is especially prominent in the comic traditions of vaudeville, pantomime, and other popular medleys" to create art that is a novel in binding only, is more of a performance of an author creating a multi-genre piece. This becomes clear as the tragic worldview wins out over these comic traditions, with the war becoming "an insane piece of bad theater" in *Slaughterhouse-Five* (13).

This performative element is clear throughout the novel, as the work had not "been conceived along realist lines, but with music, poetry, and, perhaps most germane of all, cartoons" (18). The music of tragedy, so important to Nietzsche, as it is in "the Dionysian dithyramb man is incited to the greatest exaltation of all his symbolic faculties" (7), is seen early in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Just as Nietzsche imagines crowds excited though the frenzied music of the chorus, the narrator starts in on the never-ending loop of a song with verses that begin and end (and begin again, ad infinitum) with "My name is Yon Yonson." This, of course, follows the narrator's recitation of a dirty limerick (3-4), but comes before the drawings that Vonnegut sprinkles throughout the

novel. *Slaughterhouse-Five* might not be performed in a theater, but it is most certainly replicates the Dionysian dithyramb on the page.

Beyond the use of music and other performative elements, Vonnegut shares with Nietzsche the formal devices of tragedy to deal with Silenian reality. In discussing Vonnegut's *Bluebeard*, David Rampton writes the following:

Once you have come face to face to face with the most horrific truths about humanity's potential for cruelty, accept that you have looked into the heart of something that is quintessentially meaningless. The impact of such a vision will be profound, but to attempt to build a series of conceptual arguments on it or to countenance explanations of it would be like trying to get light from a black hole. At such moments, the storyteller or painter can only fall back on the formal devices that enable him to communicate what he can, and on the fact that such communication is possible (23).

This is the issue we see arising again and again, establishing meaning in an indifferent universe, and we begin to get an answer in the shape of these "formal devices."

Vonnegut is an artist, and in the production of art, we see the beginnings of a solution, one outlined by Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy* in very similar language, albeit inverted. Rather than stare into a black hole, we look at a tragedy like *Oedipus Rex* as if we have stared into the sun: "[W]e turn away blinded, we have dark-colored spots before our eyes as restoratives, so to speak; while reversing the colors, those light-picture phenomena of the Sophoclean hero –in short, the Apollonian of the mask, - are the inevitable consequences of a glance into the secret and terrible things of nature. They are

shining spots intended to heal the eye which dire night has seared” (29). This mechanism of Apollonian and Dionysian forces generating tragic art is Nietzsche’s central idea in *The Birth of Tragedy*, and it is one that Vonnegut employs in his fiction.

As we have seen, both Nietzsche and Vonnegut are attuned to the reality of living and writing in a universe that is not designed for human life, which raises the basic question of how one lives meaningfully in a cosmology of the absurd and the arbitrary. Philip Kain summarizes Nietzsche’s solution: “The knowledge of the horror of existence kills action – which requires distance and illusion. The horror and meaninglessness must be veiled if we are to live and act. What we must do, Nietzsche thinks, is construct a meaning for suffering. Suffering we can handle. Meaningless suffering, suffering for no reason at all, we cannot handle” (51). This quintessential existential move takes a mythic twist in the hands of the Greeks, as Nietzsche sees them. According to Nietzsche, the pre-Socratic Greeks crafted a solution in what he sees as their deep sensitivity to suffering by draping an Apollonian veil over the annihilation of the individual at the heart of Dionysian reality – in short, by crafting tragic art. “Must we not suppose that the highest and, indeed, the truly serious task of art – to release the eye from its gaze into the horrors of night and to deliver the ‘patient’ by the healing balm of appearance from the spasms of the agitations of the will,” writes Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy* (71). If not for interposing tragic art between themselves and the abyss, “How else could this people, so sensitive, so vehement in its desire, so singularly constituted for *suffering*, how could they have endured existence...”(9)? Michael Belshaw writes in “Nietzsche, Culture and the Fiction of the Artist,” that Nietzsche holds “that western culture has sustained itself by conceding to reactive forces”; in response, “the artist is the one who

can still create values” (199). Here, the Greeks begin this culture by portraying the tragic understanding at the heart of it.

In “Nietzsche’s Metaphysics in the *Birth of Tragedy*,” Beatrice Han-Pile contends that in this early work, Nietzsche’s reading of the creation of tragic art as “metaphysics precisely insofar as he saw and offered it as a myth, one of “artistic redemption, both for the will and for us” (374). As such, it is worth understanding these metaphysical mechanisms so that we can see how Vonnegut uses them in his own tragic fiction. According to Nietzsche, “the development of art is bound up with the *Apollonian* and *Dionysian* duality” of “dreams and drunkenness,” respectively (1). The Apollonian impulse is centered on appearance, beauty, and individuation, while the Dionysian “rises from the innermost depths of man, aye, of nature,” destroying that individuation through a sort of “narcotic draught, which we hear of in the songs of all primitive men and people” that causes “the subjective to vanish into complete self-forgetfulness” (4). These “artistic energies, which burst forth from nature herself” (5), become the Greek New Attic Tragedy, “the Apollonian embodiment of Dionysian perceptions and influences” (27). “The combination of these two perspectives allows for Greek tragedy to attain its full fruition in Attic drama,” writes Nathan Devir, “namely in the plays of Aeschylus and Sophocles,” where “life is presented as a mystery” (75-76).

We comprehend this sense of mystery in a world without an answer to Vonnegut’s “Why me?” through the examples that Nietzsche uses to clarify his notion of tragedy. Oedipus, the Apollonian appearance on the stage, is the “light –picture cast on a dark wall” of a tragic, Dionysian reality, where a “noble man, who despite his wisdom, is fated to error and misery” (29). Through his passivity, Oedipus does not actively sin, and

yet he is destroyed in this tragic reality. Conversely, Prometheus actively sins, but his fate is also tragic. New Attic Tragedy reflects the reality of the abyss, that “Whatever exists is alike just and unjust, and in both cases equally justified” (34). The use of these artistic forces to create Attic Tragedy is not simply a Greek process, however. It can be argued that Vonnegut is employing a version of the Apollonian and Dionysian art myth throughout his body of work, including *Slaughterhouse-Five*, effectively creating Nietzschean tragedy.

Throughout Vonnegut’s body of work, we can see the integration of Apollonian and Dionysian forces into his formal fictional devices, perhaps nowhere so clearly as in the paintings of Rabo Karabekian, the discontented abstract artist protagonist of *Bluebeard*. Rabo has the skill to be the greatest representational artist, but a realist portrait is boring, didactic and a mere counterfeit of reality. Faithful representations of reality are the height of strictly Apollonian art, and as Karabekian says, “They are the negation of art! They aren’t just neutral. They are black holes from which no intelligence or skill can ever escape” (126). But Dionysian art with no Apollonian veil is problematic as well. The best of the Abstract Expressionist paintings have the Dionysian power of birth and death within them (84). However, Karabekian’s abstract art cannot last. “[T]hanks to unforeseen chemical reactions between the sizing of my canvases and the acrylic wall-paint and colored tapes I had applied to them, all [the paintings] destroyed themselves,” Karabekian writes (19). To Vonnegut, neither of these art forms is complete on its own; the answer is a combination of the two forces, and we see it in Karabekian’s final work, a massive mural titled “Now It’s the Women’s Turn.” His painting depicts thousands of World War II soldiers, representing all armies and races,

congregating in a field at the end of the war, and while Karabekian has an individualized backstory for each character, they also represent the primal Dionysian forces, as they are both themselves and symbols of more than themselves. “His painting is at once as precise as [the representational art of his mentor] Gregory’s illustrations, and in some important ways as imaginatively playful as an abstract expressionist canvas,” writes Donald E. Morse (299). This confluence of forces in the painting is made comprehensible through the individual figures, using the interplay of the Apollonian and Dionysian to create a piece of art steeped in tragedy, at once understandable and too big to be fully understood. We can see Nietzsche’s artistic energies at work in *Slaughterhouse-Five* as well, but it is complicated by the rationalistic forces at the center of the novel. As such, it is perhaps best to examine the ways that Greek tragic art can be read in other aspects of Vonnegut’s writing.

Another of Vonnegut’s devices that resonates with features of tragedy is his concern with creating a frame for his fiction. Much like the circular construction of the Greek theater that blurs boundaries between chorus, hero, and audience, Vonnegut chooses a circular structure, instead of “framing his story in a linear narrative” to similarly deconstruct boundaries and the traditional expectations of narrative (McGinnis 56). Framing matters to Nietzsche, and “in tragedy, the frame is transfiguring: setting off the actors in their costumes and masks from the surrounding space, it makes ‘the eye insensitive and blind to the impression of reality’” (Shapiro 37). Presenting *Slaughterhouse-Five* through a skewed framework destroys the idea of an orderly universe that is usually presented in fiction, and this circular frame disorients through “associative shifts between different moments,” creating “new connections between

events that are neither chronological nor logical, but affective” (Rigney 15). Indeed, this circular framing, the “haphazard movement[s] of the novel, the purposeful violation of normal chronological sequence... are all purposefully inserted to prevent the reader from emerging from the work with a comfortable sense that moral order has been restored with the ending of the war, or that the factors that precipitated the carnage have been resolved or eradicated” (Matheson 236). This circular frame, wherein the first chapter ends with what we are told are the final words of the book, violates our sense of what literature is typically permitted to do, and “reminds us that terms like ‘beginning’ and ‘end’ have no meaning or importance as far as this novel is concerned” (238). If we are not even permitted those elements, then what meaning *can* we expect from someone who is supposed to be a “trafficker in climaxes and thrills and characterization and wonderful dialogue and suspense and confrontations” (Vonnegut 6), especially an author who admits that his narrative is “so short and jumbled and jangled” (24)? The traditional formal devices are thrown out the window in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and as we shall see, they are replaced with what Nietzsche regards as the central features of tragedy: the use of myth and the Dionysian chorus.

Chapter Two: *Slaughterhouse-Five* and Nietzschean Mythopoesis

Throughout *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche is concerned with the return of myth to tragedy. “Through tragedy myth attains its most vital content, its most expressive form,” he writes, “it rises once more like a wounded hero and its whole excess of strength, together with the philosophic calm of the dying, burns in its eyes with a last powerful gleam” (36). In Nietzsche’s estimation, unlike religion and historiography, myth can reveal truths without having to defend itself as final truth, and this is a stance that suits Vonnegut perfectly. David Rampton writes, “In his earlier work, he often implies that the mysterious, noncognitive dimension of art, that aspect of it that resembles myth, could make its appeal to what he calls ‘the more primitive lobes of our brains, where knowledge counts for nothing’” (17). Through his fiction and in the art contained in that world of fiction, Vonnegut effects a return to valuing the power of myth.

Though myth may be noncognitive, the first device he uses is extremely straightforward, simple intertextual reference. Even if the connections between *Slaughterhouse-Five* and the two myths that Nietzsche returns to as examples again and again throughout *The Birth of Tragedy*, the stories of Oedipus and Prometheus, are accidental, comparisons to these myths generate connections worth exploring. An argument could be made that Billy is an Oedipus figure, as his wife and his mother are caricatured in similar manners – the description of Billy’s mother as a “perfectly nice, standard-issue, brown-haired, white woman with a high school education” can be applied to Valencia with the added qualifier “overweight” – but this has less to do with an intentional comparison than simply being the result of painting in broad strokes (130). A similar connection could be drawn on Billy’s profession as an optometrist and Oedipal

eyes, but the most direct correlation between *Slaughterhouse-Five* and Nietzsche's reading of Oedipus is in what those eyes have witnessed. Nietzsche writes in regard to Oedipus in *The Birth of Tragedy*, "[W]herever by some prophetic and magical power the boundary of the present and future, the inflexible law of individuation and, in general, the intrinsic spell of nature, are broken, an extraordinary counter-naturalness – in this case, incest – must have preceded as a cause." Whoever breaks the boundary of natural understanding into Dionysian wisdom through "unnatural abomination," says Nietzsche, "plunges nature into an abyss of annihilation must also expect to experience the dissolution of nature in himself" (30). Billy Pilgrim certainly is experiencing the "dissolution of nature in himself" in the way that his perception of time no longer proceeds in a natural manner, violating Nietzsche's "boundary of the present and the future" in a way that, as Vonnegut says when initially describing his condition, "Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time.... He has seen his birth and death many times, he says, and pays random visits to all the events in between" (29). The Oedipal "passive sin" of Silenian knowledge for Billy Pilgrim is his survival of the firebombing of Dresden. Billy, locked in the basement meat locker of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, does not see the conflagration, but only hears the sounds of the bombs, described by Vonnegut as the walk of "giants" (226). As with Oedipus, learning the truth of reality destroys his desire to see anything.

These bombs that sound like the walk of titans naturally call to mind Nietzsche's other archetypal tragic myth, Prometheus. In Chapter One, Vonnegut reads of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in his hotel room's Gideon Bible (27). While it is God's fire that destroys these cities, the fire that engulfs Dresden is not divine, but rooted

in the knowledge that man has acquired, a knowledge that reinforces and makes possible tragic reality. Whether or not these parallels are accidental, it is certain that Vonnegut is using mythic events, language and imagery to lend resonance to *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

Direct parallels to the myths that Nietzsche values are obviously not the only way that we can see Vonnegut insisting on tragic reality in his art. In a very clear way, it can be said that Vonnegut, just as much as Nietzsche, Aeschylus, or Sophocles, is creating his own tragic myth. One way this happens is in *Slaughterhouse-Five*'s opposition to mainstream historiography as the final arbiter of truth, even as it appeals to history.

Vonnegut used David Irving's *The Destruction of Dresden* as source when writing *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and Irving pins the number killed in the firebombing at 135,000. This figure is enshrined in Vonnegut's novel, but recent scholarship puts the actual number somewhere between 25,000 and 40,000, notes Ann Rigney (10-11). But despite Vonnegut's inflated figure, Rigney makes the important point that "[t]he fact that the novel can continue to do cultural work even at a point when its factual basis has been discredited is testimony in part to the fact that its value is not restricted to the information it offers" (23). Even without a basis in unerring "fact," Vonnegut's novel still retains its power. To Nietzsche, this is the advantage of myth: unlike religion or any other system that requires the appearance of truth to justify its existence, myth, in its best form, does not require historical truth to matter. Rather, Nietzsche believes that though it is "the fate of every myth to creep by degrees into the narrow limits of some alleged historical reality, and to be treated by some later generation as a unique fact with historical claim," this movement towards "juvenile history" is to be resisted (36).

While Vonnegut's resistance to turning the firebombing of Dresden into "juvenile history" may be accidental, we see him resisting this process in more intentional ways, especially in the diegetic readings of the first chapter. When visiting his war buddy Bernard O'Hare to remember their experiences, hoping to shake loose some memories that will make writing his "famous Dresden book" easier, the fictional Vonnegut is confronted by O'Hare's wife. She suspects that the book that Vonnegut is writing will make war look glamorous, as if it were fought by "men instead of babies." Vonnegut swears that he will do no such thing, offering to call the novel *The Children's Crusade*. Her fears assuaged, the three of them decide to look up the real Children's Crusade. Rather than go to, say, *The Encyclopedia Britannica* for a general summary of the crusade, Vonnegut is careful to note that the book they select is something more eccentric, *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds*, by Charles Mackay, LL.D. While this real volume is by no means obscure, it does not seem to be the kind of book one would cite for historically accurate information, especially since it was written in 1841, as Vonnegut is also careful to note (18-19). The selection of a text situated well outside of modern academic historical writing and the attendant search for factual truth reinforces that historical "truth" is not a concern when engaged in creating tragic myth.

Indeed, the passage excerpted from the text in the first chapter accomplishes this feat quite effectively, with irony in a flowery cadence that leads to a punch line that Vonnegut himself could have written: "Now what was the grand result of all these struggles? Europe expended millions of her treasures, and the blood of two million of her people, and a handful of quarrelsome knights retained possession of Palestine for about

one hundred years” (20). Definitely not what one would get from a more sober work, but Vonnegut is interested in the sources that help solidify his tragic myth (while, here, echoing his tone), not in academic historiography.

This resistance to traditional, dry, and comforting views of history situates Vonnegut’s novels in a unique space. Kathryn Hume writes, “Whether set in the recent past (World War II and its aftermath, the Vietnam War and its aftermath, Watergate) or the future, most of the novels have a spacey quality that defamiliarizes the historical settings and locates all the actions in Vonnegutland.” In these grotesque and tragic settings, “World War II intertwines with Tralfamadore, and the presence of Kilgore Trout plot summaries in several books serve this distancing function.” This and other “distancing functions” are apparent throughout, as an event that is as coded and static in the American imagination as World War II is transformed into something unrecognizable.

Rather than presenting a sepia-toned discourse of “Greatest Generation” that we have become accustomed to in all representations of Americans in World War II, Vonnegut defamiliarizes the war through a process Christina Jarvis refers to as *Vietnamization*. She writes:

While reconfiguring war narratives generally, *Slaughterhouse-Five* also revisions World War II specifically by linking it explicitly to events in Vietnam. By employing the vehicle of time travel and a fractured narrative that juxtaposes the firebombing of Dresden with reference to Vietnam, the narrator’s story of World War II presents a narrative

primarily about civilian deaths and concentration camps – not heroic assaults and flag raisings. (98-99)

Indeed, *Slaughterhouse-Five* is no *Band of Brothers*, and we see this from the very start. During his visit to O'Hare's house to try to remember the war, Mary O'Hare's major objection to Vonnegut's novel is that it will glamorize war. "You'll pretend you were men instead of babies, and you'll be played by Frank Sinatra and John Wayne or some of those other glamorous, war-loving, dirty old men," she says. "And war will look just wonderful, so we'll have a lot more of them. And they'll be fought by babies like the babies upstairs" (18). O'Hare's concern is that in the process of mythmaking, Vonnegut will bring comforting, comic assumptions and resolutions that will remove any traces of Silenian reality from the story.

The fictional Vonnegut assures her that he will do no such thing, and the author Vonnegut obliges, showing the dangers of romanticizing war with the only character John Wayne could conceivably play, Wild Bob from Cody, Wyoming, the dying colonel who Billy meets at the depot where Allied prisoners of war are being loaded onto trains. Wild Bob (as he always wanted his "boys" to call him), was "a man who lost an entire regiment, about forty-five hundred men – a lot of them children, actually." The dying man imagines himself addressing his troops, telling them "that there were dead Germans all over the battlefield who wished to God that they had never heard of the Four-fifty-first," the kind of speech that one could imagine John Wayne giving to his soldiers in *The Sands of Iwo Jima* or *They Were Expendable* (84-85). Where the traditional World War II narratives would provide assurances that Wild Bob's men did not die in vain,

Vonnegut is creating an alternate myth. Art that does not show a tragic understanding of existence is worthless at best, dangerous at worst.

To that end, he further continues creating an alternate, tragic vision of World War II, one that Nietzsche himself would recognize. Little fuss is made of VE day in *Slaughterhouse-Five* to acknowledge an Allied victory – rather, it is only important that a week later Vonnegut and the other POWs stopped being POWs (7). Vonnegut’s novel shows a world that stays basically the same regardless of who wins the war. Indeed, he portrays many German soldiers as supremely sympathetic, and the two most despicable characters in the book, the torture-obsessed Roland Weary and the sadistic Paul Lazarro, are American like Billy. This tragic portrayal of World War II, which countenances no ideology, only numbers, is seen when Vonnegut includes a long excerpt from David Irving’s *The Destruction of Dresden*, his primary source of information about the bombing, wherein the number of people killed in the firebombing of Dresden, the Doolittle raid on Tokyo, and the destruction of Hiroshima are listed, followed by, as always, a resigned “So it goes” (240). The narrator makes no claim about the necessity of the air campaigns, with despicable uber-macho war historian Professor Rumfoord, a retired Air Force Reserve brigadier general who shares a hospital room with Billy Pilgrim, saying that the bombing of Dresden “*had* to be done,” but conceding that Billy “must have had mixed feelings, there on the ground” (253-254). Defamiliarizing World War II by applying a tragic view works to dispel the comic mythmaking that justifies war as good or necessary, rather than as simply another destructive and meaningless emanation of a hostile universe. “I have told my sons that they are not to work for companies which make massacre machinery, and to express contempt for people who

think we need machinery like that,” Vonnegut writes in the introduction (24-25). To him, there is no need for such machinery, as there is no cause that can justify its use in Vonnegutland.

Is this alternative to the popular American interpretation of World War II more accurate? Not really, as it is all mythmaking at the end of the day, but the creation and sustenance of tragic, not comic, myth is what concerns Vonnegut and Nietzsche. Without this kind of myth, Nietzsche writes, “every culture loses its healthy creative natural power.... It is only myth that frees all the powers of the imagination and of the Apollonian dream from their aimless wanderings” (85). We can see this drift away from tragic myth, as well as Vonnegut’s response to it, by looking closely at *Slaughterhouse-Five*. By looking at the reaction that Billy Pilgrim has when faced with a tragic reality to which he is unaccustomed, we can see a force other than the Dionysian and Apollonian represented in Vonnegut’s fiction.

According to Lawrence Lerner, Vonnegut’s work is an attack on the idea that “man knows his own long-term good, that he seeks to harmonize this with the good of others, that he can judge all issues calmly – in short, that man is rational” (qtd. in Rampton 19). David Rampton expands on this point, writing, “What differentiates Vonnegut from so many writers who have come to the same conclusion is his refusal to accept that this recognition of the blackness at the center of our nature can be translated into social terms” (19). Lerner’s words certainly resonate with Nietzsche who in *The Birth of Tragedy* contends that in the realm of Dionysian truth in which both he and Vonnegut are rooted, myth is the symbolic language of that knowledge, not rationality. And while translating that knowledge into action is impossible for Vonnegut and

Nietzsche, the act of portraying that knowledge matters. To that end, throughout *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche sings the praises of Aeschylus and Sophocles, tragedians who, in his estimation, rejected cosmological answers beyond an acceptance of a tragic worldview, devoid of reason and causality.

As we have touched on briefly with Vonnegut, when dealing with the importance of the tragic view of reality, the question of what is to be done with the comic view naturally arises. Nietzsche is disheartened that Greek theater continued to evolve – or in his opinion, devolve – beyond the Attic tragedies of Aeschylus and Sophocles. The new art form that arose was the Attic Comedy of Euripides, who, to Nietzsche, removed the most important element of tragedy. “To separate this primitive and all-powerful Dionysian element from tragedy, and to construct a new and purified form on the basis of an un-Dionysian art, morality, and conception of the world,” writes Nietzsche, “this is the tendency of Euripides as it is now clearly revealed to us” (41). This new form of drama presents a comforting worldview, one no longer devoted to coping with life in a random universe. Rather, for Nietzsche, this is a comedic and highly rational one that he equates with the thinking of Socrates, “effectively negating the need for tragic art in general,” as “opposed to the mystical and instinctive ‘real wisdom’ of the pre-Socratics” (Devir 65). Furthermore, this Euripidean/Socratic worldview stands against the tragic view in its “naturalistic and inartistic tendency,” with a “supreme law” that reads, “‘To be beautiful, everything must be intelligible,’ as the counterpart to the Socratic identity: ‘Knowledge is virtue’” (43).

Already we can see how Vonnegut’s writing stands as a rebuke to this Socratic view. Vonnegut is the most stylized of authors, avoiding the kind of naturalism that

creates, in Nietzsche's estimation, "wax work cabinets" (22). Besides the overtly fantastical elements in all of his books, even down to the level of simple word choice, there is nothing "naturalistic" in Vonnegut's style. From the conversational exclamations that destroy the illusion of an invisible narrator (the repeated "So it goes" of *Slaughterhouse-Five* is the most famous example, but nearly all of his books feature a similar leitmotif), to the strategic use of an out-of-place, nearly-nonsense adverb like "sniffingly" to describe the movement of the "88 millimeter snout" on the Tiger tank that decimated Roland Weary's gun crew (44), Vonnegut has no desire to present a traditional realist view.

As to whether a piece of art must be intelligible in order to have worth, Vonnegut himself has said that his writing is a protest against explanations, repeating that there is no answer to the question "Why me?" (Todd 39) This protest against intelligibility extends to the structure of the novel itself: as we have seen, eschewing the expected literary elements in *Slaughterhouse-Five* and telling the reader that he will be doing so is not a recipe for crafting a lucid work of fiction. It is a technique that he deploys repeatedly, going so far in *Timequake* as to scuttle the entire plot proper, leaving only glimpses of the story as it was originally conceived, replacing the rest with philosophical and autobiographical musings.

The Socratic idea that all knowledge is intrinsically valuable is perhaps the Euripidean idea against which Vonnegut would chafe most. Examples abound throughout his fictive worlds, and quests for Promethean knowledge inevitably lead to massacre and apocalypse. *Cat's Cradle* begins with the narrator setting out to collect information for a nonfiction book to be called *The Day the World Ended*, a quest that

culminates with the actual end of the world when he puts into motion events that lead to the accidental release of ice-nine. The creation of Dr. Felix Hoenikker, a “pure research man” (49), the substance was developed as a way to freeze mud to make it easier for marines to traverse, with the unfortunate side-effect of permanently freezing all liquid on Earth (47-48). Hoenikker’s idle notion that it would be good to know if this could be done inadvertently destroys almost all life on Earth. Similarly, in *Breakfast of Champions*, Vonnegut works to demonstrate the limits of science to make reality explicable. Wealthy Pontiac dealer Dwayne Hoover goes insane over the course of the novel, and rather than diagnose the insanity as schizophrenia or some other mental illness, Vonnegut simply states that his “incipient insanity was mainly a matter of chemicals, of course” (13). These chemicals are never named, and one gets the impression that Vonnegut could replace them with “demons” or “atoms” without changing the novel much at all. Saying that it is chemicals that make Dwayne see eleven moons in the sky or “a huge duck directing traffic at the intersection of Arsenal Avenue and Old County Road” reveals the illusion that something can be understood by simply naming a cause (39). Causality and the understanding of it is an illusion to Vonnegut and Nietzsche – an intelligible reality is impossible.

Regardless of the stand that Vonnegut seems to take against this anti-tragic movement, it is a view that informs the world in which Vonnegut and Nietzsche write. Nietzsche refers to the world informed by this view as “Alexandrian,” and it is “[o]ur whole modern world.” He continues:

It proposes as its ideal the theoretical man equipped with the greatest forces of knowledge, and laboring in the service of science, whose

archetype and progenitor is Socrates. All our educational methods have originally this ideal in view: every other form of existence must struggle on wearisomely beside it, as something tolerated, but not intended (64-65).

This knowledge and rationality-based stance is one that makes the preservation of myth particularly difficult, as this labor in the field of science promises a “true” knowledge as its reward; other forms continue to exist but are seen to lack validity. But for Nietzsche, there is no need to accept the triumph of Alexandrian culture, for even though there has “never been another art-period in which so-called culture and true art have been so estranged and opposed,” there is a solution: “We can understand why so feeble a culture hates true art; it fears destruction at its hands” (74). If a return to tragic art and the tragic worldview with it combats Alexandrian culture, then we can expect Nietzschean tragic structures that stand in contrast to the art form most clearly associated with the rationalistic world to appear throughout Vonnegut’s novels.

Billy Pilgrim finds himself in a mental institution with another World War II veteran, Eliot Rosewater, a character who appears throughout Vonnegut’s fiction. In this appearance, “he and Billy were dealing with similar crises in similar ways. They had both found life meaningless, partly because of what they had seen in war. Rosewater, for instance, had shot a fourteen-year-old fireman, mistaking him for a German soldier. So it goes. And Billy had seen the greatest massacre in European history, which was the firebombing of Dresden. So it goes” (128). Both Rosewater and Billy know the Silenian truth of living in a hostile universe, and they have no way to cope with the knowledge that it is best have not been born at all. In one of the most telling passages in the book, Rosewater lays bare the resultant dilemma: “Another time, Billy heard Rosewater say to

a psychiatrist, ‘I think you guys are going to have to come up with a lot of wonderful *new* lies, or people just aren’t going to want to go on living’” (129). This is the impulse at the root of Nietzsche and Vonnegut’s mythopoesis. Alberto Cacicedo writes, “What Rosewater calls ‘lies’ are the stories that people tell to make sense of the world around them.” To Nietzsche, this realization of the void at the center of reality presents the opportunity to fill it with Dionysian truth and abandon, via Apollonian imagery; however, in the Alexandrian cultural context of mid-twentieth century America, Nietzsche’s tragic art is, for the moment, quashed. “In the twentieth century,” Cacicedo goes on, “such ‘lies’ have a scientific cast to them simply because ‘science’ has taken over the explanatory role that religions once had” (366). The “lies” of Alexandria take the form of a genre that, like Euripides’ New Attic Comedy, offers a vision of optimism in a knowable universe: science fiction.

Billy Pilgrim and Eliot Rosewater “were trying to reinvent themselves and their universe. Science fiction was a big help” (128). Indeed, science fiction is a mythology that allows one to completely reinvent the universe, especially since the universe it creates has nothing to do with the one that Billy and Rosewater have experienced. Instead, in the rationalistic view of the Socratic man, meaning resides not in myth but in science, as, again, it acts as the “enemy of the tragic view” (Borody 86). Therefore, one would expect any Alexandrian creative impulse to take the form of a genre that renders the universe eminently intelligible.

This might seem like a strange way to think about a genre populated with surreal aliens, time travel, and other fantastical tropes, but the central move of science fiction is one of understanding and overcoming these initially mystifying forces, and doing it

through human awareness and understanding. Literary historian James Gunn writes that “most, if not all science fiction is rooted in the belief that through thinking human beings can indeed save the planet and the species; that through technology a way will be found out of the current ecological dilemma; that progress is not only possible but probable through science” (qtd. in Morse 293). Paradoxically, then, science fiction becomes the most rational and philosophically comforting genre of them all.

It is a genre that Vonnegut found himself lumped into. Of the critical reaction to the publication of *Player Piano* in 1952, he says, “I learned that I was a science fiction writer.... I have been a soreheaded occupant of the file drawer labeled science fiction ever since, and I would like out, particularly since so many serious critics regularly mistake the drawer for a urinal” (qtd. in Simpson 262). It’s easy to see why he would be placed in this category when we consider the B-movie ideas that form what plot is found in his novels, and his fictional avatar Kilgore Trout writes Z-grade yarns that no reputable publisher will touch, the plots of which Vonnegut relays in great detail in every book in which Trout appears. When reading these descriptions of Trout’s novels, it’s easy to imagine that they are meant to be models of moral fiction that Vonnegut aspires to, with their humanist messages and delightfully grotesque imagery. But when they are situated in the context of an Alexandrian society, they take on a decidedly different meaning.

The Gospel from Outer Space is the one Trout story summarized in significant detail in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and on the surface it seems like the most Vonnegutian of concepts: An alien studies Christianity to “understand why Christians found it so easy to be cruel,” which he chalks up to a muddled narrative. To the visitor, the intent of the Gospels is to treat others, especially the “lowest of the low” decently, but the message

that comes across is “[b]efore you kill somebody, make absolutely sure he isn’t well connected” (138). Furthermore, since readers know that Jesus is divine, they think, “Oh boy – they sure picked the wrong guy to lynch this time!” Vonnegut goes on, “And that thought had a brother: ‘There are *right people* to lynch!’” The visitor rectifies this reading by composing a new gospel for the people of Earth, one where Jesus actually was a “nobody.” In this new version, just as Jesus dies, the skies open and the voice of God “told the people that he was adopting the bum as his son, giving him the full powers and privileges of The Son of the Creator of the Universe throughout all eternity.” The message then becomes, “From this moment on, He will punish anybody who torments a bum who has no connections!” (139-140). Vonnegut the narrator notes that Trout’s ideas are good, but this is only true in a Socratic context.

Despite the flippant tone and an easy message to swallow, it is Euripidean through and through, simply another myth that promotes an orderly world. Nietzsche writes that “we must not hide from ourselves what is concealed at the heart of this Socratic culture: Optimism, with its delusions of limitless power” (65). That power, residing in a just and fair Christ whom we can petition (as *we* didn’t do the lynching), is the optimistic vision of Euripides all the way down to the *deus ex machina* and the “audacious principle of ‘poetic justice’” (50). Trout knows that these are the “fantasies of an impossibly hospitable world,” as these are the reassurances of science fiction in an Alexandrian world (Simpson 265).

Vonnegut is lumped into a genre that stands in contrast to his philosophical goal of accepting life in a Silenian universe. Josh Simpson writes that he is “far from being a science fiction writer.” Rather, he is an author “whose works, when read closely,

ultimately warn against the dangerous ideas that exist within science fiction. At the center of his canon resides the notion that science fiction is capable of filling humanity with false realities and empty promises for utopian societies that do not and, perhaps most important, cannot exist” (262). Indeed, he works to undercut these “dangerous ideas” of a rational universe at every turn, “systematically work[ing] at exposing the risk of such hubristic assumptions,” as David Rampton says (23). Indeed, in *Breakfast Champions*, while Vonnegut stubbornly refuses to diagnose Dwayne Hoover’s mental illness other than to say that it is rooted in unidentified chemical interactions, he does note that the Kilgore Trout novel that he reads is essential to his violent breakdown. “Dwayne, like all novice lunatics,” Vonnegut says, “needed some bad ideas, too, so that his craziness could have shape and direction.” Trout’s novel, which informs Dwayne that he is the only creature in the universe with free will – an experiment by the Creator of the Universe – was available to anyone, but “it was mind poison to Dwayne” (14-15).

Similarly, Trout’s brand of “mind poison” appears late in *Slaughterhouse-Five* when the singing of a barbershop quartet reminds Billy of what he saw in the slaughterhouse basement during the firebombing of Dresden. At this, his “mouth filled with the taste of lemonade, and his face became grotesque, as though he really were being stretched out on the torture engine called the *rack*” (220). Instead of acknowledging his trauma and the awareness of tragedy in the universe that it provides, Trout, a guest at the party, supplies one of his “fantasies of an impossibly hospitable world.” “You saw through a *time window*,” ventures Trout. “He suddenly saw the past or the future” (222). Rather than acknowledging the horror at the center of moment, Trout attempts to plaster over the Silenian truth with his science fiction jargon. Billy

disagrees, but he does transform his post-Dresden experience into a science fiction story. “Whenever the truth is unveiled, the artist will always cling with rapt gaze to whatever still remains veiled after the unveiling,” writes Nietzsche, “but the theoretical man gets his enjoyment and satisfaction out of the cast-off veil” (52). Rather than helping Billy to confront the reality that still exists behind the veil, Trout simply names the process of removing the veil.

Besides countering the necessity of science fiction, Vonnegut undercuts the generalized rationalism at the center of Socratic society every chance he gets. The central conceit of *Timequake* is the stuff of classic science fiction, as it concerns the aftermath of a universal catastrophe that wreaks havoc across the whole of existence, but as Vonnegut describes in the novel, there is no scientific explanation. Rather, it’s just a pulled muscle and psychology:

The timequake of 2001 was a cosmic charley horse in the sinews of Destiny. At what was in New York City 2:27 p.m. on February 13th of that year, the Universe suffered a crisis in self-confidence. Should it go on expanding indefinitely? What was the point? (63).

This isn’t science fiction, a thing that can be explained and fixed by intrepid space explorers, it’s an existential conundrum. The Universe suspects the pointlessness of existence, just as Vonnegut and Nietzsche, and shrinks from it, as we all do.

Vonnegut rejects the perfectible world of science fiction with “a resounding *no!* to any such unearthly faith in populating future worlds” (Morse 293). Rather, the world that we have is not capable of being perfected, and any kind of scientific solution to that

imperfection is inevitably rooted in the flaws of its creator. Vonnegut's views echo Nietzsche's pessimism towards the explicable powers of science. Nietzsche writes:

For the periphery of the circle of science has an infinite number of points and while there is no telling yet how the circle could ever be fully surveyed, the noble and gifted man, before he has reached the middle of his life, still inevitably encounters such peripheral limit points and finds himself staring into an impenetrable darkness. He at that moment sees to his horror how in these limits logic coils around itself and finally bites its own tail (54-55).

Vonnegut is one of Nietzsche's "great, universally gifted natures [who] have contrived, with an incredible amount of thought, to make use of the paraphernalia of science itself, in order to point out the limits and the relativity of knowledge generally, and thus definitely to deny the claim of science to universal validity and universal aims." Vonnegut uses the language of science as it is employed in science fiction – "chemicals" and "time slips" and the expanding universe - to point out the limits of science to the optimists who "had believed in the intelligibility and solvability of all the riddles of the universe, and had treated space, time, and causality as totally unconditioned laws of the most universal validity," as Nietzsche says (66). When these theoretical men of Socratic optimism reach this point, it is possible, according to Nietzsche, for "the new form of knowledge [to break] through, tragic knowledge, which in order to be tolerated, needs art as a protection and remedy" (55). Nietzsche repeatedly points to the importance of aesthetic view of life, which Billy Pilgrim tries to achieve in *Slaughterhouse-Five* through creating his Tralfamadorian fiction. But creating tragic art out of life through the Apollonian and

Dionysian forces that Nietzsche so values becomes difficult when the artist is situated in an Alexandrian society. Billy's artistic impulse is confused though the influence of science, science fiction, and the rationality that drives these desires.

The society in which Billy Pilgrim lives is Alexandrian through and through, and as such, he scrambles desperately to make sense of the hostile world. It's a drive shared not just by Pilgrim and Rosewater, who participated in the horrors of World War II, but everyone who feels the deceptive pull of Socratic order. For example, Billy Pilgrim grew up "with a ghastly crucifix on his wall," a by-product of the desire of his mother, a substitute church organist, to find the right denomination. "She never did decide," Vonnegut writes. "She did develop a terrific hankering for a crucifix, though," which she bought in a gift shop during the family's trip west during the Depression. "Like so many Americans, she was trying to construct a life that made sense from things she found in gift shops," he says, and we see the desire for any kind of meaning filtered through the comfort, macabre that it may be, of an orderly universe (48-49). This desire to fill one's existence with the novelties and knick-knacks of rational culture clutters Billy's adult life as well. As he is "rich as Croesus," he owns a beautiful Georgian home; his wife's bedroom has floral wallpaper, a clock radio, an electric blanket, and the "Magic Fingers," a "gentle vibrator which was bolted to the springs of the box mattress." Despite having all the material objects an Alexandrian society would hold valuable, as well as a third of a Tastee-Freeze stand, which sold frozen custard that "gave all the pleasure that ice cream could give, without the stiffness and bitter cold of ice cream," Billy would find himself crying for no apparent reason. In one of the more sadly comic images of the novel, Billy

“turned on the Magic Fingers and jiggled as he wept.” The vibrating bed is no consolation (78-79).

Here, we see the world that worries Nietzsche so when he laments the end of tragedy. But even in this Alexandrian society, there is, according to *The Birth of Tragedy*, a “metaphysical impulse” that “still endeavors to create for itself a form of apotheosis (weakened, no doubt) in the Socratism of science that urges to life: but in its lower stage the same impulse led only to a feverish search, which gradually lost itself in pandemonium of myths and superstitions accumulated from all quarters” (87).

Ultimately, this “feverish search” leads Billy to his chilly rumpus room. There, he is warmed by “the cockles of [his] heart,” which were made “glowing coals” by “Billy’s belief that he was going to comfort so many people with the truth about time” (35). In the process of revealing to the world the truth about the static nature of time, as told to him by the plunger-shaped aliens from Tralfamadore, Billy constructs one of the “brand new lies” that Rosewater said the world needed. In an Alexandrian world, however, that comes in the form of a Euripidean comedy.

The only art available to Billy Pilgrim is unbalanced by its reliance on rational impulse, as the Dionysian and Apollonian balance, according to Nietzsche, has been wrecked by Euripidean tendencies. Nietzsche claims that in the *Bacchae* and subsequent New Attic Comedies, “Dionysius had already been scared from the tragic stage; he had been scared by a demonic power speaking through Euripides. For even Euripides was, in a sense, only a mask” for Socrates. “Thus, we have a new antithesis – the Dionysian and the Socratic; and on that antithesis the art of Greek tragedy was wrecked.” This antithesis is useless for creative purposes, as the exclusion of the primal, non-representative

Dionysian from the process leaves only the Apollonian dream to counter the Socratic impulse, an impossibility to Nietzsche. Without Dionysius, we are left with fantastic dreams of a comforting, orderly, and explanatory universe of science and science fiction. For Billy Pilgrim, this takes the shape of the Tralfamadorian view of time.

Unable to come to terms with a tragic worldview, Billy Pilgrim accepts, in Josh Simpson's words, the "false reality" presented by the Tralfamadorian aliens who Billy imagines have abducted him after his daughter's wedding. On Tralfamadore, a name that, as Lawrence Broer points out, is an anagram for "or fatal dream," Billy "adopts an account of time that assumes a mistaken conception of human knowledge and thereby rejects vital aspects of experience for a dream-like state devoid of temporal roots, significant experience, and meaning. He is calm and untroubled, but isolated from his own experience" (Coleman 690). This new dream is one where a person only seems to be dead, as he "is still very much alive in the past, so it is very silly for people to cry at his funeral." Furthermore, Billy learns

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 Mountain, 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 (33-34).

This is, of course, a very comforting vision. Eliminating time eliminates the need for a tragic conception of the universe. Death and responsibility are eliminated as well,

replaced by a calcified and, to Billy, comforting reality. There is no need to cope with the horrors of existence, since everything is always all right. When the Tralfamadorians share with Billy that the universe will end when a Tralfamadorian pilot presses a button to begin the test of new flying saucer fuel, Billy asks why they will not prevent the end from happening. The Tralfamadorians respond, “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” (149). The Apollonian impulse, untethered from Dionysian understanding, creates a dream of the most Socratic of worlds, where everything is known and therefore beautiful and necessary. “It was all right,” Billy says to Rumfoord of the destruction of Dresden. “*Everything* is all right, and everybody has to do exactly what he does. I learned that on Tralfamadore” (254).

In this viewpoint, life and death are not interconnected, but the same. Trapped behind German lines during the Battle of the Bulge, Billy is not concerned whether he lives or dies. Vonnegut writes, “Billy wanted to quit. He was cold, hungry, embarrassed, incompetent. He could scarcely distinguish between sleep and wakefulness now, on the third day, found no important difference, either, between walking and standing still. He wished everyone would leave him alone” (43). This is the Billy Pilgrim we first meet in the novel, but the Billy of the then-future year of 1976 is not so different. Speaking to a stadium filled with his followers who wish to hear more about the true nature of time, Billy informs them that he will be dead within the hour. When the crowd objects, he says, “If you protest, if you think that death is a terrible thing, then you have not understood a word I’ve said.” He then closes with his standard parting words: “Farewell, hello, farewell, hello” (180-181). While there *seems* to be some sort of change in Billy

over the course of his journey, he is still indifferent towards death. There is no changing or understanding the tragic world, only an appearance of understanding, only the appearance of change.

When combined with the Socratic tendency and divorced from the Dionysian, the Apollonian appearance is wholly illusion. “So extraordinary is the power of the epic-Apollonian representation, that before our very eyes it transforms the most terrible things by the joy in appearance and in redemption through appearance,” writes Nietzsche (42). This is the very process that Billy Pilgrim uses to extend the veil of comprehensibility that an Alexandrian culture extends over tragic reality. It is, of course, only illusion, though an appropriate one for an optometrist who believes that he is “doing nothing less now... than prescribing corrective lenses for Earthling souls” (Vonnegut 36). The Tralfamadorian view changes nothing but perspective, to the point where the wearer can no longer see anything as bad, let alone tragic. As such, Billy’s Tralfamadorian illusion has given him a vision of that “impossibly hospitable world,” one of cold aestheticism and impossible solutions proposed for humanity by this science fiction inspired Euripidean farce.

If Billy’s solution to living in a tragic world is hopelessly compromised by its origin in science fiction, the art of Socratic rationalism, is there an answer proposed to this problem in *Slaughterhouse-Five*? There seems to be, and it is rooted in what seems to be the most Euripidean feature of the novel, Vonnegut’s prologue. In “*Übersehen: Nietzsche and Tragic Vision*,” Gary Shapiro emphasizes the importance of framing for “[v]isions in the theater.” He writes,

[For Nietzsche,] all visions are framed in some way and that for those who want to understand them, that is, or those who want to make the progress in aesthetics promised in the first sentence of *The Birth of Tragedy*, it is necessary to articulate the structure of the frame rather than simply to focus on what might appear to be the immediate content of the vision – whether it is dream, artfully generated theatrical vision, or hallucination (36).

This is an important point when reading *Slaughterhouse-Five* in concert with *The Birth of Tragedy*, especially when considering how carefully Vonnegut bookends the novel with a pair of meta-textual chapters that insert “Vonnegut” into the text as both author and character. On the surface, the opening chapter could be read to as proof that not only are the fictional characters in the novel unable to acknowledge tragic existence due to the influence of Socratic society, but the author, whether fully or partly fictionalized, falls prey as well. The first chapter of *Slaughterhouse-Five* is essentially an essay describing the process of writing the novel, and it has all the trappings of the Euripidean prologue. Nietzsche sees this feature of Euripides’ work as the worst example of his rationalistic tendencies:

Nothing could be more antithetical to the technique of our own stage....

For a single person to appear at the outset of the play telling us who he is, what precedes the action, what has happened so far, even what will happen in the course of the play, would be condemned by a modern playwright as a willful, inexcusable abandonment of the effect of suspense. We know

everything that is going to happen: who cares to wait till it actually does happen? (43).

This is essentially a checklist of what Vonnegut accomplishes in the first chapter. He introduces himself in great detail, and he does indeed tell us what is going to happen, from the death of Edgar Derby to the first and last words of Billy's story. But there does seem to be something else happening here, likely Vonnegut presenting these events out of order to destroy the Socratic notion of causality.

Regardless, there are other similarities between the first chapter and the Euripidean prologue. Nietzsche notes that Euripides placed the prologue "in the mouth of a person who could be trusted; some deity had often as it were to guarantee the particulars of the tragedy to the public, to remove every doubt as to the reality of the myth" (44). While putting these words in the voice of the author seems on the surface to be a move to instill faith in the veracity of these events, the trope of the unreliable narrator is just as old as the narrator, and no reader is naïve enough to take Vonnegut's words as gospel. The first utterance of the novel is "All of this happened, more or less," and in that "more or less" is enough space to fly a Tralfamadorian saucer through (1). While the chapter does seem to share some of the traits that Nietzsche so despises in the Euripidean narrator, something else is at work here, and in our answer is Vonnegut's play to reinstate a tragic worldview. To that end, Vonnegut's first chapter is no prologue; rather, the voice of the author is something altogether different: the return of the tragic chorus.

Beatrice Han-Pile writes that, for Nietzsche, "[S]alvation lies in the artistic *creation*, not in contemplation... both for the will and the individual. In Nietzschean

terms, one must embrace the perspective of the *creator*, not that of the spectator, a point that the *Birth* makes explicitly in its analysis of the chorus” (387-388). The Nietzschean stance of accepting the pain and transforming it, via Apollonian and Dionysian interplay, into art requires us to identify with the creative force of the Dionysian chorus, not with the hero created by that chorus.

In all of his fiction, Vonnegut works to create this identification between the reader and the “Vonnegut” who is telling the story. According to Kathryn Hume, “intimacy with the author makes readers feel personally intimate with the work”; as such, “one core element that makes reading the novels unusual is the relationship established between reader and an authorial voice” in Vonnegut’s writing. Writing as a version of himself, he “crosses over from existence” in that introduction,” and “he keeps that position in *Breakfast of Champions*.” Even when the narrator is not Vonnegut, as in *Slapstick*, *Jailbird*, and *Deadeye Dick*, “an authorial voice is present in the introductions.” In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, this association with the artist is built through his admitted difficulties with the creative process and personal details, reminding the reader through stark contrast that the story contained between the two long intrusions from the author is indeed a story. But even in sections of the book devoted to Billy Pilgrim’s journey, the “chorus” intrudes, as in the moment when Billy listens to the mad ravings of Wild Bob, and in the nightmare the Americans create at the POW camp latrine after the elaborate meal prepared for them by the English prisoners. In the former case, “Vonnegut” comments, “I was there. So was my old war buddy, Bernard V. O’Hare,” (86); in the latter, an American soldier, “excreting everything but his brains” yells that his brains finally went. The narrator states, “That was I. That was me. That was the author of this

book” (160). These two examples – especially the forceful latter one - show how Vonnegut’s use of these interjections has the dual effect of demonstrating that the constructed narrative is fiction, the Apollonian appearance of reality, while simultaneously insisting that these events are rooted in reality, reminding the reader that the forces that have shaped the abyss at the center of the story are inevitably tragic. This is the result of the Dionysian artistic impulse that drives New Attic Tragedy, and we see the twentieth-century version of Nietzsche’s belief that “the scene, together with the action, was fundamentally and originally thought of only as a *vision*, that the only reality is just the chorus, which of itself generates the vision and celebrates it with the entire symbolism of dancing, music, and speech” (27). In Nietzsche’s conception of Greek tragedy, the chorus is assigned the task of “exciting the minds of the audience to such a pitch of Dionysian frenzy, that when the tragic hero appears on the stage, they do not see in him an unshapely man wearing a mask, but they see a visionary figure, born as it were of their own ecstasy” (28). Since we are so closely linked to the chorus of Vonnegut’s narrative voice, *his* lamentations and admissions of failure, building to a fever pitch through repetition and limericks and the ever-repeating “Yon Yonson” song are *our* lamentations and failures and songs; by reading, we are abetting the creative act of Apollonian individuation, in the form of writing Billy Pilgrim’s story. Art cannot exist without an audience, and in this instance, the audience is the author as well.

As the pre-Socratic Greek tragedy closes, Nietzsche says, “[A]t the most essential point this Apollonian illusion is dissolved and annihilated” (80), which Vonnegut accomplishes with the return of the narrator, who again dominates the start of the final chapter in much the same way he was at the center of the first chapter. Here,

Slaughterhouse-Five abruptly shifts from Billy Pilgrim's contented fantasy of life with Montana Wildhack and their child on Tralfamadore to Vonnegut solemnly informing us that, as he types, it has been two days since Robert F. Kennedy has been shot, and a month since the assassination of Martin Luther King. Additionally, he writes, "every day my Government gives me a count of corpses created by military science in Vietnam. So it goes" (268). This shift from the reassuring comic ending of Euripides to tragic reality is the shedding of Apollonian appearance to effect a creative release in Dionysian knowledge, the highest goal of art to Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy*. For the remainder of this final chapter, Vonnegut is only intermittently interested in continuing Billy's story, as he is no longer a potential tragic hero, having been reduced by his commitment to Alexandrian society to living in an Apollonian dream, one with no underlying Dionysian knowledge of tragedy to justify it. "The drama... attains as a whole an effect which transcends all Apollonian artistic efforts," writes Nietzsche (80), in a move that we can see in the final chapter of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, where Vonnegut and O'Hare literally transcend Dresden, flying over it in a Hungarian Airlines flight. Onboard, Vonnegut imagines dropping bombs on the city as he and O'Hare discuss that the world population will reach seven billion by the year 2000. "I suppose they all want their dignity," says Vonnegut, accepting that tragic impossibility (269-270). With this new knowledge, the narrator becomes, as Lawrence Broer points out, the real hero of *Slaughterhouse-Five* (Gallagher 79). Vonnegut – or "Vonnegut" – accepts the metaphysical comfort offered by art he has created in the interplay of Apollonian and Dionysian forces, made possible through his human awareness of the life in a Silenian world. Perhaps in an effort to convey to his creation the nature of tragic reality,

Vonnegut the narrator follows Nietzsche's admission that "[t]ragedy closes with a sound which could never emanate from the realm of Apollonian art" (80), ending Billy Pilgrim's story with the sound that nullifies all rationality and Socratic solutions, the sound that is the only answer to the Alexandrian question, "Why me?": "Poo-tee-weet?" (Vonnegut 275).

Chapter Three: Zarathustra, Billy Pilgrim, and the Eternal Recurrence

One of the more useful aspects of Nietzsche's philosophy when engaged in literary analysis is his Perspectivism. Nietzsche's mandate to accept a variety of possible truths gives permission (as if it is really needed) to read any work in a multitude of ways, each one with at least the possibility of being valid from its – and our - unique perspective. This is not to say that Nietzsche advocates a relativistic free-for-all, as he is clear that some perspectives demand to be seen as more valid than others. With this in mind, we are going to continue our examination of Kurt Vonnegut's fiction from the perspective of the tragic worldview, as established in Chapter One and Two, and in doing so, we shall see how the tragic forces that drive Nietzsche's later work, eternal recurrence and *amor fati*, work in Vonnegut's fiction, particularly *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

As *The Birth of Tragedy*, the focus of the previous two chapters, is a relatively early entry in Nietzsche's oeuvre, it is not surprising that he continued to refine the processes that, as he sees them, govern our ways of responding to existence in a Silenian world. What *is* surprising is how Nietzsche's later thought is just as useful in understanding Vonnegut's fiction as *The Birth of Tragedy*. As we shall see, both Vonnegut and Nietzsche continue their mutual goal of creating meaning in a meaningless reality, one beset by the inexorable forward flow of time. Their solutions to this problem, as we shall see, are remarkably similar, as both tackle the issue of living meaningfully when confronted with what Nietzsche calls the eternal recurrence.

While the roots of eternal recurrence can be found in Nietzsche's early writing, his first full explication of this idea can be found in Book Four of *The Gay Science*, in a

passage entitled “The Heaviest Burden.” In it, he asks the reader to imagine that a demon has “crept into thy loneliest loneliness some day or night,” asking,

This life, as thou livest it at present, and hast lived it, thou must live it once more, and also innumerable times; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and every sigh, and all the unspeakably small and great in thy life must come to thee again, and all in the same series and sequence - and similarly this spider and this moonlight among the trees, and similarly this moment, and I myself. The eternal sand-glass of existence will ever be turned once more, and thou with it, thou speck of dust! (171-172)

An infinite repetition of every single moment of one’s life, and knowledge that this process will never end: this surely is a recipe for nihilism. Philip Kain tells us that eternal recurrence “shows us the horrors of existence. No matter what you say about your life, no matter how happy you claim to have been, no matter how bright a face you put on it, the threat of eternal recurrence brings out the basic horror in every life” (56). Imagine every failure, every death, every loss in our lives, repeated ad infinitum, without the opportunity to change anything. This is the thought exercise that Nietzsche presents here.

In light of this, what’s the purpose of living? This is the justifiable first reaction that many would have in the face of such news, one that Nietzsche says will be accompanied by throwing ourselves to the ground while wailing and gnashing teeth, but there is a second possible reaction in this scenario. “Or hast thou once experienced a tremendous moment in which thou wouldst answer him: ‘Thou art a God, and never did I hear anything so divine!’” Nietzsche responds to the demon. Rather than acting as an

invitation to despair, the eternal recurrence from this perspective is an “eternal sanctioning and sealing” (172). In *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche’s version of an autobiography, he describes this process of accepting eternal recurrence as “the highest formula of affirmation that can possibly be attained” (69). To him, it is “the eternal Yes to all things, ‘the tremendous unbounded Yes and Amen’... ‘Into every abyss I still bear the blessing of my affirmation’... *But that is the concept of Dionysos [sic] once more*” (77). Again, we can see the tragic, primal art impulse of Dionysus at work in Nietzsche’s philosophy, here challenging us to affirm the value of every good and every evil in our lives. For Nietzsche, this love of every aspect of our existence, which he refers to as *amor fati*, is an essential process in combatting nihilism.

We see this process playing out in Kurt Vonnegut’s fiction, as this notion of *amor fati* is evidenced in *Cat’s Cradle*, Vonnegut’s telling of the events that lead up to and follow the release of the apocalyptic ice-nine, a substance that permanently freezes all water on Earth. In “The Function of ‘Oubliette’ in Kurt Vonnegut’s *Cat’s Cradle*,” David Ullrich pays special attention to the narrator’s “life-affirming choice of becoming what ‘each one of us has to be’” after the extinction of almost all human and animal life, an event in which he played a no insignificant part. Ullrich goes on

From the narrator’s (and author’s) perspective such a decision requires remembering actively and vividly all the inane and horrifying events associated with unleashing ice-nine into the world. To chronicle such events, the narrator must reject the impulse to obliterate memory, no matter how painful, and accept his responsibilities as a writer. For Vonnegut, this is a freighted task, since many of the more salient aspects

of the ice-nine disaster... likely have their origins in Vonnegut's experiences during and after the Dresden bombings. This the act of writing rejects the concept of the "spiritual oubliette" – of sequestering unwanted events, persons, and responsibilities within the dark recesses of the mind in hopes of forgetting them (151).

This insistence on facing and accepting all of one's actions in the past, no matter how "inane and horrifying," echoes Nietzsche's call to love all that have we done and all that we will do in our lives. As we shall see, ignoring or attempting to seek revenge on the past is dangerous to both Vonnegut and Nietzsche.

This is not to say that *Cat's Cradle* is the only place in Vonnegut's fictive universe where the ramifications of the eternal recurrence and *amor fati* can be seen. Indeed, the circular time structure of this thought exercise, as well as the search for meaning in a predetermined – though still disorderly and constantly becoming – universe, has much in common with the warped flow of time portrayed in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, though significant problems do arise if we are to understand the novel from a Nietzschean perspective. As we have seen in Chapter Two, the tragic reality as conceived by Nietzsche and the pre-Socratic Greeks informs our understanding of the universes in which Billy Pilgrim and the narrator, "Vonnegut," live, though it is again more complex than it first appears.

Vonnegut denies that Nietzsche is any direct influence on *Slaughterhouse-Five*, but there is a not-too-terribly convoluted path that one can follow from the eternal recurrence to Vonnegut's novel (Buck 160). Wayne D. McGinnis refers to a Vonnegut piece concerning the origins of *Slaughterhouse-Five* in which he writes, "I had lifted a

comment Murchie made about time for a book of my own,” in which the reporter and popular science writer Guy Murchie wonders “whether mortality itself may be a finite illusion, being actually immortality and, even though [human life is] constructed of just a few ‘years,’ that those few years are all the time there really is, so that, in fact, they can never cease” (60). McGinnis makes the connection that this view reflects the eternal recurrence, albeit “without the Nietzschean will to improvement,” as it is expressed throughout Nietzsche’s work, in particular *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, a book that is both his most obscure and his most thorough examination of eternal recurrence (61). As such, reading *Slaughterhouse-Five* with Nietzsche’s story of the messianic Zarathustra’s trials in coming to terms with and spreading the word of eternal recurrence is particularly useful.

There is a definite attraction to reading *Slaughterhouse-Five* in concert with the ideas of eternal recurrence and *amor fati*, as it is, like *Cat’s Cradle*, “an attempt to find a way to meaningfully go on while acknowledging that pain” of experience (Coleman 693). However, where the narrative of *Cat’s Cradle* is a relatively straightforward one, the conceit of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, in which the narrator, ostensibly Vonnegut himself, writes a novel about Billy Pilgrim, a man who has come “unstuck in time” (29) since surviving (as the narrator and real-life Vonnegut did) the firebombing of Dresden, is built to call attention to the process by which humans understand and experience time. Unable to experience it in a linear sequence that follows the past-present-future ordering of human experience, Billy eternally visits moments in his life in an arbitrary fashion. “He has seen his birth and death many times, he says, and pays random visits to all the events,” Vonnegut writes, explaining the eternal, though random, recurrence of all

moments in Billy's life (29). While eternal recurrence as put forth by Nietzsche is, for us, a thought exercise, for the traumatized Pilgrim (whether or not he is "actually" bouncing around in time or simply experiencing his trauma as a breakdown of the past-present-future conception of time) it is his temporal reality.

Despite similarities that invite us to situate *Slaughterhouse-Five* within the discourse of Nietzsche's eternal recurrence and *amor fati*, it is not a straightforward project. Regardless, I will be using common ideas and imagery contained within *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* to understand that while Vonnegut's supposedly "quietist" novel does, as we have seen in the previous two chapters, work as an affirmation of a tragic worldview, this still does not translate into passive acceptance and nihilism. And as we have seen when using *The Birth of Tragedy* in Chapter Two to inform our understanding of Vonnegut's most enduring novel, the success of reading *Slaughterhouse-Five* with an eye towards *Zarathustra* rides on separating the experiences of Billy Pilgrim from those of Vonnegut (or, again, more accurately, "Vonnegut").

Even a cursory comparison of Billy Pilgrim with Zarathustra yields compelling surface similarities, most notably in their status as parodic saviors. While there is little doubt that Nietzsche intends for his reconceptualization of the Persian prophet to spread the message of eternal recurrence, which he considered his most important discovery, there is in *Zarathustra*, as is the case with *Slaughterhouse-Five*, a parodic element to the supposed savior of the story. Indeed, at the very start of "Zarathustra's Prologue," we are told that he is thirty when he leaves his home, like Christ. But rather than beginning any kind of traditional ministry, Zarathustra goes into the mountains for ten years (7), perhaps in an effort to illustrate Nietzsche's perception that Christ died at the wrong time. "Truly,

too early died that Hebrew whom the preachers of slow death honor: and to many it has proved a calamity that he died too early,” says Zarathustra later (64). Thus properly attached to life, Zarathustra descends from the mountain, amazed that anyone could be unaware that God is dead, a message that if we did not know Nietzsche, would be rather surprising coming from the supposed inventor of the Manichean universe (9).

Furthermore, when Nietzsche does arrive at the town to preach the coming of the *Übermensch*, he is neither met by an adoring crowd, nor by bristling Pharisees; rather, he is greeted with a confused and awkward indifference, as the townspeople think that Zarathustra is a circus performer, a tightrope walker (11). When the tightrope walker does perform, he falls and dies next to Zarathustra, who utterly fails in comforting him through the knowledge that there is nothing after death. Rather than liberating him, Zarathustra’s words prompt the dying daredevil to embrace nihilism with his last breath (15). “Truly, Zarathustra has made a fine catch of fish today,” this supposed savior says to himself. “It is not a man he has caught, but a corpse” (16). Truly, Zarathustra begins his ministry as an utter failure.

Billy Pilgrim’s tenure as a Christ-figure is similarly a debacle. He wants to convince the world about the “true” nature of reality, writing a letter to the local newspaper about the plunger-shaped Tralfamadorians and their conception of time as a permanent, unchanging structure that these aliens can scan as humans can look at “a stretch of the Rocky Mountains” (Vonnegut 33-34). Like Zarathustra and his indefatigable belief in the coming *Übermensch*, Billy has an “unflagging belief that he [is] going to comfort so many people with the truth about time” (35). Indeed, in a nod to his occupation as an optometrist, he is “doing nothing less now... than prescribing

corrective lenses for Earthling souls” (36). Instead, he is chewed out by his daughter, who threatens to put him in a home (37). This is the beginning of Billy Pilgrim’s ministry, and though he says he has experienced his death many times, which occurs after he gives a sermon to a baseball stadium full of his adherents (a sort “Sermon on the Mound”) in the future year of 1976, this vision is another symptom of his trauma (180-181). Indeed, as we have seen, his failure to acknowledge any kind of Silenian truth renders him incapable of completing the kind of work that “Vonnegut” or, to come back to the present example, Zarathustra are able to accomplish. According to Walter Brogan, “[W]e are to understand that *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is the rebirth of tragic art and Zarathustra is the prototype of the tragic philosopher” (45). When we finally do see Zarathustra come to understand and subsequently work to spread the message at the center of the novel, it “culminat[es] with an interpretation of eternal recurrence as the tragic insight that Nietzsche refers to in *The Birth of Tragedy*” (46). Zarathustra eventually becomes less a parodic messiah than a successful one; in Billy Pilgrim, we see no such transformation.

Billy’s inability to confront temporal reality in a tragic world makes such a change impossible, and while it might seem unfair to compare the hapless, passive protagonist of *Slaughterhouse-Five* with Nietzsche’s superhuman prophet, their dilemmas are similar (“How can I deal with the crushing march of time in light of past experience?”), as is the imagery that both authors use to hint – sometimes subtly, more often not – towards a solution. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, this imagery most often takes the form of birds and mountains.

Zarathustra imparts metaphorical weight to birds in many of his discussions and parables, for example, lamenting the constant becoming of time, a Dionysian march of destruction and reconstruction that entails his youthful “songbirds of my hopes” being “strangled” (Nietzsche 97). In this process, a longing for “happy omens from the birds” is met with “a monstrous owl across my path, an adverse sign,” with the only thing untouched in this constant becoming is Nietzschean will, through which “there are graves and resurrection” of eternal recurrence. In a broader figurative sense, these birds, flying over mountains and abysses, signal the freedom that both creates and is made possible through this acceptance. Robin Small explains the metaphorical value: Zarathustra’s “way of greatness” involves

Spontaneity, improvisation, an accepting and taking advantage of chance: these are the characteristics of the activity that Nietzsche wants to suggest in evoking images of dancing, sailing and flying. The absence of oppositions and tensions, such as that between peak and abyss, is definitive for this picture. Wisdom is indifferent to such distinctions: “As long as you still experience the stars as something ‘above you’, you lack the eye of knowledge: for this there is no longer ‘above’ and ‘below’.” Similarly, according to Zarathustra, “bird-wisdom speaks thus: Behold, there is no above, no below!” The wisdom of birds is not a theoretical but a practical wisdom, displayed in their ability to move freely throughout space (96).

In Nietzsche’s conception, this freedom of movement destroys the distinction between opposites, permitting an acceptance and affirmation through *amor fati* of all past events,

beautiful and horrific, and it echoes the constant becoming of time that, as we shall see, so troubles Billy Pilgrim. To find meaning in a tragic world, bird knowledge and the motion of flight, to Zarathustra, is crucial. “You are no eagles,” he says to philosophers who deny the necessity of Dionysian knowledge, “thus you have never experienced the happiness of spirit’s terror. And he who is not a bird should not roost over the abysses” (92). This motion of flight over mountains and abysses is essential to Zarathustra and Nietzsche: the wisdom of the body matters. Nietzsche writes of the mountain trip that served as the inspiration for *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* itself in *Ecce Homo*, and describing the hikes that inspired the books he muses, “The *body* is inspired: let us leave the ‘soul’ out of it... I could often have been seen dancing; at that time, I could walk for seven or eight hours in the mountains without a trace of tiredness” (74). *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* itself asserts the power of this vigor, with Zarathustra saying, “Behind your thoughts and feeling, my brother, there is a mighty lord, an unknown sage – his name is self; he dwells in your body, he is your body. There is more reason in your body than in your best wisdom” (32). The distinction between soul and body is false, which is certainly information that that Billy Pilgrim could use.

Reading the use of birds and bird motion to imply an acceptance of the eternal recurrence through affirmation of all experience in *Slaughterhouse-Five* reveals how this wisdom of the body could inform Billy Pilgrim’s view of time, as it does Zarathustra, if he would only pay attention. The narrator plants birds throughout the book for Billy to hear, but he ignores the most important one: himself. Billy’s body is described in grotesque terms over the course of the novel, but in the first description of his body, “a funny-looking youth – tall and weak, and shaped like a bottle of Coca-Cola,” is the image

of a bird (30). This comparison is rendered even more explicit later in the novel when, as a haggard chaplain's assistant in the mismatched remnants of his uniform, trapped behind German lines, he is twice described as a "filthy flamingo" (42). Rather than allow himself to be a metaphorical songbird that, according to Zarathustra, is uniquely suited to overcome nihilism and sing the praises of and accept the metaphor of eternal return (Nietzsche 189), he is built like one of Zarathustra's other birds. While Zarathustra twice mentions the flamingo as a symbol of ostentatious nobility (174, 209), Billy Pilgrim is Zarathustra's ostrich, which "runs faster than the fastest horse" in a single direction, "but even he buries his head heavily into the heavy earth: thus it is with the man who cannot yet fly" (165).

The flightless ostrich, which, like Billy, is extremely limited in its motion, is unable to traverse mountain tops as the flying Zarathustra does without effort. He proclaims, "In the mountains, the shortest way is from peak to peak, but for that one must have long legs." Here, his aphorisms are the peaks, and he says, "Whoever climbs on the highest mountains laughs at all tragic plays and tragic seriousness," revealing the joy with which he is able to confront and accept the tragic view (37). Billy Pilgrim's view of mountains, however, is slightly more obstructed. A Tralfamadorians zoo guide contrasts the alien interpretation of time with Billy's typical human conception:

The guide invited the crowd to imagine that they were looking across a desert at a mountain range on a day that was twinkling bright and clear. They could look at a peak or a bird or a cloud, at a stone right in front of them, or even down into a canyon behind them. But among them was this poor Earthling, and his head was encased in a steel sphere which he could

never take off. There was only one eyehole through which he could look, and welded to that eyehole were six feet of pipe.

Here, Billy Pilgrim has no Zarathustran freedom; rather, he can only see time as if “[h]e was also strapped to a steel lattice which was bolted to a flatcar on rails, and there was no way he could turn his head or touch the pipe. The far end of the pipe rested on a bi-pod which was also bolted to the flatcar. All Billy could see was the dot at the end of the pipe. He didn't know he was on a flatcar, didn't even know there was anything peculiar about his situation.” This highly limited view of time forces Billy to say, “That’s life,” an acceptance with none of the love of fate that is Zarathustra’s affirmation of all time (Vonnegut 145-146). To Zarathustra, “Man’s earth became a cave to me,” (Nietzsche 188); to Billy Pilgrim, he is firmly trapped within this Platonic parable, and, as Small notes, “Anyone who is confined to a single place, like the prisoners in Plato’s cave, will be unable to gain adequate knowledge” (99).

To Billy Pilgrim’s credit, he does attempt to gain this knowledge by conceptualizing time in alternate ways, though none of them meet Nietzsche’s standards of acceptance and love of a constant circular flow of time. While waiting for the Tralfamadorian saucer to abduct him, Billy watches a World War II movie in reverse, processing the backwards journey of damaged American bombers being repaired by German fighters as a peaceful return to innocence (Vonnegut 93-94). There is a certain logic to dealing with past trauma this way, since, if life is painful moving forward, how much worse could backwards be? According to Martin Coleman, Billy repeatedly “rejects vital aspects of experience for a dream-like state devoid of temporal roots,” and this reversal of time indulges this tendency (690). In Coleman’s formulation, Billy

Pilgrim's experience of time can be said to be Apollonian and Alexandrian, logical but dreamlike, and his other attempts at ordering time show a similar process. While on Tralfamadore, Billy claims that he was not missed on Earth because he was taken through a time warp, "so that he could be on Tralfamadore for years, and still be away from Earth for only a microsecond" (Vonnegut 33). His most frequent temporal view, one in which he experiences the events of his life out of order, traveling through the past, present and future in a seemingly random progression, seems to track with some essential elements of the eternal recurrence, especially in the way that Billy cannot change events that have already happened. If this was indeed possible, there would be no need to love one's fate, as the past would be infinitely pliable, but Billy never makes the crucial, though difficult, next step of loving all experience, good and bad. Rather, according to Alberto Cacicedo, Billy's past traumas have "made him into a passive observer of his own existence, a fact that he is spastic in time turns into the novel's central trope." Yet Billy's travels through time do not affirm the value of his past experiences; instead, "Billy's memory makes him feel complicit" (364). There is no artistic redemption for Billy Pilgrim, as there is no creation of a new attitude towards past experience.

This stagnant conception of time is, for Nietzsche, particularly corrosive because it denies what he sees as the central feature of time, the constant becoming of the present, a process of continuous destruction and reconstitution of and in the present moment. While moving backwards and randomly through time, along with stopping the flow altogether, is the most obvious solution to the crushing abyss at the center of temporal perception, is impossible for Nietzsche since, according to Small, "for a true Heraclitean there is only a single continuous flow of becoming, so it is hard to see how any such

pause can occur” (89). Furthermore, without a constant flow of time characterized by change, “any metaphor which fails to convey the process of becoming will be false to our existence of time” (85). Without representation of this constant state of change, there is essentially no true conscious awareness of a past or future for us to accept unconditionally in the affirmation of eternal recurrence, and for Nietzsche, no need for *amor fati*. In contrast, Zarathustra, as we have seen, is more than prepared to accept will and becoming as the only constants, while Billy Pilgrim is concerned only with the rationalistic “*causal* account, which [to Nietzsche] interprets the course of becoming as a succession of momentary states of affairs, connected by the relation of cause to effect” (88). Without a clear causal relationship, Billy is lost; jumping though time, “he is in a constant state of stage fright” (Vonnegut 29). He needs a new understanding of time, and thanks to his rejection of tragic reality again and again, he is never going to find it. The best he can hope for is a shallow approximation of the unconditional acceptance that is so central to Nietzsche, seen most clearly when Valencia, newly married to Billy Pilgrim, asks him about his military service in the post-coital calm of their honeymoon suite. “Was it awful?” she asks, with Billy responding, “Sometimes.” The narrator goes on, “A crazy thought occurred to Billy. The truth of it startled him. It would make a good epitaph for Billy Pilgrim – and for me, too” (155). The narrator draws a tombstone on the next page, and underneath a plump cherub is the inscription “EVERYTHING WAS BEAUTIFUL, AND NOTHING HURT” (156). While the first half of the epitaph succeeds as a Nietzschean acceptance of one’s entire existence, in effect claiming that all occurrences in Billy Pilgrim life, including the nightmare of Dresden, could be in some way loved, accepted and called “beautiful,” the second part implies that this is a life

devoid of pain, an impossibility that would undercut the necessity of *amor fati* in light of the eternal recurrence. We can therefore attribute this second part to Billy's passive acceptance of reality as it is presented to him, though there is one other possibility. "EVERYTHING WAS BEAUTIFUL, AND NOTHING HURT" could be read not as a descriptive understanding of Billy's life, but a proscriptive axiom, one that tells us to accept all the bad that has happened and affirm it by calling it beautiful, saying that it did not hurt. This is Zarathustra's essential move, "To redeem what is past, and to transform every 'It was' into 'Thus would I have it!' – that alone do I call redemption" (Nietzsche 121). While this is certainly a solution for Billy Pilgrim, it is difficult to conceive of him having the will to make such a difficult affirmation; as such, we must come to the conclusion that Vonnegut would permit him to earn no such redemption, just a life of fantasy. This might seem unfair, but as Nietzsche writes in *Ecce Homo*, "The imperative 'become hard,' the deepest certainty *that all creators are hard*, is the actual mark of a Dionysian nature" (81). Vonnegut does indeed display this Dionysian nature.

In considering this epitaph, it is essential to remember that Billy Pilgrim is not the only one who thinks this would make a good summation of his. The narrator, "Vonnegut," agrees. As we have seen, following the Tralfamadorian solution of creating a static view of history that does not allow for a constant becoming of events is Billy Pilgrim's plan, not Vonnegut's (Coleman 695). As we saw in Chapter Two, there is a sharp delineation between Billy Pilgrim's blueprint for understanding the world and the narrator's, and, again, we see "Vonnegut" as the true Nietzschean hero. Though he starts the novel in much the same position as Billy Pilgrim, by the end, the narrator has learned, like Zarathustra, how to affirm the past.

Vonnegut does spend time looking backwards, facing the nihilism that can occur when considering the horror of the past, noting that in writing the book, he has become a pillar of salt (28). However, unlike Billy Pilgrim, this backwards-facing nihilistic stance is not permanent. Rather, Vonnegut knows that looking back is not the only way to view time, and suspects that there is another aspect, and it is one that corresponds with the eternal recurrence as put forth in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Vonnegut has an inkling about the Heraclitean nature of time that Nietzsche values so much. Driving from Cape Cod to Pennsylvania to visit his war buddy Bernard V. O'Hare to get inspiration for his Dresden book, Vonnegut stops to watch the water of the Hudson River, as well as the waterfalls that feed into the Delaware, though, before too long, "it was time to go, always time to go" (15). On the ride back, after crossing the Delaware again, they go to New York World's Fair where he "saw what the past had been like, according to the Ford Motor Car Company and Walt Disney, saw what the future would be like, according to General Motors." It is then that Vonnegut thinks about time: "And I asked myself about the present, how wide it was, how deep it was, how much was mine to keep," he writes (23). Zarathustra similarly discusses this depth of the present at the end of Book IV. After accepting the eternal recurrence and trying to pass word on to the misfits he has gathered in his cave, Zarathustra includes in his final celebratory affirmation of all he has learned repeated references to this aspect of time, saying again and again that "*The world is deep!*" (275), "*and deeper than the day had been aware!*" (276), and, most forcefully, "Joy wants the eternity of *all* things, it *wants deep, deep eternity!*" (278). Here, he is reminding us of the connectedness of all the joys and sorrows of the world, and that to

affirm these in the ever-recurring present, made deep by its endless, river-like flow and repetition, is the sign of the highest humans.

Of course, it takes time for Vonnegut to pass Zarathustra's psychological test of whether he can affirm all his past life by saying that he would be willing to live it over and over again, the true purpose of this eternal recurrence, but he does have a way to go before he can confront this reality. He puts Billy Pilgrim through a similar challenge that, as we have seen, he fails, but the narrator starts off in a similar place as Billy, wishing for tragic reality to simply freeze. The book that he brings with him on the flight back to Dresden is a biography of Louis-Ferdinand Céline, and Vonnegut tells us that "[t]ime obsessed him," before quoting a scene from *Death on the Installment Plan* that parallels Billy Pilgrim's deepest wish: "Céline wants to stop the bustling of a street crowd. He screams on paper, *Make them stop ... don't let them move anymore at all ... There, make them freeze... once and for all! ... So that they won't disappear anymore!*" (27). But where Billy Pilgrim's experience with time is an attempt to get to this point, this is only the beginning of Vonnegut's experiences.

As we have seen in Chapter Two, the narrator Vonnegut yields to Dionysian impulses to make sense of meaningless existence, and there is nothing more Dionysian than the process of time becoming, which, according to John Richardson, requires us to "give up clinging to present conditions, and take delight in destroying which Nietzsche associates with Dionysus" (224). Vonnegut accepts the uncertainty at the center of this meaningless universe, having seen this in his affinity for the phrase "if the accident will," taken from the broken English on a postcard that an East German cab driver sends to O'Hare (2). With this acceptance, Vonnegut takes the stance of Zarathustra, who notes

that the Alexandrian last men “pity my accidents and chances; - but *my* word says: ‘Let chance come to me: it is innocent as a little child’” (Nietzsche 150).

This willingness to affirm the act of becoming, no matter how destructive it appears, paves the way for love of eternal recurrence in the way that unshackles us from seeking revenge on the past, and we can see this affirmation most clearly when Vonnegut turns his sights in the final chapter to his return flight from Dresden. O’Hare shares the following passage from the reference page in the back of the notebook he has been keeping during the trip:

On an average, 324,000 new babies are born into the world every day. During that same day, 10,000 persons, in an average, will have starved to death or died from malnutrition. So it goes. In addition, 123,000 persons will die for other reasons. So it goes. This leaves a net gain of about 191,000 each day in the world. The Population Reference Bureau predicts that the world's total population will double to 7,000,000,000 before the year 2000.

This is the essence of becoming, both destructive and constructive, and Vonnegut simply affirms its tragic reality, saying, “I suppose they will all want dignity” (270-271). This might seem callous, but it demonstrates that this narrator accepts the becoming of time, and this fearlessness permits him to engage in the most daunting challenge Nietzsche can give to us: reevaluating the past so that the “It was” of history becomes “I would have had it no other way, and I will gladly live it again with no changes.”

As we have seen through Zarathustra’s examples, this unshackling, a freedom of movement that permits *amor fati* in light of eternal recurrence, is couched in flight

metaphor. “A complete freedom of movement would open up infinitely many perspectives; and this is what ‘the power and art of flight offers for the knower,’” writes Robin Small, and though there is no discernable bird imagery associated with the narrator’s “present” experience, (except for the bird’s tweet that he writes as the final words of the novel, which, as stated in Chapter Two, is used to affirm the necessity of tragic art), it is significant that this affirmation of becoming via population growth happens while Vonnegut is in the air. Small further notes that Zarathustra’s “bird wisdom” works to “determine its own orientation” and offers ways to express oneself “in free and spontaneous activity, which, in turn, gives rise to infinitely complex and unpredictable forms” (105). In Vonnegut’s case, these forms do not echo Billy Pilgrim’s attempts to fight the tragic truth of time; instead, we again see redemption through the creation of art. After all, the free movement of flight and dance, to Nietzsche, is “spontaneous and improvisatory, the expression of a creative impulse, in a process of sustained intensity and continuity” (101). Again, writing a novel is the expression of a Nietzschean ideal, in this case, *amor fati*.

But before we can demonstrate that the fictionalized Vonnegut, in his capacity as the narrator of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, can use the test of eternal recurrence to affirm all of life’s experiences and be willing to face them, unchanged, for all of eternity, we first have to acknowledge that, as with most things, what is easy in the abstract becomes significantly more difficult in reality. As David Ullrich showed us, the narrator of *Cat’s Cradle* makes the “life-affirming” choice to confront his role in the ice-nine disaster through his writing. However, it cannot be stressed enough that this is a fictional apocalypse, while Dresden really did happen. How then can anyone learn to love an

event that incinerated somewhere between 25,000 and 135,000 actual people? Can Nietzsche's *amor fati* be anything but naïve in world where mechanized warfare is a reality?

Acknowledging the depth of the present that so fascinates Vonnegut, Zarathustra asks the reader, "Did you ever say yes to one joy? O my friends, then you said yes to *all* woe too. All things are entangled, ensnared, enamored, - if ever you wanted one moment to come twice; if ever you said: 'you please me, happiness! Instant! Moment!' then you wanted *everything* to return" (278). This entanglement is the tragic root of eternal recurrence, but can finding meaning in a Silenian universe through the production of tragic art, which Vonnegut accomplishes in his fictive worlds, be extended to a thought exercise that calls for accepting a massacre that will happen endlessly? To a certain extent, he does. In the opening of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, he describes the filmmaker Harrison Starr's incredulity at the fact that Vonnegut is writing an anti-war book, suggesting that Vonnegut might as well write an "anti-glacier" book. "What he meant," Vonnegut writes, "was that there would always be wars, that they were as easy to stop as glaciers. I believe that, too. And even if wars didn't keep coming like glaciers, here would still be plain old death" (4). But again, affirming in the abstract that wars will always occur, is different than mentally permitting Dresden again.

There are several solutions to the dilemma at the center of loving fate, and Beatrice Han-Pile is most convincing when she reminds us that there are no cosmological implications to the eternal recurrence. The usefulness of the idea is not in its descriptive power, as the universe almost certainly does not work this way (and even if it did, we would have no way of knowing this truth). In a sense, Nietzsche's focus on the cyclical

nature of time is a feint. The real focus is on what *thinking* about eternal recurrence does to our present lives. “[W]hat is at stake,” she writes, “is an existential transformation of the self and of our relation to our present (rather than our past)” (245). The firebombing of Dresden has already happening and will have always happened. As such, “in Nietzsche’s writings... the primary temporal focus of such transfiguration [through *amor fati*] is not our relation to our past, [but] our ability to live in the *present*” (234). Love of fate is then explicitly personal, and while Vonnegut might chafe at the solipsism involved in this response to the promise of eternal recurrence, it is perhaps a better solution than any belief system that requires a return of large-scale human incineration, which would justify the “quietism” criticism that dogs *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Han-Pile does admit that her conception of *amor fati* does have its limits, particularly in light of “the most abhorrent events in human history”; indeed, Nietzsche is “aware of the limitations of the human condition,” and *amor fati*’s “redemptive powers may not be infinite, but they are the best we can hope for” (246).

One other solution: Perhaps Vonnegut, as a true tragic artist, is uniquely situated to move from “it was” to “thus I willed.” One does not have to be Zarathustra to know that changing the past is impossible, so we recognize the truth when he says, “That time does not run backward, that is its wrath; ‘That which was’ – that is the name of the stone [the will] cannot roll” (122). The best that the will can do is view the past in a way that constructs a causal relationship with the present, as John Richardson says, “where a will does bring the past into ‘into view’ – where the drive orients its pursuit of its goal by some kind of reference to the past – it treats the past merely as a more removed kind of means as a help in orienting its use of the present” (219). In essence, Richardson is

proposing a realignment of past events to match the story that we tell ourselves in the present. The will is retroactively scripting our lives – precisely what a writer does.

Willing backwards would then permit us to nip the dilemma [of *amor fati*] in the bud by allowing us to retrospectively project our will in the past and to acquire total control over our lives: the sting of ‘it was’ would be removed because what was would ultimately turn out to have been what we willed it to be *even then*. Thus willing backwards would offer us an autonomous form of redemption, a redemption purely based on the power of willing and without any need for *amor fati* (Han-Pile 242).

While this is presented as an impossible option, this is exactly what Vonnegut is able to do as writer. Willing backwards is not superhuman: it is writing, with the author and narrator looking back at abysses and turning them into tragic art, affirming it all. This is not a dodge of *amor fati*, as, again, according to Alberto Cacicedo, Vonnegut “takes an ethically responsible stance that denies the quietism of the Tralfamadorian philosophy” by looking at (and portraying) “‘unpleasant’ moments, not because he revels in them, but because they so powerfully determine who he is and what he does” (360). It is the ultimate acceptance of present reality when faced with the test of eternal recurrence. Instead of simply saying “yes – again,” the author essentially relives a version of the events in the writing. Going back to Beatrice Han-Pile’s “Nietzsche’s Metaphysics in the *Birth of Tragedy*,” she says that the tragic “transmutation of pain into pleasure is not a permanent result, and that the creative process must endlessly be repeated” (388), but the novel is a unique piece of art because it is, in its way, an eternal recurrence, endlessly

repeated in each reading, unchanging, inspiring the reader to say, “Yes, again,” with every rereading a reaffirmation. When considering Nietzsche’s eternal recurrence, Richardson says, “You pursue your projects *as* embedded in a world that eternally returns” (223), but Vonnegut pulls a neat revision: he embeds his world in a project that eternally returns. That is *amor fati*, as even with Dresden, one would have to love it on some level to set it down on the page, an acceptance that transforms every “So it goes” into a “Thus I willed.” Vonnegut does not transform the horror of Dresden into some fictional apocalypse, as he does in *Cat’s Cradle*, except in adding Billy Pilgrim’s Alexandrian, science fiction-obsessed perspective to show the dangers of viewing time in ways that deny the tragic reality so essential to Vonnegut and Nietzsche. By calling attention to the artifice of the narrative by, again, writing “Vonnegut” into the novel, he points us to a novel artistic response to the challenge posed by Nietzsche’s eternal recurrence.

Conclusion

Reading *Slaughterhouse-Five* as a nihilistic, quietist work becomes impossible when looking at it from an explicitly Nietzschean perspective. As we have seen in Chapter One, the work is inherently tragic, as Vonnegut is concerned with how one responds to the Silenian contention that if one has to be born, it is best to die soon. This concern is reflected in the abysses that Billy Pilgrim confronts throughout the novel, which reveal a worldview that is not fatalistic but tragic, accepting the challenge of a meaningless reality. There are no comic assurances in this worldview, and we see Vonnegut responding to this outlook by means of the same mechanisms that Nietzsche identifies in the tragedies of Aeschylus and Sophocles, the dream-like Apollonian individuation, and the terrifying primordial unity of the drunken Dionysian impulse (which is itself a representation of this abyss). In this way, Vonnegut creates a work that adheres to the Nietzschean notion of tragic art put forth in his *Birth of Tragedy*, echoing the importance of the tragic stage in his framing of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, as well as reflecting, intentionally or not, the myths of Oedipus and Prometheus in Billy Pilgrim and the narrator's journeys.

These common processes yield a common end result: both Nietzsche and Vonnegut are concerned with tragic myth, and in Chapter Two we see how Vonnegut goes about the mythopoetic process of writing *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Vonnegut creates this myth by stranding the reader in a defamiliarized world, one where the Allies are not necessarily "the good guys" of World War II, a place where the historiography is distant second in importance when compared with the power of myth. In the world of the novel, Billy Pilgrim attempts the creative act of mythmaking, but due to his unquestioning

acceptance of the rational, Socratic world that offers a knowable reality in place of Dionysian mystery, he is stuck in a world of nonlinear time and the comforting illusion of Tralfamadore. This reality is informed by the most rational of genres, science fiction, and it is easy to read *Slaughterhouse-Five* in such a way that the narrator is similarly spellbound by the Socratic worldview, especially when we look at the similarities between “Vonnegut’s” meta-fictional intrusions into the novel in the first and last chapters and the Euripidean prologue of the New Attic Comedy. However, closer examination reveals that this feature is more like the tragic chorus that wills the world of the story into existence through Apollonian representation in concert with the audience, before the artifice is destroyed in a Dionysian unveiling that is the narrator’s acknowledgment of the constructed nature of the novel.

These meta-fictional elements become particularly important when looking at *Slaughterhouse-Five* in conjunction with Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, his esoteric examination of the eternal recurrence. While there are several key similarities between Zarathustra and Billy Pilgrim, Pilgrim again fails as a model of Nietzschean virtue, since he is unable to truly love his past and affirm its recurrence. As in the previous chapter, the narrator “Vonnegut” is able to show Nietzsche’s *amor fati* in the very fact that he is writing the book. A piece of fiction is an eternal recurrence, and the fact that this novel deals with Vonnegut’s Dresden experience, rather than erasing it from existence, demonstrates what Nietzsche regards as the highest function of eternal recurrence.

Again, this is far from the first reading that connects Nietzsche to *Slaughterhouse-Five*. The Tralfamadorian concept of time, as well as the concern with predestination that

informs many of his other novels, practically demands a discussion of eternal recurrence. However, one thing that is clear from this reading is that *The Birth of Tragedy*, while less thorough and focused than later works like *On the Genealogy of Morals*, can yield interesting results when applied to modes beyond music and theater. While the Apollonian and Dionysian art impulses are firmly established critical tools, especially in regards to music, there are other critical tools within Nietzsche's essay that are just as functional. For example, *The Birth of Tragedy* is a work that stands counter to the mainstream discourse of American optimism, which holds that things will invariably get better with gumption and elbow grease in an "Exceptional" nation, and Vonnegut obsesses more than many authors over the tragic reality that Nietzsche is driving towards: everything fails eventually, and we need to create art to help us to accept this tragic existence.

We see this in *Slaughterhouse-Five* when Billy Pilgrim jumps in time to his mother's bedside as she is dying of pneumonia in a nursing home. She tries to gather enough strength to ask Billy a question:

She swallowed hard, shed some tears. Then she gathered energy from all over her ruined body, even from her toes and fingertips. At last she had accumulated enough to whisper this complete sentence:

"How did I get so old?"

When his mother's body is wheeled out by a pretty nurse, we are reminded that her body as well will fail in horrible and degrading ways, just as the body of a former marathon runner is wheeled down the hallway at the same time (56). In *Breakfast of Champions*, Kilgore Trout is given a chance to meet Kurt Vonnegut, who has again written himself

into his fiction. Vonnegut tells Trout, who looks suspiciously like Vonnegut's dead father, that he is setting him free. Trout responds in Vonnegut's father's voice, "Make me young, make me young, make me young!" (302). This is the root of tragedy, the reality that we all must face, and *The Birth of Tragedy* reminds us that acceptance of a Silenian worldview is necessary (as long as it does not curdle into nihilism), an important counterpoint to the discourse of the knowable, solvable world.

Reading texts using *The Birth of Tragedy* brings into critical play Nietzsche's unique diagnosis of the "modern condition," which he refers to as Alexandrian or Socratic culture. "Now, we must hide from ourselves what is concealed at heart of this Socratic culture: Optimism, with its delusions of limitless power!" Nietzsche writes (65). This optimism, in the form of scientific rationalism, a belief that all problems, even death, can conceivably have a solution, is an idea that must be questioned by all responsible critics. In a world where something as absurd as geoengineering is put forth as a viable solution to the global climate crisis, a solution that reads only slightly less ridiculous than ice-nine or bombing civilians to end war, then this naïve faith in human rationality must be questioned. *The Birth of Tragedy* gives one set of critical tools to do just that.

One of the more important aspects of this discussion is the way that science fiction can be seen, in light of the supposed "rationality" of the Alexandrian man, as a genre steeped in the Socratic. Again, while it ostensibly deals with confronting unknown forces, these forces in science fiction seldom remain unknowable. Vonnegut is right to object to being lumped into this category, especially in light of his refusal to supply the kind of traditionally satisfying explanations for the fantastical elements in his books. As we have seen, the temporary universal recurrence of *Timequake* is waved away as a

cosmological crisis in confidence. An even more frustrating answer for readers expecting conventional conclusions occurs in *The Sirens of Titan* when, after an epic quest across the solar system that promises to reveal the meaning of human existence, Vonnegut informs the reader that the greatest human engineering marvels in history, Stonehenge, the Great Wall of China, Nero's Golden House, the Kremlin, and the Palace of the League of Nations are messages meant to be seen by a stranded Tralfamadorian on Saturn's moon of Titan. Human history has been manipulated by invisible forces to build these structures to keep Salo, the marooned Tralfamadorian, in the loop regarding efforts to send help for his stalled ship. In Tralfamadorian, these structures mean, respectively, "Replacement part being rushed with all possible speed," "Be patient. We haven't forgotten about you," "We are doing the best we can," "You will be on your way before you know it," and "Pack up your things and be ready to leave on short notice" (276-277). All of this is being done in an effort to aid Salo's mission to carry a secret message to the other end of the universe, and all of Winston Niles Rumfoord's complicated scheming has been towards discovering the contents of the message. Salo finally relents and allows him to read it; "Greetings," is all it says (306). By undercutting our Socratic desire for answers, Vonnegut, like Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy*, is forcing us to question the worth of these rationalistic impulses.

Beyond demonstrating the applicability of ideas discussed in *The Birth of Tragedy* to literary criticism besides just the Apollonian and Dionysian, this discussion is also valuable in the use of Nietzsche's philosophy as an alternate explanation for the meta-fictional elements in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Equating the voice of the narrator with the tragic chorus opens up some fascinating critical possibilities, and looking at other

examples where “Vonnegut” plays an integral part in the story could help to make sense of them. Both *Breakfast of Champions* and *Timequake* feature the author as narrator in an even more prominent role than he plays in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and an in-depth examination of the latter through the critical frameworks of *The Birth of Tragedy* and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* might help to make sense of it. Again, *Timequake*, in its original conception, concerns a ten-year recurrence wherein everyone is forced to relive those years exactly as they lived them the first time. Vonnegut informs us, in an echo of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, that that novel was a failure; unlike *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut mostly scraps the novel. In between fragments of the original story, Vonnegut creates a philosophical / autobiographical / fictional tapestry where he and his doppelganger Kilgore Trout, who has inspired the world to accept free will again after the timequake ends, again meet. It is a fascinating, barely comprehensible mess of a book that contains some of Vonnegut’s most powerful writing, as well as pages of solipsism disguised as profundity. Very little critical attention has been paid to *Timequake*, his last novel, and with its central conceit of a literal (though, not eternal) recurrence, a reading informed by Nietzsche looks particularly promising.

This discussion on Nietzsche and *Slaughterhouse-Five* has helped to clarify some of the more problematic aspects of the book, as well as point towards areas of inquiry where a reading of Vonnegut from a Nietzschean stance could be applicable. This is not to say, however, that it is an unproblematic reading. Indeed, there are several areas where this discussion falls short, and these are well-worth mentioning.

Though I would argue for the explanative powers of both *The Birth of Tragedy* and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in the realm of literary criticism, it is naïve not to

acknowledge the problematic nature of these works. So many of the quasi-mystical elements in *The Birth of Tragedy* exist in close proximity to the more practical, less esoteric ideas (like his focus on Alexandrian society), and as such, there is no persuasive way to argue that Nietzsche's approach is anything resembling systematic. While this is neither a fatal nor unexpected flaw – indeed, if one is looking for an unfailingly consistent approach, why bother turning to Nietzsche in the first place? – the wheat sometimes sticks to the chaff. Furthermore, though the work is primarily concerned with the effects of the Dionysian impulse, that drunken primordial oneness, the effects of this art force are never fully explained. Indeed, the further into *The Birth of Tragedy* one reads, the more properties and powers the Dionysian seems to acquire. Nietzsche may very well argue that this exponential expansion is the very point of the Dionysian impulse, but using it to inform the understanding of non-musical art is problematic.

This inconsistency is also at the center of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, the other of Nietzsche's texts that drive this discussion, which, again, should not be unexpected. After all, its subtitle is "A Book for All and None," a promise that Nietzsche more than delivers on. Though the book centers on Zarathustra's quest to understand and accept the implications of eternal recurrence in much the same way that the narrator of *Slaughterhouse-Five* comes to a similar acceptance, the biblical language and intentionally oblique style complicate any effort to apply these ideas. This is generally a danger when using Nietzsche to support any contention, as writing in an aphoristic style as he does lends itself especially well to misreadings. This tendency to misread Nietzsche is compounded when the elements of a subtle narrative, a reliance on parables, and opaque phrasing found in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* are all taken into consideration. I

have been cautious in my use of this text, as it is essential to the argument I am trying to make, but a misreading of *Zarathustra* is, unfortunately, an innate danger in its application.

Other than the ever-present risk of misinterpreting Nietzsche, it is important to acknowledge other, possibly more persuasive, interpretations of *Slaughterhouse-Five* that would undermine the argument at the heart of this discussion. The reading outlined in this paper hinges on a view that does not grant Billy Pilgrim any real measure of control over his actions. Chapter Two is concerned with Billy Pilgrim's rationalism preventing him from creating the constructive tragic myths that the narrator is able to fashion, and he retreats into the Alexandrian dream-world of Tralfamadore. Similarly, in Chapter Three, Billy Pilgrim, unlike the narrator, is unable to accept his past, failing to come to terms with his painful experiences that have contributed to his delusions of nonlinear time and Tralfamadore.

Most in-depth interpretations of *Slaughterhouse-Five* propose that the real hero is the narrator, but there are some problems with this view. As we have seen, Vonnegut gleefully undercuts the expected narrative at every turn, but this reading is hard to square with the fact that the majority of the text is devoted to Billy Pilgrim's experiences. Even in a novel that is an admitted failure, this is a lot of time to spend *with* a failure. Indeed, in this conventional reading, it is hard to argue that Billy Pilgrim can even be considered an existential hero, one who tries to find meaning and transcendence but ultimately fails, as it is hard to say that Billy Pilgrim tries *at all*. In Nietzsche's view, Billy's final paradise on Tralfamadore with Montana Wildhack and their infant son would reflect the English utilitarianism that so disgusts Nietzsche. This philosophy seeks to minimize the

painful experiences that, for Nietzsche, are necessary for existence, especially in an inherently tragic universe.

But what if Billy Pilgrim is not the patsy of the universe that the typical reading would have us believe? His assassination in a Chicago stadium after speaking to his followers is commonly seen as a symptom of his delusion, but he does demonstrate acceptance of eternal recurrence when he says, “It 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” (181-182). There are other instances in the novel that can be read as evidence of some acceptance of eternal recurrence, such as when Rumfoord defends the military necessity of the bombing of Dresden and Billy Pilgrim replies, “Everything is all right, and everybody has to do exactly what he does. I learned that on Tralfamadore,” a statement that can be taken as either quietist or as evidence of Nietzsche’s *amor fati* (254). If nothing else, Billy’s story ends with his idealized life on Tralfamadore, and if this is the “reality” of the book, then perhaps this moment offers Pilgrim a model for affirmation of his existence, perhaps hinting towards a love of fate. When Billy mentions to Montana that he has seen one of her “blue movies” on his last trip through time, her response is free from guilt:

“Yes-“ she said, “and I’ve heard about you in the war, about what a clown you were. And I’ve heard about the high school teacher who was shot. He made a blue movie with a firing squad.” She moved the baby from one breast to the other, because the moment was so structured that she had to do so (265-266).

This example highlights the problem of using the eternal recurrence to understand *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Here, this response looks away from Montana's past experiences, which could be seen as a failure to confront and, on some level, love the past. But at the same time, her unwillingness to explain or excoriate herself shows none of the *ressentiment* that the will points at the unchangeable past, which implies an acceptance of the challenge of eternal recurrence. Vonnegut calls her response particularly Tralfamadorian, but it is also in line with Nietzsche's antipathy towards taking revenge on the past. In future readings of *Slaughterhouse-Five* that examine it from a Nietzschean stance, it will be important to review the relationship between *ressentiment* and the Tralfamadorian perspective. This should help us to clarify some of the more ambiguous symbols in the text, such as Reinhold Niebuhr's Serenity Prayer, which appears in both Billy Pilgrim's office, a decidedly gloomy context, and engraved on a locket around Montana Wildhack's neck, a much more hopeful one.

One other blind spot in this discussion is in the failure to discuss any aspect of Nietzsche's *Übermensch*, the potential next stage in human development that is to humans as humans are to apes. The place this "superman" holds in the popular imagination is disproportionate to the amount of actual ink Nietzsche devotes to this topic. Like the idea of predestination and recurrence that reappears throughout Vonnegut's work, the superman is similarly present in his fiction, albeit in its popular form, which replaces Nietzsche's promise of a sort of evolutionary step beyond humankind with a figure obsessed with unbridled power and physical prowess (Higgins and Solomon xxi). In *Slaughterhouse-Five* alone, the Englishmen in the prisoner of war camp fall into this category. Captured at the beginning of the war, they are at in peak

physical condition, as they “had been lifting weights and chinning themselves for years.” They have washboard abs, muscles “like cannonballs,” and all the food they could want, thanks to a Red Cross clerical error (119-120). But these men share nothing with the sea of Russian prisoners that surrounds their section of the camp, nor do they have any use for the American prisoners when the reality of cohabitation, in the form of the destruction of their tidy latrines, sets in. Later, Billy Pilgrim, recovering from an airplane crash, shares a room with the aristocratic Bertram Copeland Rumfoord, the very picture of the “war-loving, dirty old [man]” that so bothers Mary O’Hare (18). Rumfoord ignores the pitiful, comatose Billy Pilgrim, uninterested in him until he reveals that he survived Dresden, which Rumfoord holds was necessary to the war effort (253). Vonnegut notes that Rumfoord’s significantly younger former go-go dancer wife, as well as the fact that this seventy-year-old man broke his leg skiing, act as a “public demonstration that he was a superman” (235-237).

This pitiless man is a caricature of Nietzsche’s *Übermensch*; so is the similarly named and old-moneyed Winston Niles Rumfoord in *The Sirens of Titan*; and so is the barbaric, yet graceful, titular superman of “Harrison Bergeron,” who, like Zarathustra, preaches and practices liberation from constraining forces, utilizing Zarathustra’s gravity-defying dance to counter the leveling forces in a dystopia of mandatory equality. A further examination of Vonnegut’s understanding and use of this concept, as well as his role in popularizing the caricature of the *Übermensch*, is warranted.

Other than a closer look at Vonnegut’s use and transformation of the *Übermensch*, there is one final potential application of this work. One of the assumptions in the Chapter Three discussion of the eternal recurrence is that even though Vonnegut is

not directly influenced by Nietzsche, his ideas can, in a roundabout way, be traced to Nietzsche. Perhaps it is a mistake to assume that twentieth-century depictions of non-linear time are necessarily informed in some way by Nietzsche, especially in the context of depicting war. For example, Tim O'Brien's Vietnam short stories and novels share many of Vonnegut's concerns and conceits, including, occasionally, a narrator who has the same name as the author, a clear echo of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Furthermore, the torture obsessed Roland Weary spends his time behind the German lines imagining that he is telling "a true war story" to his family, the one that he is currently living (53). This doubling of time, a scripting of reality wherein there is a mythic retelling of events both as they happen and retroactively, is a particular concern of O'Brien's, especially in "How to Tell a True War Story" from *The Things They Carried*. Additionally, *The Things They Carried* is told in the "Tralfamadorian style" of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, with vignettes stacked next to one another in an order that recalls the words of Billy Pilgrim's Tralfamadorian abductors regarding their literature:

[E]ach clump of-symbols is a brief, urgent message - describing a situation, a scene. We Tralfamadorians read them all at once, not one after the other. There isn't any particular relationship between all the messages, except that the author has chosen them carefully, so that, when seen all at once, they produce an image of life that is beautiful and surprising and deep. There is no beginning, no middle, no end, no suspense, no moral, no causes, no effects. What we love in our books are the depths of many marvelous moments seen all at one time (112).

Like *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the stories and vignettes in *The Things They Carried* are arranged nonlinearly, mixing fantasy and fiction into a representation of the confused nature of war to achieve this Tralfamadorian depth. O'Brien is not necessarily influenced by Nietzsche, but they are both dealing with the perils and opportunities of the modernist fractioning of human understanding. Even without a direct line from Nietzsche to O'Brien, engaging in this kind of reading of *The Things They Carried* and, especially, *Going After Cacciato*, with its "real" framing (akin to the tragic chorus discussed in Chapter Two) and Billy Pilgrim-ish fantasy of escape from the war, would help to demonstrate the roots, possibly Socratic, and effects of the representation of time in relation to war. Seeing these characteristics in texts beyond *Slaughterhouse-Five* may be the strongest evidence of the importance of eternal recurrence and *amor fati*.

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