

The Certain Uncertainty of T/truth

Truth is subjective. Whether it's the little "truth" of an individual or the big "Truth" of life, no one's version will be the same as another's. Truth depends entirely on one's own experiences and thoughts, which is what makes it such a variable subject. The main characters of Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five*, Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, and Marie Redonnet's *Rose Mellie Rose* grapple with this concept. But one thing they all share in common is that no matter how fantastic or incredible their "Truth" seems to be to others, they know it's real—no, they make it real for themselves.

In *Slaughterhouse Five*, Vonnegut begins by assuring that "[a]ll this happened, more or less" ("this" being the contents of the novel), and that the novel would begin "like this:/ Listen:/ Billy Pilgrim has become unstuck in time" and that "It ends like this:/ Poo-tee-weet" (1, 28). Shortly before introducing Billy Pilgrim, an unreliable main character (who knows but who doesn't seem to care about his unreliability), Vonnegut presents himself as the constant that the story needs to stay grounded. By revealing the "secret" of the novel, that he himself is the one telling it, he crosses the traditional boundary set between reader and author. He's not an authority, exactly, but someone who has every right to tell the story the way he wants to. And, though he admits that the rest of the story likely didn't happen "more or less," he wants to tell it through the eyes of an unassuming, strangely mundane main character.

So why would he choose someone like Billy? Surely there are better heroes he could've used to make the narrative that much more bombastic, that much more exciting (Rumfoord,

perhaps). But Billy Pilgrim isn't a hero; he isn't even a soldier "all the real soldiers are dead" (203). He was only twenty-one at the time of the war, and was, along with Vonnegut, part of the "Children's Crusade" that was the second World War (19). Because he was so young, and because of what he'd seen during the war, he returns damaged, but damaged in a such a specific way that he seems almost normal. He always seems to be saying "It's alright" or "I'm alright," but who is he trying to convince (58, 60)? He's not living life as he would were it not for the war. He's simply acting, simulating the motions of the day-to-day. He's a successful optometrist because he must be, he gets married and has kids because it's expected of him, he *survives* because there's nothing else for him to do. He makes this pilgrimage through time because he needs to remember everything.

Like the characters from the other novels that will be discussed in this essay, Billy lives in a world apart from other people, but unlike the characters from those other novels, he is not only determined to tell others about his fantastical, Tralfamadorian Truth, he is also sure that it is the best version of the Truth. Billy has seen a lot of death, but he was able to survive the horror somehow. It only makes sense that he'd need some way to cope with that: "when I myself hear that somebody is dead, I simply shrug... 'So it goes'" (34). The Tralfamadorians taught Billy that "the real... can be reproduced an indefinite number of times... it no longer needs to be rational... it no longer needs to be anything but operational" (Baudrillard 2).

And though Vonnegut seems to imply that Billy's version of events might not have happened, he challenges that by describing a Tralfamadorian novel, wherein "each clump of symbols is a brief, urgent message—describing a situation or scene... there isn't any particular relationship between all the messages, except that... they produce an image of life that is beautiful and surprising and deep" (112). In describing this type of novel as if it were a

description of what he was doing, Vonnegut reveals another truth: Billy's story is a Tralfamadorian story. This means that Billy will never really die, a comforting notion to one whose life has been plagued by death since he was young—he seems to welcome the “blue and ivory” hues of a corpse (on his feet, specifically) (188), he “will die, [has] died, and always will die on February thirteenth, 1976”, a Friday, of all days (180).

Billy's Truth isn't something he came up with himself, but it makes sense that he would ascribe to someone else's views. He, being trained as a soldier, prefers to surrender to the lack of agency the Tralfamadorians describe: “he has *always* pressed it, and he always *will*. We *always* let him and we always *will* let him. The moment is *structured* this way” (149). Billy doesn't have to worry about making a decision, his life is, has been, and always will be set out for him. Like war, the great Rube Goldberg machine of events, everything that is supposed to happen will happen—like puzzle pieces falling helplessly into place, unable to stop themselves from defying the pull of gravity or the guidance of fate. There's only the simulation or illusion of free will because “it is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real... of deterring every real process via its operational double” (Baudrillard 2). But even as they fall, we who watch—some in delight, others in morbid fascination, and still others in awe—are unable to look away. War is entrancing, inevitable, needlessly complicated, and serves no real purpose, or “so it goes” (149).

In this way, *Slaughterhouse Five* doesn't present the death of the author like the other two novels. Because this story is partly an autobiography, one that deals with something that had a profound effect on him, Vonnegut can't resist adding the occasional reminder that he is the one writing Billy's story: “That was I,” he says, “That was me. That was the author of this book” (160). In that way, he has bonded his identity to the text, immortalizing his presence in the pages. Vonnegut will never die. According to Barthes, it is “language which speaks, not the author,” but

Vonnegut defies this idea (3). In *Slaughterhouse Five*, the author will never stop speaking as long as his text remains.

Dr. Kinbote from Nabokov's *Pale Fire* is determined to tell the world the Truth as well. Kinbote is an ex-King, an unreliable narrator, and a shameless voyeur, one who watches his neighbor "[f]rom behind a drapery, from behind a box tree, through the golden veil of evening..." (160). Shadows, real and imagined, cloak the words on the page until the end, when everything becomes much clearer. By the end of the novel "the claim to 'decipher' [the] text becomes quite useless" because one of the biggest secrets of the novel is revealed (Barthes 5). Kinbote, echoing Vonnegut's move in *Slaughterhouse Five*, immortalizes himself in the Commentary. The author of the poem, Shade, is superseded by the author of the Commentary, which is a total breach of academia. Though "the Author's empire is still very powerful" (Barthes 3), "for better or worse, it is the commentator who has the last word" (Nabokov 29).

But it would appear that the Commentary is shadowing the poem. The beginning sentences of both the poem and the Commentary describe illusion and death: "I am the shadow of the waxwing slain" because the waxwing mistook the window for something else (1). The window, which is usually an image of truths revealed and clear sight becomes a lie. It presents an "illusion of continued space" by reflecting the sky, and the poor waxwing flies into it (73). But though the waxwing seems to represent Shade, does that make Kinbote his "shadow?" The novel shifts between Kinbote and Shade as to who is the shadow of the other. At one point, Kinbote states that he was [supposed to be] the inspiration behind "Pale Fire"—that it was always supposed to be "his" poem (182). At another, he talks about how much he adored Shade and how he observed him almost religiously (the voyeurism coming into play). At still other times they are almost *too* similar: "And all at once that spark on that key caused a wonderful conflagration

to spread in [Kinbote's] mind" and Shade's "[t]here was a sudden sunburst in my head" (123, 38). Perhaps the fact that Shade was killed instead of Kinbote proves that he was the shadow of Kinbote, for "[i]t is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges persist... no longer those of the Empire" (Kingdom, in Kinbote's case) "but ours" (Baudrillard 1).

Nabokov crafted this dichotomy as intentionally as he chose his characters' names. As in *Rose Mellie Rose*, they are important to the plot. Kinbote's name means "regicide," Shade's name translates to "ombré, almost 'man' in Spanish" (174). There's Disa, named after paradise, the duchess "of Great Payn and Mone" (306). Sybil is named after a prophetess, but rather than revealing truths—or at least revealing truths under the guise of riddle—she keeps things from Kinbote, censors Shade's poem, and prevents Shade from revealing anything. Sybil's maiden name was "Ironde... which comes... from the French for 'swallow'" as in, swallow the truth (171). And finally, Gradus has many names, all having to do with gray (77).

And continuing with this play on shadows and shades, Gradus as a character is masked by gray obscurity. He isn't necessarily a force of evil, he's too blundering and single-minded for that, but he is unstoppable. Perhaps, he is a force of nature or a force of fate. He functions like clockwork with "mere springs and coils" and no passion (152). The only time he is ever passionate is when he learns that his Shadow organization had "bungled their job," meaning that "the clean, honest, orderly course of death had been interfered with in an unclean, dishonest, disorderly manner" (153). Over the course of the Commentary, Kinbote describes Gradus/fate/death's gradual, inevitable, and chaotic encroachment. Gradus was one of the "very polite Extremists from the famous Glass Factory" (120). The name of this factory implies fragility and weakness, but also a sense of foreboding. A factory that creates glass and that is controlled by extremists can only mean trouble. Mirrors are made from glass, and an extremist

could distort the reflection to have it show whatever “truth” they wanted it to (S/shadows do, after all, conceal). But the connection between Gradus and the inevitable mortality of human life is evinced by the last sentence of the Commentary: “somebody, somewhere, will quietly set out... a bigger, more respectable, more competent Gradus” (301). In other words, death is something that even Kinbote can’t escape (though his story will remain forever within the text).

Kinbote’s adventures may have delighted Marie Redonnet’s Mellie. She puts “herself into the text... by her own movement” (Cixous 875). She is determined to see the magic in the world despite others’ attempts to disillusion her. Mellie tells her story in very blank, concise language. She doesn’t rely on flowery words or purple prose, which makes her imagery more startling, more graphic: “The blood is still flowing. It’s bad to lose so much blood” (109). Mellie, who is fresh and young and able to read both the old language and the new, is unaffected by the rot that infests Oât (39). Unlike Rose, who is elderly, she can “still see the rainbow in the middle of the falls” (1). It is Mellie who, “by writing,” puts herself “in a place other than silence” and who defies the people who want to control her (like the truck driver, like Martha) (Cixous 881). She is a subject who breaks “automatism”, one that “no authority can ever subjugate” (Cixous 883).

It is her purity and her willingness to hold onto magic that makes Mellie the most honest character of her novel. The adults lie to themselves. At their age they “undoubtedly [do] not do the same things as [Mellie]” (45). Rose, who becomes the most “youthful” of the adults Mellie describes because she understands the necessity of legends, “doesn’t want to admit” that her faculties are failing (3). The older Mellie dies when “[t]he veil in front of her eyes no longer disappears when she stands near a lamp,” in other words, when she can’t see the world clearly anymore (54). Miss Martha tries to fix Oât, but she can’t. She becomes “disenchanted with

everything, not just the municipal offices” (59). She leaves for the Blue Island, but she can’t “start over” there, because, as she predicted, “double lives always end badly” (60). The photographer once believed that Miss Martha would become the curator of his museum, but after her “sad end”, he becomes “inconsolable” and “lives alone in his dark room” (100). None of these adults can accept their realities, but Mellie can see the truth in their lives.

Mellie is the youngest in town, but she doesn’t want to do things “just to please” the adults around her who are uncomfortable with her level of autonomy (52). She isn’t *adulterated* by her rape nor by sex. She says that she is a woman because of these sexual experiences, but this isn’t true. Where the other women in the novel have matured past the dreaming, hopeful, or adventurous phase of their lives, Mellie is determined to continue her book of legends because she’s taken a liking to the so-called “youthful mistake” of photography (37). This is one of the reasons why she isn’t allowed to become an adult. There’s the risk that she will grow old and forget her Truth and live in so-called “reality” which is represented by an empty, sinking Oât, and the Blue Island, a town that seems to chew people up and spit them out (as with Martha). The adults don’t have the magic, it is “the adults themselves who” try to “foster illusions as to their real childishness” (Baudrillard 13). Mellie might be childish or naïve at times, but it isn’t an illusion, it may even be a form of defiance.

Mellie rebelliously sets herself apart from the others in the village because she might forget who she is. Oât, a wasteland of memories, is filled with people who have the same name and most have met unknown fates. Mellie remarks how she occasionally has “the impression that [she looks] like the model in the painting” (72). She says that “[m]irrors are deceptive” and that “[i]t’s the same thing with names” (72). As Baudrillard states, “[t]oday abstraction is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror, or the concept... It is the generation by models of a real

without origin or reality” (1). The generations of Mellie’s and Rose’s go mostly unsung, they’re a sea of duplicates, where only a precious few of them get to have an identity. It’s no mistake that the ones who have the same name are all women while the men have names that rhyme. Mellie’s life and even her death combats this normalcy. Her book of legends separates her legacy from the others’ formless mass of memories. These memories have collected in Oât only to die with its residents. In this way, Redonnet makes Cixous proud, writing her novel so that “the historic forces” within the text “would and will change hands and change body”: as the book of legends is passed from Rose to Mellie and then to Rose again, as the title suggests (Cixous 585).

Yem, too, is young, and he still understands the beauty of the world, hence why he “can make [the Queen of the Fairies] do anything he wants,” when the aging Cob can’t (79). Both he and Mellie complete their legends because their “two wishes compliment each other” (101). Mellie, like Rose before her, got to accomplish the most important parts of her book of legends, which says “that newlyweds who go and spend their wedding night in the Fairy Grotto have a child nine months later” in their case, the Queen of the Fairies takes the grotto’s place (2). And “[t]he legend also says that when a traveler feels his last moments approaching he goes and takes refuge in the Fairy Grotto” at which point, “the fairies take away his body” (2). That’s exactly what Mellie does. She “makes [her] very life into a work for which [her book of legends] was in a sense the model” (Barthes 3). When she’s dying, she gets a “veil in front of her eyes” which makes her question whether Yem made it “to the end of the channel” (108). Like the older Mellie before her, Mellie can’t see things as clearly at her end, the veil represents an encroaching sense of adulthood. But her death allows her to avoid this maturity. She dies “alone in the Buick, all alone” with the image of “Rose wrapped in [her] bridal veil in the Fairy Grotto” in her mind’s

eye (110). In other words, unlike the older Mellie or Nem, Mellie dies with a vision of the future rather than a vision of the past.

For these characters, their “simulation [of the Truth] threatens the difference between the ‘true’ and the ‘false’, the ‘real’ and the ‘imaginary’” (Baudrillard 3). None of them share the same truths, and though some of them might be tempted by deception, as in a mirror or in the shadows play in the corners of the eye, they don’t deviate from what they believe even at the very end. By simultaneously examining and blurring the lines between semblances and individuality or death and life, these works defy traditional notions of what could be defined as True or true. This defiance sets them on a plane above those who can’t accept the truth, and this is what makes them the hero/heroine of their stories.

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