



Kurt Vonnegut's Crusade

Or, How a Postmodern Harlequin
Preached a New Kind of Humanism

Todd F. Davis

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*For Kenneth Womack
and James Mellard,
who still believe stories
might change the way we live.*

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1

Postmodern (Midwestern) Morality

The Act of Affirming Humanity in a Screwed-up World

“Hello, babies. Welcome to Earth. It’s hot in the summer and cold in the winter. It’s round and wet and crowded. At the outside, babies, you’ve got about a hundred years here. There’s only one rule that I know of, babies—:

“God damn it, you’ve got to be kind.”

—Kurt Vonnegut,

God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater

Kurt Vonnegut’s Social Commitment: Acting Humane Even When the Odds Are against You

WHILE KURT VONNEGUT’S reputation as a major American writer has been the subject of much debate for the past thirty years, his status with his readers has remained exceedingly healthy.¹ Vonnegut’s devoted reading public, those who have—as Wayne Booth suggests about author–reader relationships in *The Company We*

Keep: An Ethics of Fiction—invited the author into their lives, embracing the negotiated philosophy of a postmodern, Midwestern moralist, have remained faithful in a manner that is humorously akin to the rock-and-roll groupies who followed the Grateful Dead across the country for so many years, or, perhaps even more so, the citizens of some Indiana town where folks gather around one of their own boys who's made good, waiting to hear what he has to say. It is this faithful following—one created by narratives that are at once profound and intimately familiar, one which was responsible for the early paperback sales of such works as *Mother Night* and *Cat's Cradle*—that scholars at first briefly acknowledged, then ignored. This cult of readers was first mentioned by early critics like John Somer and Jerome Klinkowitz, but since Vonnegut's commercial success, little has been said about these readers and their significant influence as they continue to purchase Vonnegut's work, passing it on to subsequent generations and keeping his entire canon in print—an impressive list of more than twenty books that Dell has continued to refurbish and hawk with new cover designs.

My first experience with this group of readers occurred on a rainy and unseasonably cold evening in November 1991 in the heart of the country, in the heart of the Midwest. My wife and I, along with several thousand admirers of Vonnegut, had paid \$12.00 a ticket to listen to the author deliver a speech in the gymnasium of William Rainey Harper College just outside of Chicago in Palatine, Illinois. Vonnegut spoke for an hour and a half, using portions of articles and speeches that had been collected previously in *Palm Sunday*, as well as more timely material that spoke directly to political and cultural events from recent weeks (some of this material subsequently was collected and published in *Fates Worse Than Death*). Just as in his writing, Vonnegut's mannerisms and speaking voice helped create an environment of intimacy, of familiarity. Such an environment may strike some as odd, considering that many critics have labeled Vonnegut an indifferent philosopher of existentialism or a playful nihilist of comic futility, but it was quite obvious that the Kurt Vonnegut who spoke compassionately and directly about such issues as violence and war, love and respect, was exactly the Kurt Vonnegut that the audience had come to see. Here was the Midwestern sage at the town meeting speaking his mind; here was the town fool making the young laugh and the old-timers shake their heads. Here was a man who

took seriously the values he learned in his American Civics class at Shortridge High School and was holding his compatriots to those very values—as idealistic as they might be. Yet there was something different about this Midwesterner, something slightly out of kilter, something decidedly postmodern. For that reason, the speaking engagement, at times, more closely resembled a rock concert or political convention than a lecture given by a man of arts and letters. Several times throughout the evening, members of the audience shouted out encouragement or requests for the author to address certain topics, and, at all times, the crowd was attentive, laughing heartily at Vonnegut's pointed barbs that, for the most part, were directed at current political leaders and at all of humanity's ineffectuality in dealing with its daily enigmatic existence. It was clear that these readers—although entertained by narrative structures first developed by Vonnegut in his novels and more often than not punctuated by a joke—had come seeking guidance and understanding—or reassurance—on some very weighty philosophical issues in the wake of the Gulf War.

This sort of environment—one which in tone seemed more familial than scholarly, as members of the audience talked freely to one another concerning characters from the novels and even of Vonnegut himself as if they were old friends or relations—is, of course, the very kind of cultural setting that Vonnegut most believes in. In his books and lectures, Vonnegut consistently preaches about his experience growing up in Indianapolis and the relationship of this Midwestern experience to the theories of Dr. Robert Redfield, whose work Vonnegut was introduced to while studying anthropology at the University of Chicago. Redfield's theories contend that all human beings need to belong to extended families for physical and emotional well-being. But such communities have rapidly disappeared during the modern era, and in the fragmented and disrupted postmodern world are, for the most part, absent. As Vonnegut remarks, "It is curious that such communities should be so rare, since human beings are genetically such gregarious creatures. They need plenty of like-minded friends and relatives almost as much as they need B-complex vitamins and a heartfelt moral code" (*Palm Sunday* 204). Vonnegut, in his speaking and writing, has undoubtedly made progress toward the creation of these kinds of communities, and while this is a result he might not have foreseen, I suspect it is one with which he is quite happy.

Unlike other postmodern writers, like John Barth or Thomas Pynchon in whose company he is often placed, Vonnegut speaks openly about his commitment and responsibility to his readers. This commitment is inextricably bound with Vonnegut's view of literature, the work it may do. Although his stance remains unpopular in many scholarly and artistic circles (and understandably so, considering that it is a position similar to that taken by certain groups who wish to censor the arts), Vonnegut adamantly asserts that artists are agents of change, agents with the ability to do good or harm. As he explains in an interview with *Playboy* later collected in *Conversations with Kurt Vonnegut*, "My motives are political. I agree with Stalin and Hitler and Mussolini that the writer should serve his society. I differ with dictators as to how writers should serve. Mainly, I think they should be—and biologically have to be—agents of change. For the better, we hope" (57).²

In *Vonnegut in America*, Klinkowitz suggests that this sense of responsibility results from Vonnegut's early forays into journalism as a writer for student newspapers, first at Shortridge High School in Indianapolis and later at Cornell University (22). During his tenure as a writer for school periodicals, Vonnegut displayed great concern with the political and social issues of the day, with scientific progress heralded as the saving grace of the United States. Issues of scientific progress, of social commitment, of history's absurdly romantic relationship with war would continue to occupy Vonnegut not only in his writing but also in his study: Vonnegut majored in chemistry and biology at Cornell, and later at the University of Chicago pursued a master's degree in anthropology. For Vonnegut, issues of such significance demand that the writer be understood; the goal of the writer is to communicate as quickly and effectively—and quite often for Vonnegut, as ironically and humorously—as possible.³ While much of Vonnegut's writing maintains standards first established by his work as a student journalist and public relations writer for General Electric, these same standards that have helped him achieve a level of clarity that is seldom encountered in postmodern fiction have been attacked as simplistic by certain adversarial critics.

Roger Sale, in the *New York Times Book Review*, has berated Vonnegut's work (in this case, specifically *Slapstick*) by saying that "Nothing could be easier," while works by Thomas Pynchon take "stamina, determination, and crazy intelligence" (3). Although Vonnegut has had to weather this kind of criticism, he has not

stood alone. John Irving, among other writers, defends Vonnegut's craft, pointing to the sheer lunacy of asserting that "what is easy to read has been easy to write" (41). Irving claims that "Vonnegut's lucidity is hard and brave work in a literary world where pure messiness is frequently thought to be a sign of some essential wrestling with the 'hard questions'" (42). Undoubtedly, Vonnegut is wrestling with the "hard questions," and his ability to do so with grace and precision marks him not only as a fine literary stylist but also reveals his ultimate concern: that his ideas find their way to the reader. Vonnegut's own response to literary critics, included in *Palm Sunday*, takes the form of an understated diatribe: "It has been my experience with literary critics and academics in this country that clarity looks a lot like laziness and ignorance and childishness and cheapness to them. Any idea which can be grasped immediately is for them, by definition, something they knew all the time. So it is with literary experimentation, too. If a literary experiment works like a dream, is easy to read and enjoy, the experimenter is a hack" (320).

Whether one agrees that Vonnegut's work is aesthetically pleasing because of its directness, however, is not at issue here. Rather, his desire to enact change, to establish patterns for humanity that will lead to the construction of better realities for the world, will be the focus of this study.⁴ As Vonnegut has explained, "I've worried some about why write books when Presidents and Senators and generals do not read them, and the university experience taught me a very good reason: you catch people before they become generals and Senators and Presidents, and you poison their minds with humanity. Encourage them to make a better world" (Allen, *Conversations* 5).

It is Vonnegut's insistence that writing is an "act of good citizenship or an attempt, at any rate, to be a good citizen" (Allen, *Conversations* 72) that has led many critics to dismiss his work. Critics like Peter Prescott denounce Vonnegut for what Prescott calls "gratuitous digressions"; he characterizes Vonnegut's writing on race and pollution and poverty as "arrested," and the relationship of author to audience as "sucking up to kiddy grievances" (40). Prescott is outraged—or as he puts it in a review of *Breakfast of Champions*, "From time to time, it's nice to have a book you can hate—it clears the pipes—and I hate this book for its preciousness" (40)—I argue, for the simple reason that Vonnegut resists the rhetoric of modernist art. By Prescott's modernist

standards, a book like *Breakfast of Champions* is “manure, of course.” Raymond Olderman argues that Vonnegut’s work should be assessed by different criteria: “If we grant that he has designs on us and that he sometimes sacrifices fictive device for absolute clarity, often sounding more like a social scientist than a novelist, then we can forget his occasional failure to justify the literary tradition he half evokes, and judge him on the genuine quality of a passionately honest heart and mind working over the bewildering facts of contemporary existence” (192). While I agree with Olderman that any evaluation of Vonnegut by modernist, new critical standards is certain to find aspects of his work lacking, I do not agree that Vonnegut’s only contribution to American literature is a “passionately honest heart and mind working over the bewildering facts of contemporary existence.” The very nature of Olderman’s defense—one that attempts to excuse Vonnegut for sounding more like a social scientist than a novelist—is situated in modernist thought, using generic paradigms developed by the New Critics, among others.

The new fiction of our times, often labeled postmodern, may, as James M. Mellard suggests, be perceived as an exploded form. In some instances, notions of generic distinction have all but vanished. The writing of Richard Brautigan, William S. Burroughs, Vonnegut, and many others problematized the use of such descriptors and boundaries and helped literary theory to move beyond the work of genre-labeling into new territory. I argue that Vonnegut offers a new kind of fiction, a paradigm of postmodernity that allows the author to struggle with philosophical ideas concerning our condition in a form that reflects this very struggle. Unlike Auden’s claim that “poetry makes nothing happen” and the assertion of so many modernist critics that art is autonomous (art for art’s sake), Vonnegut is concerned not only with the form his writing takes—one that reflects postmodern convictions about the nature of reality and our ability to express that reality in language—but also with the positive work his artistry may engender. As Jane Tompkins explains in *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790–1860*, the novels of writers like Harriet Beecher Stowe were dismissed by modernist academics because such critics failed to acknowledge the kind of “cultural work” that Stowe hoped to bring about with her writing. Sadly, Vonnegut also has received the same treatment at times, neglected by critics and scholars alike because of his social vision, which he

claims grew out of his Midwestern upbringing. "That's the story of my life, too. I went to a good high school, and everything was noise after that," Vonnegut remarks in *Like Shaking Hands with God: A Conversation about Writing*. "I was always interested in good citizenship," he continues. "It was just what I learned in junior civics class in school in Indianapolis, how important it is to be a good citizen" (70).

Vonnegut's efforts to connect with his audience as an act of good citizenship, a connection he hopes ultimately leads to the construction of better realities for humanity, are rooted in the "big" questions. His work is philosophical in nature; his stories often take the form of parables; he struggles along with the reader, not in a position of author as omniscient creator but as one who also is wrestling honestly with the "big" question at hand. Arguably, Vonnegut's appeal to college students since their discovery of his work in the 1960s and 1970s may be linked with his ability to explore philosophically profound questions in prose that is neither convoluted nor simply theoretical. Vonnegut explains his popularity with young people as the result of his insistence on probing the nature of our existence: "Maybe it's because I deal with sophomore questions that full adults regard as settled. I talk about what is God like, what could He want, is there a heaven, and, if there is, what would it be like? This is what college sophomores are into" (Allen, *Conversations* 103).⁵ What distinguishes Vonnegut from other metaphysicians is his incredulity toward final answers and his unflagging determination to find pragmatic responses to profound questions. His admonitions to readers, based on the firm conviction that there are no longer "enormous new truths" to be discovered, are mired in what Vonnegut calls "the ordinariness of life, the familiarity of love" (Allen, *Conversations* 74).

While Vonnegut is willing to contemplate the existence of God, of His hand in the painfulness of life for some and the sweetness of life for others, he is not willing to allow theoretical debates to overshadow our need for action in our attempts to alleviate the suffering of others.⁶ The working-class pragmatism he inherited from the preceding generations of Vonneguts who lived in Indianapolis—among his ancestors were the proprietors of a long-running hardware store and the architects and builders of many buildings that still dot this Midwestern city's skyline—will not allow Vonnegut to simply theorize. While intellectual inquiry and