The Lives of Billy Pilgrim, Kilgore Trout, and Eliot Rosewater by Way of Kurt Vonnegut

written by Michael Wreszin | July 30, 2012

CHARLES J. SHIELD'S BIOGRAPHY offers a detailed life of the writer, his strengths and weaknesses, both as an author and a person. The major thrust of the Shields biography is to present Kurt Vonnegut as two different people, the writer and the private person. A nephew told the biographer:

> There was a definite disconnect between the kind of guy you would imagine Kurt must be from the tone of his books, the kind of guy who would say "God damn it, you got to be kind" and the reality of his behavior on a daily basis. He was a complicated, difficult man. . . . I think he admired the idea of love, community, and family from a distance but couldn't deal with the complicated emotional elements they included. (Shields 213-14)

Tiger Adams was one of the four sons that Vonnegut and his wife Jane adopted after the death of his sister and brother-in-law. In an interview with Shields he recalled that his stepfather, Kurt, "had a cruel side to him, a nasty side that's why it always struck me, the difference from the guy you would imagine from his writing and the guy that is the real guy."(166) As Shields notes, Vonnegut's "public remarks and persona, always circling around humanistic themes, just like his books, created expectations of him." (326)

Kurt Vonnegut's grim Camus-like view of life, living, and the world was part and parcel of a post–World War II sensibility. The old optimism of prewar America was gone. Liberal faith had been undermined by the experience of the Spanish Civil War, the Nazi/Stalin Pact of 1939, World War II, followed by the Holocaust and the droppings of the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In many of his works he wonders if life is worth living. He felt that the so-called American Dream had a dark side that led to loneliness, separation, and the denial of community. Americans were living in the age of anxiety. For Vonnegut, community was the only way to support and nourish genuine humanity. He developed a strong belief in communitarianism as much more important than leftist demands for economic collective solutions to social problems and inequality.

He asked frequently "what are human beings for?" His answer was similar to Albert Camus' stance in his *Myth of Sisyphus.* One must keep struggling for a humane and decent life even with the knowledge that there is little possibility of success. The human predicament was disastrous. In his novel *Jailbird* (1979), a devastating critique of the inequities built into the current capitalist system, he expressed, as Sumner said, " a well earned fatalism about whether the state of affairs would ever change." Sounding as though it were written today, the novel's main character, Walter Starbuck, believed that

Concentrations of wealth would endure, Ponzi schemes would rise and fall, corporations would continue to treat their employees like disposable machinery through . . . naked brutality . . . or the more bloodless methods of multinationals . . .. The winners would mostly win, through booms and busts, calm seas and typhoons . . . the main dream of a humane "revolution" whether from above or below, might never come to pass.

But the struggle must continue. (Sumner p. 210)

Vonnegut feared most the turning of humans into machines, the thingification of humanity, people becoming nothing more than interchangeable parts in a soul-destroying technology. His first novel *Player Piano* (1952) suggests how machines can simply replace people. By his next novel, The *Sirens of Titan* (1959) he portrays post-World War ll America as a "nightmare of meaninglessness." (Sumner 42) Again, as in all of his writing, the only answer is for human beings to insist on being human, that is, humane and kind. It is the struggle of Sisyphus pushing the rock up the hill only to have it fall down again. Shields makes a point of arguing that Vonnegut was not a knee jerk anti-capitalist. In fact he insists throughout the biography that Vonnegut was in many ways a conservative. He wasn't against capitalism as such. He was against a rigged system.

I have no quarrel with most if not all of Vonnegut's continuous critique of American life and culture. Briefly a pacifist, but then rejected as a philosophical position, "he opposed all wars and insisted they were insane and the participants the listless playthings of enormous forces." (139) In his account of the meaningless brutality of the Dresden bombing, he does not blame the military commanders or the bomber pilots. "One reason they burned down Dresden is that they had already burned down everything else. You know: 'What are we going to do tonight?'" (Sumner p. 141) Sumner argues persuasively that the views expressed in *Slaughterhouse Five* "had a real effect on the consciousness of people questioning our involvement in Vietnam and [the] other foreign crusades," all of which he actively and effectively opposed.

He had awakened to his great fear that members of his high school class were running the country. As he approached his 50th year he became more and more enraged and mystified by "the idiot decisions" made by his countrymen. They did so because they lived by the illusions and myths that were created to give order and meaning to a bizarre and senseless world. He attacked the space probe and said going to the moon before eradicating poverty was morally untenable. He denounced the "savage and stupid and entirely inappropriate American class system." He hated all censorship and particularly the banning of some of his own books. As for foul language, he was sure that a handbill of the first Amendment would be quickly burned. He denounced narrow-mindedness and insisted on personal freedom. He was quick to recognize and denounce the rise of the religious right in the Republican Party and the outrageous claim that the sovereignty exercised by American politicians came directly from God. (Shields, p. 304) *The Barnstable Patriot* complained of his pessimistic personality. "He is a man who has something bad to say about everything."

One could go on, but his biographer takes great pains to stress the difference between the writer and public man and the private person. Vonnegut had created contradictory identities.

> He was a countercultural hero, a guru, and a leftist to his fans; a wealthy investor to his broker; a champion of family and community, and yet a distant father; a man who had left his child-centered home to save his sanity, but again a satirist of American life but feeding at the trough of celebrity up to his ears. (Shields, p. 351)

Shields quotes his long suffering wife: "Kurt doesn't mind being hurtful, really, although he talks a good game to make you think the opposite. He's fooled most of his public now, for a long time. You see, he doesn't really know what he is doing. He's really very innocent." (Shields, 345)

Shields presses the dichotomy persistently and at one point notes Vonnegut's critique of corporations and businesses with lousy labor and environmental records. But Shields points out that Vonnegut and his wife had investments in Dow Chemical, the sole maker of napalm during the Vietnam War. When this charge was mentioned in a review of Shields' biography, Donald Farber, Vonnegut's attorney and agent who had attended to his business affairs for over 40 years, responded

that Vonnegut never saw the brokerage firm's statements. Many were upset by this charge and it does seem to this reviewer that Shields may have overworked the negative aspects of the two Vonneguts.

GREGORY SUMNER BUILT A CRITICAL STUDY of Vonnegut's life and work structured on fourteen chapters, each devoted to Vonnegut's 14 novels. People not familiar with Vonnegut's quirky prose style will find this book a tough slog despite its sometimes brilliant analytical interpretations. Sumner, who champions his style, concedes that reading Vonnegut's incomprehensible lurching is like "watching television with another person impulsively changing channels." Sumner's title *Unstuck in Time* is taken from Vonnegut's assault on what he felt were the limitations of time, rhythmic shifts in time and place in the spastic travels of Billy Pilgrim. (Sumner. P. 278) Sumner's analysis of this assault on time is worth citing. His character Billy Pilgrim stands in for Vonnegut on a space trip to another planet and discovers that

> story telling on their planet is not a matter of sequential narrative. There is no beginning, no middle, no end, no suspense, no moral, no causes, no effects. The idea is to convey the depths of many marvelous moments seen all at one time.

Here, Sumner writes, "Vonnegut is expressing his renunciation of the simplistic notion of time on Earth that defines and imprisons us." The novel (*Slaughterhouse Five*) marks his "boldest effort to be free of those strictures." This makes some philosophical sense but the actual use of unstuck time hardly makes for a clear grasp of just what is taking place.

On the last page of Sumner's text, prior to his effusive Epilogue, there is a cartoon of the head of Vonnegut made up of some of his most memorable and enduring comments:

> Just because some of us can read and write and do a little math, that doesn't mean we deserve to conquer the universe;
>
> The main business of humanity is to do a good job of being human beings, not to serve as appendages to machines, institutions and systems;
>
> You cannot be a good writer of serious fiction if you are not depressed;
>
> True terror is to wake up one morning and discover your high school class is running the country.

Many of these comments don't appear in his novels. In Sumner's analysis of *Slaughterhouse Five,* known for its discussion of Dresden, he offers this long quotation:

> It didn't shorten the war, didn't weaken a German defense or attack anywhere, didn't free a single person from a death camp . . . . It was religious. It was Wagnerian. It was theatrical. It should be judged as such.

This came from Vonnegut's anthology *Fates Worse Than Death* (1991) written over twenty years later.

In contrast to Shields, Sumner sees only the overwhelming decency of Vonnegut, who, he writes, believed that heroism is making peace with our tragic limitation, acting with decency and caring for those around us." (40) He does recognize Vonnegut's anxieties as being lonely and isolated. Vonnegut frequently refers to the "great American experiment with rootlessness "and the observation that he "did not think himself very good in life" and suffered from a "perpetual lack of confidence in his creative powers." There were also suicide attempts and nervous breakdowns.

Both of these books present a complicated man, with great strengths and several flaws. For those interested in the life and times of Vonnegut, I recommend them both.