A CLOWN'S SAY —A STUDY OF KURT VONNEGUT, JR.'S *SLAUGHTERHOUSE-FIVE*—

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Since after the publication of *Slaughterhouse-Five* in 1969, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. has been one of the most talked-about writers today. Yet, in fact, he had suffered from a long negligence until he was recognized as a serious writer. Although he published his first novel, *Player Piano*, in 1952, and by the time of the publication of *Slaughterhouse-Five* he was an author of six novels and a hundred short stories, he was considered as no more than a little bit quaint science fiction writer. As he made clear in "Playboy Interview", he was not "even getting reviewed."[1] In 1963, when the *Esquire* drew a map of the literary establishment in the United States, Vonnegut could not find his name on the list.[2] This gave him a mild shock to him, since he himself thought what he had been doing was "pretty good."[3] But in the meantime his paperback novels were selling steadily and some of the established publishers began to show interest in his works, and then a Guggenheim fellowship came to him. In 1967, with that money, he re-visited Dresden, where he had stayed as a prisoner of war toward the end of World War II. This was to open up a path of fame for him.

His re-visit to Dresden was a kind of must for Vonnegut. He was drafted during the war and taken to the western front as a very young soldier. There he fought in "the Battle of the Bulge,"

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[1] Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., "Playboy Interview" in *Wampeters, Foma & Granfalloons* (Delacort Press / Seymour Lawrence, 1974), p. 279.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 279.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 279.

and taken prisoner, he was sent back to Dresden. In Dresden he experienced a massacre which is known as " the raid on Dresden " or " the Dresden fire-storm." Vonnegut said in his interview, " Dresden was astonishing, but experiences can be astonishing without changing you."[1] It seems that he does not like to talk about that experience and that he would not like it to be put too much emphasis on as a great influence upon his later career. But what we could surmise is that a young would-be writer could never let this kind of experience pass as it went. As a matter of fact, after the war Vonnegut once attempted to write about it, but " not many words about Dresden came from my mind then —not enough of them to make a book, anyway."[2] Perhaps, as he confessed, the experience in Dresden did not change him directly. For the shock of the experience was too strong to give an immediate revelation to him. It went deep into his mind and many years later, when aroused by many other experiences, it was to come up again to become an incitement to write a book on it. It is a latent must for Vonnegut, which made his re-visit to Dresden be realized.

There is another important experience for Vonnegut that directly changed his view of life. After the war, getting his M.A. from the University of Chicago, he worked for General Electric in Schenectady, New York, from 1947 to 1950, as a publicity man. There he met and talked with many brilliant scientists and engineers, and got to know their ideas, experiments and ambitions about the future society. Vonnegut was surprised to know for the fact that the future society, if it were entrusted to those people, would be totally computerized and operated by machines. He said, " This was in 1949 and the guys who were working on it were foreseeing all sorts of machines being run by little boxes and punched cards."[3] His first novel, *Player Piano*, was written

[1] *Wampeters, Foma & Granfalloons*, p. 263.

[2] Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., *Slaughterhouse-Five* (Delarcort Press / Seymour Lawrence, 1969), p. 2.

[3] *Wampeters, Foma & Granfalloons*, p. 261.

as his response to this prediction by those scientists.

If *Player Piano* had been written in the later sixties, it must have achieved a popular acclaim for Vonnegut. But in 1952, when it was published, the metaphor of this fantastic novel was so remote that it could not appeal to the public interest. There was, indeed, a certain suspicion that the industrialism prevalent in the American society might be leading the United States in the wrong direction. The suspicion was expressed in the works of the writers like Mailer, Salinger and others in those days. But the fear expounded by Vonnegut in his first novel that the human society was to be taken over by machines was too fantastic to be seriously taken into consideration. It can be said that Vonnegut's idea was too far ahead of the age.

So, naturally his *Player Piano* had been in the literay limbo for a long time, but in this novel Vonnegut's basic idea was formed and illustrated clearly. In that sense it might be useful to discuss it here a little bit more to explain the author himself. What Vonnegut presents in this novel is a future society, highly industrialized and controlled by a small group of scientists. That is, the United States presented here is one huge technocracy, where all the industries are synthesized into one organization and operated by a small number of scientists and engineers. Those scientists and engineers form the upper class, while the rest of the citizens form the huge lower class. The lower class citizens live neither in poverty nor in prosperity. They are all deprived of their work by machines, so they have to live with pension or enlist in the army. Even their life itself is all mechanized—every kind of daily necessities are provided by machines and the household work is all done by machines. The problem is that they have nothing creative or worthwhile to do as human beings. Deprived of the pains and joy of working, men just stay in the saloon all the time, getting drunk, while women, freed from their household chores, kill their time watching TV programs.

This is a satirical picture of a utopia thwarted somewhere by industrialism. In this future society function is considered as the

highest value. Since human beings are valued according to their functional merit, as compared with machines in terms of function, they have to give way, as machines begin to function better. Finally, human beings, who first devised machines and should have controlled them, are almost completely enslaved by machines. What Vonnegut suggests here is: if the society is moving rapidly toward an industrialized utopia, the future society will be like what he wrote about here. In such a society human beings will become mere implemnts, losing their own humanness. The society itself will be systematized and accurately operated by computers, and if there were any implements which distrub or obstruct the operation, they would be expelled mechanically from the system. They would be thrown away like useless parts. Personal feelings or doubts are here what derange the normal operation of the society, so that they should be eliminated. In other words, human beings have to cease to be human.

While Vonnegut presents such a grotesque picture of the future society, he is also aware that this kind of thwarted utopia could be created by human beings themselves. At the end of the novel he tells the reader about one episode that those who rose against the computerized system to regain their own humanness and were sieged by the army could not give up their interest in making and using machines. Through the episode Vonnegut presents human inconsistency which will lead to human follies. The episode is funny but very grotesque. Vonnegut is trying to suggest that the human society might be moving toward the final self-destruction through the accumulations of human follies.

II

In his another novel, *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, published in 1965, Vonnegut presented a funny science fiction writer named Kilgore Trout, who seems like the author himself, though very much caricatured. Kilgore Trout appears in the court, at the end of the novel, to prove the sanity of Mr. Rosewater, and says,

". . . if we can't find reason and methods for treasuring human beings because they are *human beings*, then we might as well, as has so often been suggested, rub them out."[1] This statement by Trout is a warning against the technological society and conveys exactly what was presented in *Player Piano* in 1952. But in actuality even in the mid-sixties the society had just ignored this warning and was trying to organize itself into a more and more mechanized society, in which, as Trout fears, human beings might be just rubbed out as zombies without lives and feelings.

Through his war experiences Vonnegut must have seen many scenes in which human beings were worthlessly and helplessly treated as mere functional implements. For the war necessitates that one nation be operated as one organized system and that the operation of the system be more important than any other thing. In that sense, the war teaches us the threat of a highly systematized society, which is similar to a highly industrialized one presented in *Player Piano*. What Vonnegut learned from his experiences of the war and from working for General Electric merge together now into one belief; that is, as Trout said, we must " find reason and methods for treasuring human beings because they are *human beings*," though they have so many inconsistencies and commit so many follies. This warm affection toward human beings is distinguishes Vonnegut from other nihilistic black humorists, and with that affection he writes about his war experiences in *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

Slaughterhouse-Five was written nearly twenty-five years later than his actual war experiences. But that time distance made the novel all the more unique as a war-novel. During those twenty-five years Vonnegut had been through many other experiences, developing his own ideas and forming his own belief that we have discussed hitherto. And, what is more, with the growth of his own age, he came to have an unheroic idea of human beings.[2]

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[1] Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* (Dell Books, 1971), p. 183.

[2] Compare Dr. Proteus in *Player Piano* with Billy in *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

Therefore, he could view the war, cooly from some distance, not as a stage on which heroic acts are exhibited, but as a situation in which human follies are enacted.

From the very beginning of the novel Vonnegut consciously uses a loose colloquial style, and tries to make light what is to be narrated and, in fact, is grave, cruel and serious. The narrator of the novel is a writer by profession, who thinks of writing a book based on his war experiences and pays a visit to his war-buddy, Mr. O'Hare, at his home in Virginia. When the narrator has found out that Mrs. O'Hare is angry because she thinks he will write another cheap war-novel full of lies, he defends himself and explains his own view of the book as follows:

> " . . . I don't think this book of mine is ever going to be finished. I must have written five thousand pages by now, and thrown them all away. If I ever do finish it, though, I give you my word of honor: there won't be a part for Frank Sinatra or John Wayne."[1]

After explaining his stand to Mrs. O'Hare, the narrator promises to call the book " The Children's Crusade ", which is actually a subtitle of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. The Children's Crusade was what really happened in the 13th century, and the narrator tells about it like this: " It started in 1213, when two monks got the idea of raising armies of children in Germany and France, and selling them in North Africa as slaves."[2] What Vonnegut suggests in this episode is that many young soldiers drafted and sent to the battleground toward the end of the war are similar to the children sold as slaves in North Africa. He thinks that they were taken away from their home under the name of a sacred war only to be killed as helpless victims.

Billy Pilgrim, Vonnegut's hero in this novel, is fit for the main character of the book which is called " The Children's Crusade." He is innocent, helpless and vulnerable. In other words, he is

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[1] *Slaughterhouse-Five*, p. 13.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 14.

totally unfit for a soldier. Billy was born in Ilium, New York, as a son of a barber, and after finishing high school he attended for one semester at the Ilium School of Optometry. Then he was drafted and became a soldier. Not exactly a soldier. For he was " a chaplain's assistant in the war. A chaplain's assistant is customarily a figure of fun in the American Army. Billy was no exception. He was powerless to harm the enemy or to help his friends."[1] So Billy had neither a gun nor a helmet. He did not even have on his army boots, and instead he had on a pair of civilian shoes, one of which had lost its heel. When he was brought to the front, it was just in the midst of a big German attack called " the Battle of the Bulge " and he got lost on the battleground away from his own regiment, and before he knew what, he was wandering alone behind the German lines.

Just imagine Billy in those civilian shoes (he is so awkwardly tall) wandering very forlornly on the battleground ! He himself is a satire or even a joke on the war. It is true, Billy's innocence and helplessness appear funny on the deserted battleground, but his existence, so sweet and so humane, transcend the war or the army. In the light of Billy's existence the war has lost its meaning very suddenly and it looks like a typical human folly. Billy is certainly funny, but the war and those who are seriously engaged in it become far funnier than Billy.

Take another soldier named Roland Weary for example. He is also a young soldier who got lost from his own regiment and was wandering behind the German lines. From the first moment he met Billy, he hated Billy. Since he is immersed in a heroic idea of the war and he himself imagines to be a war-hero, he cannot stand the sight of Billy who is a perfect insult to his idea of the war. Roland cooks up his own war in his mind or he believes in a cooked-up idea of a sacred war, and tries very hard to be a heroic soldier in his imagination. He is dreaming all the time that he and his buddies—he named themselves " Three Muske-

[1] *Ibid.*, p. 26.

teers "—will safely return to their own lines and be war-heroes. For such Roland, Billy is evidently a disillusioning existence—he is, as it were, a piece of reality that will disperse Roland's illusion. So Roland, mean as he was, hated and was ashamed of Billy as if he were his own private part.

Billy is intended by Vonnegut to be a clown who becomes a reticent satire on the war, but Roland is another clown who verbosely exaggerates the illusory heroism of the war. While Billy is a pantomime artist, as it were, Roland is an excited and noisy comedian. However, if it were not for Billy, Roland's grotesque funniness can never be so illuminated to the reader.

III

Billy, no matter how clownish he may appear, is intended to be a person who transcends every kind of human follies. Let us show one example. When he was wandering with the " Three Musketeers ", he was shot at by a German sniper. The shot missed Billy's head by inches, and then " Billy stood there politely, giving the marksman another chance. It was his addled understanding of the rules of warfare that the marksman *should* be given a second chance."[1] We could see here that Vonnegut presented Billy physically and outwardly as a clown, but inwardly and spiritually intended him as an ideal " human being." Billy's innocence, thoughtfulness, and affection cannot help remind us of a saint. He is a clown-saint, as it were, on pilgrimage. And so in the light of Billy's existence as a clown-saint, Roland's heroism and various other human acts told in the novel as war-episodes look only silly and meaningless.

Those war-episodes reflected in the eyes of Billy are funny but very grotesque. There was a colonel among the prisoners who had lost his whole regiment by the German attack and got ill and was dying. Whenever he saw a new soldier like Billy, who

[1] *Slaughterhouse-Five*, p. 29.

was tired out and could hardly utter a word, the colonel spoke to him, and said, " You one of my boys? " Then he began to make a flamboyant speech, and finally he concluded like this: " If you're ever in Cody, Wyoming, just ask for Wild Bob ! "[1] The silent embarrassment shown by Billy here suggests that the colonel, who might have been crazy from the start, led his 4,500 young boys into hell-fire.

It is also funny that the prisoners were divided into several groups, according to their ranks. Soldiers were packed up in one freight car, so that they could not even move and sit and had to keep standing all the way, while a few (exactly seven) colonels occupied a whole car to themselves. One of the soldiers (ex-hobo) kept saying, " This ain't bad. . . . This ain't nothing at all."[2] And he died. Even when they were in such a miserable state, Billy thinks that "when food came in, the human beings were quiet and trusting and beautiful."[3] Through these episodes Vonnegut is asking a series of questions: What are human beings? Why do they have to fight? Why should they divide themselves according to their ranks? What is the rank? Does it have any intrinsic value? Why do they have to die or be killed like trash? And how can they be so cruel? . . . And then Vonnegut seems to say, " Look at Billy ! Here is a human being we can trust and believe in. Why can't the other human beings be like him? Why do they have to play so many follies? "

As the story progresses, the reader sees that the greatest folly of human beings is the war. Behind every grotesque episodes there exists the war with its deformed sneers. The fire-storm of Dresden is a symbol of the foolish and meaningless activities in the War. It happened on the night of February 13,1945, and killed about 130 thousand people. It was literally a massacre, because there were no strategic facilities and equipments to speak of in Dresden. Vonnegut mentions the name of Dresden all through

[1] *Slaughterhouse-Five*, p. 58.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 60.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 61.

the book and makes the reader aware of its symbolic meaning, but as to the actual air-raid scene, he writes very simply like this:

> He (Billy) was down in the meat locker on the night that Dresden was destroyed. There were sounds like giant footsteps above. Those were sticks of high-explosive bombs. The giants walked and walked. The meat locker was a very safe shelter. All that happened down there was an occasional shower of calcimine. The Americans and four of their guards and a few dressed carcasses were down there, and nobody else. The rest of the guards had, before the raid began, gone to the comforts of their own homes in Dresden. They were all being killed with their families.[1]

Dresden was destroyed in one night and kept burning until noon the next day. For the next few days the prisoners were taken outside and ordered to dig up the dead bodies from under the crumbled-down houses. And then Billy's only friend, Edgar Derby, was caught with a teapot he had taken from the celler. He was shot simply because of it—just picking up a teapot from the ruins. Vonnegut writes about this incident very simply, too, in three lines. However, these two—one is an massacre of 130 thousand people and the other is an execution of one person—symbolize the human follies in the war, and become two climaxes of the novel.

IV

Through writing the grotesque war-episodes which took place around Billy Pilgrim, Vonnegut is evidently expressing a great doubt as to the sanity of our human society, but he never analyzes or attacks the society like Norman Mailer. He just negates human follies which, he thinks, culminate in the war. He just shows in funny and clownish gestures of Billy that the war is totally meaningless, and that it is a way of the self-destruction of human beings

[1] *Slaughterhouse-Five*, p. 152.

like the extreme industrialism shown in *Player Piano*. If there were any persons who would find any meaning in it or be seriously engaged in it, they would be the funniest beings ever known. Vonnegut is suggesting that.

Slaughterhouse-Five, therefore, should be called an anti-war-novel, instead of a war-novel. And Billy Pilgrim, fit for this quaint anti-war-novel, is created by Vonnegut as an ideal clown-saint. Since he is a clown, he is reticent all the time. He is funny, awkward and tactless, but he is tender and thoughtful to others. He knows by nature that he has to "treasure human beings" because he is one. With all his existence Billy is asserting that.

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