

2014

Uncomfortably Numb: Finding Meaningful Agency and Resistance in a World without History, without Future, without End

James Speese
Lehigh University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://preserve.lehigh.edu/etd>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Speese, James, "Uncomfortably Numb: Finding Meaningful Agency and Resistance in a World without History, without Future, without End" (2014). *Theses and Dissertations*. Paper 1635.

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by Lehigh Preserve. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Lehigh Preserve. For more information, please contact preserve@lehigh.edu.

Uncomfortably Numb: Finding Meaningful Agency and Resistance in a World
without History, without Future, without End

by

James Speese

A Dissertation

Presented to the Graduate and Research Committee

of Lehigh University

in Candidacy for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

Lehigh University

May 19, 2014

Copyright

James Speese

ii

Approved and recommended for acceptance as a dissertation in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

James Speese

Uncomfortably Numb: Finding Meaningful Agency and Resistance in a World
without History, without Future, without End

Professor Elizabeth Fifer

Approved Date

Committee Members:

Professor Mary Foltz

Professor Ed Lotto

Professor Rick Matthews

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Obviously, my committee of Elizabeth Fifer, Mary Foltz, Ed Lotto, and Rick Matthews has been invaluable in the completion of this work. Their advice and guidance was truly helpful. However, even more important was their inspiration. Elizabeth was constant with her encouragement throughout my time at Lehigh, and she often reminded me to find joy in literature. One of the first grad classes I took was Elizabeth's poetry seminar, a class that both inspired me and led to my first conference presentation. Mary challenged me in ways that made me a stronger academic, always questioning my assumptions and forcing me to dig more deeply. Our discussions about the literature in her postmodernism seminar led directly to much of the second chapter of this dissertation. I appreciate how she made me feel more like a colleague than a student. Much of chapter three of the dissertation was culled from an independent study with Ed Lotto, a man who, like me, loves the work of Kurt Vonnegut. And Rick Matthews' seminar on the politics of authenticity reminded me that there is so much more beyond this academic life and that academia should always strive to serve a deeper purpose.

Of course there are so many other friends and peers I would like to thank, but space is limited. However, I could not have done this without Kathy, who helped, inspired, and even put up with me for this entire journey. Thank you!

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	Page 1
Introduction	Page 2
Chapter One: The Post-Apocalyptic Fiction of Matheson and McCarthy	Page 11
Chapter Two: The Post-Historical Fiction of Doctorow and Coover	Page 45
Chapter Three: The Post-Human Fiction of Kurt Vonnegut	Page 94
Conclusion	Page 146
Works Cited	Page 150
Vita	Page 157

ABSTRACT

As described by Jean Lyotard and Fredric Jameson, the present postmodern era is one in which transcendent narratives have been revealed as culturally constructed and hegemonic. In this postmodernity, people often feel a loss of history and meaning, as, according to Jameson, the very concept of an individual subject is called into question. Finding meaningful agency in such a world seems, at times, impossible. There is a received cultural assumption of powerlessness and meaninglessness that can be demonstrated metaphorically as zombies or bands of survivors wandering a post-apocalyptic world. This study looks at activist authors in the postmodern era, starting with the post-apocalyptic metaphor in Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend* and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*. It then examines the contingency of historical narrative in the post-historical novels *The Book of Daniel*, by E. L. Doctorow and *The Public Burning*, by Robert Coover. Finally, it focuses on the paradox of transformation in the novels of Kurt Vonnegut. These authors metaphorically create the post-apocalyptic postmodern condition in different ways, yet all present the problem of finding meaningful agency within that condition. Applying the concept of contingency, rather than randomness, to postmodern existence, these works demonstrate meaningful agency in free contingent action. The postmodern condition has liberated characters from transcendent narratives, and the acting on that liberation allows for individual transformation from postmodern object (zombie) to individualized subject (human), and allows social transformation from masses to multitudes. Meaningful agency exists through the act of resistance itself.

**Uncomfortably Numb: Finding Meaningful Agency and Resistance in a World
without History, without Future, without End**

Introduction

“It’s the end of the world as we know it (and I feel fine),” is the chorus of the famous REM song of the same name. The parenthetical line implies one of two possibilities: either the singer prefers whatever new world is being built from the ashes of the old one, or he is lying to himself. Of course, it could also be both. Regardless, the operative part of the chorus is “as we know it.” The world “as we know it” has ended many times, whenever some new epistemology takes hold of the zeitgeist. When movable type was invented, it is quite likely that the oral storytellers of the era felt the world coming to an end. That said, the rise of postmodernity after the end of World War II did not feel like a change in epistemology for many, but rather, a renunciation of epistemology altogether due to the deconstruction of epistemological metanarrative. Rather than discovering a new way of knowing the world and ourselves, postmodernity suggested that the very idea was impossible.

When we think in terms of narrative, we tend to think teleologically. The story leads us from the beginning of the tale, through the rising action, the falling action, the climax and, ultimately, to the end. The end, then, is seen as the “point” (or moral) of the narrative. A metanarrative is defined as an overarching or transcendent narrative that drives cultural life, its epistemology. In the Middle Ages in Europe, for instance, the

metanarrative was a Catholic one; plagues were not described in terms of germs, but rather, in terms of sin. In the 18th and 19th centuries, the religious metanarrative was slowly replaced by a rational or enlightenment metanarrative; things began to be described in the discourse of science and rationality. We now live in what Jean Lyotard, as well as several other critical theorists—particularly Fredric Jameson—call the postmodern era. In this era, art, literature, architecture, and music are informed by the concept of the postmodern; thus, “postmodern” is an artistic descriptor (like modernist, realist, or surrealist). However, I will make a distinction between the postmodern (a form of art, music, literature) and postmodernity, which I argue is the state of being in the world today. Lyotard, in describing the “postmodern condition,” noted that this condition is an “incredulity toward metanarratives” (Lyotard xxiv). Among the metanarratives called into question in postmodernity are, of course, the religious or transcendent narrative (which often suggests the concept of morality itself); the scientific or rational narrative (modernist enlightenment thinking); the historic narrative; the nationalistic narrative; and, for many, meaningful agency itself. Postmodernity does not necessarily suggest these narratives do not exist but rather, that they are culturally constructed and therefore not transcendent or overarching; only universal belief in them can make them so and, since we live in an era with an incredulity for such universal belief, no overarching narrative or epistemology defines our existence. Of course, this is an ironic statement, since postmodernity itself defines our existence.

Jamesonian postmodernity, defined as a late capitalist postmodernity, is our condition today. We have become consumers rather than subjects and have lost a sense of history, a sense replaced by nostalgia for a history that never was. For us, history is a

series of representations. What we view as historical, then, is really nostalgia for “our ideas or cultural stereotypes of the past, cemented by television, movies and fiction” (Jameson 10). What we know of the past is mere representation. Jameson argues that the postmodern rises in contrast to the modernist period and that the postmodernist period marks a loss of the subject, an “end to individualism as such” (Jameson 5). In Jameson’s postmodern condition, we are all, in effect, zombies shambling through a life in which nothing new can be said and any critique of the system is a complicitous critique,¹ one that reinforces that system instead. In Jameson’s formulation the postmodern has effaced the qualitative difference between high and low art. We cannot turn to high culture to critique or change the system. We are trapped in a landscape whose cultural assumptions are constantly reinforced and those cultural assumptions tell us that we cannot change that landscape. Postmodernity is an apparent inescapable cultural feedback loop. There is an implied mandate of powerlessness.

Given the incredulity toward metanarratives like religion and history and science, and given the loss of individuality, there is a tendency to see history, morality, and meaning as simply reduced to the pragmatic, or as completely random or chaotic—a *lack* of meaning. In such a world, there seems little hope for meaningful agency. In novels like Richard Matheson’s *I Am Legend*, in which the postmodern is represented as a post-apocalyptic metaphor, the protagonist fails to find any way to change the world, and his existence is, instead, reduced to finding ways to resign himself to that landscape. In postmodern historiographic fiction, like Robert Coover’s *The Public Burning*, the loss of

¹ This formulation is explained in detail by Linda Hutcheon in her book *The Politics of Postmodernism*. Postmodern parody, for instance, “both legitimizes and subverts that which it parodies” (97). For more information, see Hutcheon.

the historical metanarrative ushers in a chaotic world in which anything can happen and in which the powers that be can constantly reassert their hegemony. In E. L. Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel*, attempts to know history and change the present seem tantalizingly out of reach. The novels of Kurt Vonnegut present many characters that turn to comforting lies rather than face the reality of their postmodern existence.

However, existence in postmodernity is *contingent* rather than random. Contingency may seem random when looked at simplistically, but critic Daniel Cordle explains contingency by looking at scientist Stephen Jay Gould's explanation of misapprehensions of evolution. Many see evolution as a narrative, which, through natural selection, drives existence. While this basic fact is true, given that humans are pattern-seeking creatures, we tend to view evolution as teleological. That is, the many twists and turns of evolution lead to "us" (the telos or goal) in the present moment. Evolution, through this teleological narrative lens, is seen as an engine that creates intellect, a way for existence to know itself through its greatest and final evolutionary product, modern man. However, this view is, of course, a misunderstanding of the process of evolution. We are not the *goal* of evolution, argues Gould; we are but one branch on an evolutionary tree. Where we often see transcendent meaning or teleological narrative, there is none. Conversely, many deniers of evolution describe the process through the straw man of randomness. They are unable to accept (or they fear) that life happens randomly. They look at creation and see a creator. However, Gould tells us that this simplistic view of evolution is also incorrect. Evolution, driven as it is by natural selection, is not exactly random; it is contingent. Things don't just "happen." Rather moments are constructed in such a way that different choices or actions can lead to different outcomes. With this

reading, postmodernity does not lead to a life where things are simply random and where there is no meaning. Rather, moments are contingent; within a moment, our acting can have meaningful effect on the future, on ourselves, and on moral or political action. History, then, is a metanarrative which is contingent; as with evolution, there is no overarching narrative of history that is inescapable, but history is also not simply a series of random events over which we have no control.²

In addition, while hegemonic powers remain in control in Jameson's postmodernity, they can, in fact, be challenged in moments of contingency. I argue that that challenge can be made through philosopher Hannah Arendt's concepts of freedom and transformation. For Arendt, the difference between liberty and freedom is the difference between contemplation and direct action. Liberation may be given to someone, but freedom only comes from direct individual action: it must be demonstrated. Liberty is, in a way, the basic Lyotardian concept of the postmodern--an incredulity toward metanarratives. The postmodern condition can be seen as liberating; we are liberated from the metanarratives that formerly controlled our existence. When someone writes about "the end of the world," he is really writing about the end of the world as he knows it or, in other words, the end of a metanarrative to which he subscribes. For the elites in France, the revolution and the deconstruction of the metanarrative of the nobility was the end of the world; for the peasants, it was liberation. In postmodernity, since many people no longer believe that history, religion or nationality controls them, they have been liberated. However if we are so overwhelmed by the postmodern condition that it makes

² This formulation is based on Stephen Jay Gould's view of evolution. For more exposition, see Cordle.

us see and act as if life is random, then, while we may be liberated, we are not free. We do not deliberately act.

The post-apocalyptic zombies in many end-of-the-world stories represent this difference between liberty and freedom. Arendt argues that, “liberation and freedom are not the same . . . liberation may be the condition of freedom but by no means leads automatically to it” (Arendt, *Revolution* 19). In postmodern post-apocalyptic zombie narratives, the zombies are liberated—they are not controlled by anyone else nor by any transcendent narrative; however, they are unable to *act* on that freedom. Living humans (in these stories) also often represent the difference. Robert Neville in *I Am Legend* is not a zombie, but his actions are habituated. While human, he *acts* like a zombie until the end of the novel when he recognizes that he has been liberated but is not free. The same holds true for history; postmodernity has liberated us from accepting the teleological metanarrative of history. However, if we see this liberation as demonstrating that history is simply random, there is no reason to try to affect history and we will not act nor search for historical truth. Historical actors will be liberated but not free.³

When we see history as contingent, rather than random, we have the power to *affect* history. To be free, rather than simply liberated, is to recognize the contingency of historical moments and act freely in those moments. When someone acts freely, that is, acts against habituation or received cultural assumptions, that person is transformed. That transformation is tantamount to becoming individualized in Jameson’s postmodernity where such individualism is supposedly lost. Arendt argues that revolution is possible

³ Arendt’s formulations are examined more deeply in chapter three. For more information, see Arendt, *On Revolution* and *The Human Condition*.

through transformation. Meaningful agency, then, rests in recognizing the power inherent in free contingent action when liberated from transcendent narratives. Kurt Vonnegut, despite ending the world in his early novel, *Cat's Cradle*, demonstrates how overwhelming the postmodern post-apocalypse can be for average human beings, but also demonstrates how their liberation can lead to freedom and transformation. The search for meaning is contingent, not transcendent nor random. Free men act in contingent moments. That action can lead to individualized transformation from object (zombie) to subject (human.) We need not accept a transcendent narrative nor give up in despair due to a meaningless random existence. Characters who act, who refuse to accept either "truth," are transformed, and they, working as a multitude, may inspire social transformation (or revolution.)

This examination, then, begins with the basic formulation of the postmodern as post-apocalyptic. In chapter one, I examine the evolution of the contemporary zombie to its present representation of postmodernity. The chapter then examines Matheson's *I Am Legend* and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* to demonstrate that, for many authors in the postmodern period, postmodernity itself represents a post-apocalyptic landscape that denies the Cartesian duality implying individualization. Their post-apocalyptic landscapes are Jamesonian. These novels demonstrate the search for meaningful agency in postmodernity through that metaphor of a post-apocalyptic landscape. Characters only find meaning contingently and momentarily, though McCarthy, at least, maintains a stubborn belief that transcendent narrative may be rediscovered.

Chapter two examines the deconstruction of the historical narrative in postmodernity. I argue that history, whether consciously fictional or not, is always

ideological and that postmodern attempts to deconstruct the historical narrative are attempts to make this fact self-evident. As Jameson argues that the postmodern means a loss of history, historiographic novels expose and celebrate that loss. Various historical accounts of Nat Turner, including William Styron's fictional *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, demonstrate the political motivation behind history. I then examine E. L. Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel* and Robert Coover's *The Public Burning*, two postmodern novels about the Rosenberg Trials. Both are attempts to write multiple histories in moments of contingency to allow for more humanistic readings of the trials and to suggest action in the present before the present becomes historicized and hegemonic.

Finally, I examine the novels of Kurt Vonnegut, beginning with his apocalyptic novel *Cat's Cradle* through *God Bless You Mr. Rosewater* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, to his post-apocalyptic landscape in *Breakfast of Champions*. In these novels, Vonnegut gives us examples, from within the midst of a postmodern post-apocalypse, of characters that act against the received cultural assumptions of powerlessness and are transformed. In these novels, Vonnegut reinvents the subject lost in Jameson's postmodernity.

These authors metaphorically create the postmodern condition in different ways, yet all present the postmodern problem of finding meaningful agency. For the sake of this examination, meaningful agency is defined as being able to make real choices and resist cultural assumptions, mandates, and habituation, the ability to live as if one has free will, and as if one's free will have effects not only on one's own life, but on the lives of others. Meaningful agency means the ability not just to act within a system to critique that system, but to act *despite* the system and change that system. These authors offer some

possible methods of accomplishing meaningful agency within postmodernity. While postmodernity seems implacable, these postmodern authors and critics offer spaces for resistance through deconstruction, contingency and transformation.

Chapter One

Is There Anybody In There? The Post – Apocalyptic Fiction of Matheson and McCarthy

Introduction

For centuries, apocalyptic literature has served as a reminder that, teleologically speaking, things end, as a reminder of mortality. It has also worked as a mythical, religious, or scientific warning—a reminder to change our ways. Finally, to a certain extent, such literature has worked as a metaphoric view of a usually degenerate or failing society. Thus, something as iconic as the *Book of Revelation* works both as a warning to live a “Christian” life so as to be one of the chosen and as a reminder that one’s life in this present existence is finite, which, of course, can also work as a warning. However, as author Jonathan Kirsch argues, *Revelation* also works as a metaphor, representing the vengeance its author, John of Patmos, wishes to take on those who have wronged him.⁴ Even in the late 20th century, in the midst of the Cold War, apocalyptic stories often served as cautionary tales, in this case, usually about nuclear weapons and scientific knowledge, but also sometimes couched in religious terms, a warning, in the midst of a scientific metanarrative, to return to a religious one. Novels and films like Nevil Shute’s *On the Beach* attempt to paint a disturbing picture of what would happen in a nuclear

⁴ Kirsch makes his argument in *A History of the End of the World*, in which he studies how *Revelation* has affected history since its contentious inclusion in the Bible. Kirsch suggests that the *Book*, borne of vengeance, has, throughout history, tacitly encouraged vengeance from a religious point of view, among other things, thus actually driving history through its metanarrative. For more, see Kirsch.

exchange. The moral of the story is obvious: Unless we address the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and stem the distrust of the Cold War, we face mass extinction.⁵ This Cold War period correlates to the rise of the postmodern, a term that, in addition to being descriptive of art, literature, etc, is a periodizing term, referring to the epistemology that defined the zeitgeist after the fall of modernism. Hans Bertens, Fredric Jameson, Jean Lyotard and other critical theorists argue that the postmodern rises sometime after World War II, perhaps seeded in that war and growing in the staid 1950s to blossom in the 1960s and '70s. Thus, the rise of postmodernity coincides, more or less, with these cautionary tales of the Cold War.

Richard Matheson makes Cold War apocalyptic warnings in his 1954 novel, *I Am Legend* as well. However, the novel is also the first major literary piece in what I call the postmodern post-apocalyptic tradition, the popular trope of a post-apocalyptic world, seen especially in popular film and literature about a “zombie apocalypse,”

⁵ A more interesting and nuanced approach is expressed in Walter Miller's *A Canticle for Leibowitz*. Both an apocalyptic and a post-apocalyptic take, the novel takes place some 500 years after the “flame deluge” (a nuclear war) has drowned the world in a second Dark Age. While asking the reader to laugh at the parody of religious characters who seem so simple-minded (they, for instance, find a grocery list from the fabled Saint Leibowitz, who was a simple engineer before the Deluge, and honor it), the tale follows the re-emergence of a scientific metanarrative in the midst of a religious and mythical one. While careful not to situate itself on the side of knowledge or wisdom, the novel plays with that dichotomy, problematizing the ethical questions raised by the creation of weapons, euthanasia, and blind adherence to a religious narrative. The point here is that, while *A Canticle for Leibowitz* acts as a warning, it also metaphorically and symptomatically represents its own time (if not its very author.) In the midst of the post World War II decline of religion, it asks which metanarrative to believe—a scientific one or a religious one. It sees the results of the Cold War and fears what a devotion to science brings; but it also approaches religion with a great deal of doubt, understanding that, at best, religion is metaphorical. Thus, Miller symptomatically represents the uncertainty of his own time, an uncertainty leading toward postmodernity, as defined by Lyotard and Jameson.

metaphorically and symptomatically representing how life feels in postmodernity. Matheson uses the term “vampire,” but the creatures’ (relatively) mindless shambling and overwhelming numbers seem more recognizable, in retrospect, of the contemporary concept of zombies. Just as George Romero, who created the first “modern zombie” film, had no word for them (he called them “ghouls”) so too, Matheson refers to them as vampires. *I Am Legend* is really the first novel that presents us with the zombies we know and love today.

In such a post-apocalyptic world we feel the same loss of history and lack of meaning or apparent inability to effect change that Fredric Jameson argues denotes the postmodern. Thus, while acting as a warning, certainly, the novel does far more. War is part of the reason for the “vampire” plague, which surrounds the last human, Robert Neville. However, that cause is secondary to the condition of the protagonist and his world. In the end, the plague is simply a bacteria, spread by the war, but not caused by it. It has always been here. What then, if not a specific warning, is *I Am Legend* about? First of all, it is a commentary on the concept of a moral code as hegemonic. By the end of the novel, it becomes clear that, as the vampires become a majority, they reinterpret morality. The protagonist, Neville, has become the evil legend, the Dracula, the monster. During the day, he kills helpless sleeping vampires in his supposed attempt to survive. Eventually he meets what he thinks is a normal human, Ruth, who is able, for instance, to walk in the sunlight unlike the vampires. He spends time with her and does not realize until she leaves him that she is, in fact, also an evolved vampire. When he reads the note she leaves for him, he discovers that it was Neville himself who brutally killed Ruth’s husband as he slept helplessly, and it dawns on him that he, representing the white male

perspective, has been in the wrong all this time, hating and fearing the other. Thus one can read Neville's suicide at the end of the novel either as an act of selflessness (the old postcolonial ways must give way to the new postmodern reality) or as an act of final defiance—the white male will not allow his destiny (even if it is death) to be controlled by the “other.”

In *I Am Legend*, Robert Neville also becomes (as Lyotard would put it) incredulous toward *all* metanarratives. Unlike in other post-apocalyptic novels of the time period,⁶ there are no *competing* metanarratives here; Neville has lost *all* belief. Without any metanarrative to drive his existence, Neville searches for a reason to live in his post-apocalypse. But, again, that post-apocalypse is metaphorical; the world has not ended for Matheson. History and meaning have ended, but the world of the vampires/zombies goes on. (Indeed, it evolves.) Neville lives in postmodernity and, as a white American male, this existence, a loss of privilege, is, indeed, like the end of the world—at least for him. As critics like Deborah Christie have shown, *I Am Legend* establishes a sort of postmodern zombie apocalypse (or an apocalypse filled with marauding bands of “others” of many kinds). I argue that this trope is actually a way of writing about existence in a postmodernity in which privilege is diffused. This trope continues to exist in zombie films from 1968's *The Night of the Living Dead* to 2007's *Diary of the Dead*. However, it all starts with *I Am Legend* and, in fact, the three major motion pictures based on the novel (which represent different views based on the zeitgeist of the times in which they were made) trace that trajectory clearly, from 1965's *The Last Man on Earth*, (itself the genesis of George Romero's first “zombie” film *Night of the Living Dead*),

⁶ Walter Miller's *A Canticle for Liebowitz* is one example.

through 1971's Charlton Heston feature, *The Omega Man*, and to 2007's Will Smith remake *I Am Legend*. Each of these films offer different (and contradictory—and, as we shall see, deeply flawed) conclusions, but they all ask the same question raised in the novel *I Am Legend*: If there is no transcendent meaning or teleological movement, what meaning does the life of a single human have? What is the point of living when life is simply existence? Thus, through *I Am Legend*'s invention of the modern zombie (afterwards popularized by director Romero) Matheson establishes the evolution of human to post-human and proffers a post-apocalyptic existence as a metaphor for a postmodern life devoid of meaningful agency. That Neville finds no answer suggests that Matheson's view of the new postmodern reality is, itself, not a literal warning but a metaphorical one. Matheson does not simply argue that new technology is a danger, but that new epistemologies will suck meaning from our lives.

This chapter also will examine Cormac McCarthy's 2006 post-apocalyptic novel, *The Road*, through the same lens. *The Road* is the story of a father and son who wander the post-apocalyptic landscape, heading south on a dangerous road, also peopled with thieves and cannibals. Throughout their journey, the reader sees the bond between the two as well as their determination to live for each other. They find spare shelter along the way and run from cannibals who farm humans. They find a baby roasted on a stick, and deal with the cold rain and snow and ash. While the world had been destroyed by fire, there is never any explanation given—the fire could be man-made or celestial. The father's illness gets worse as they move slowly to the coast and, eventually, he dies. At the end, the boy is rescued by a nuclear family, which takes him off the road and to a new (apparently safe) home.

This Pulitzer-Prize-winning novel can be examined on many levels, particularly from a psychological perspective regarding the relationship between the (never named) father and son who act as the novel's protagonists. Even McCarthy has said in an interview that his novel is simply about the important psychological bond between father and son (Winfrey). However, just as important is the post-apocalyptic world surrounding the pair—a world shorn of meaning, a world in which men are nostalgic for an existence that will soon not even be a memory, a world without history or transcendence. Elizabeth Rosen explains the evolution of eschatological myths by suggesting that they once offered meaning but now do just the opposite. “Apocalyptic literature has traditionally been written to comfort people whose lives are, or who perceive their lives to be, overwhelmed by historical or social disruption . . . in part to make sense of events . . . [so that] suffering is made meaningful and hope restored” (Rosen xii). However, newer versions of such tales are instead, “a reflection of fears and disillusionment about the present, a bleak shift in emphasis from the belief in an ordered universe with a cogent history to one in which the overriding sense is of a chaotic, indifferent, and possibly meaningless universe” (Rosen xiv). In other words, they are now about postmodernity. McCarthy is writing about how to find meaning in a postmodern landscape.

He also wrestles with the question of how to pass meaning to a younger generation in such a landscape. *The Road* is about the loss of meaning in literature itself. Words themselves have been shorn of meaning. Certainly for a writer who cares about his message, whatever that message may be, words losing their meaning may be the end of meaning itself, and the end of the world. As the question is raised over and over in *The Road*, “Why bother?” If all transcendent meaning is a lie, what do we tell our children?

What stories do we pass on? As writers, what do we write about and what purpose do we serve? *The Road* suggests that we need to continue telling transcendent narratives so that we can continue to find meaning; those, like McCarthy, who choose to continue to engage in metanarratives, will then be relegated to the margins in postmodernity. However those margins will offer meaning in a way that the mainstream cannot. The novel attempts to use words to invoke the transcendent narratives of the past and make them real again. *The Road* hopes against hope for a post-postmodern existence rooted in nostalgia, creating individual narratives that *seem* to be universal metanarratives. Passing these narratives on, then, may allow for them to take root in later generations so as to, eventually, perhaps in a moment of contingency, bring belief in transcendence back to its pre-postmodern hegemonic position. McCarthy, politically tied to this position, pines for this reversal.

Apocalyptic or post-apocalyptic stories (such as *I Am Legend*, various zombie films, and *The Road*) of the postmodern era are not simply warnings per se. Rather, they are attempts to describe a postmodern existence. We live in such an existence, a Jamesonian postmodernity, in which we have become zombies (or, perhaps, have always been zombies fooled by metanarratives into believing we were autonomous subjects). How does one live in such a landscape and find meaningful agency? And what does a writer write about when, according to Jameson, there is nothing new left to write about (Jameson 7)? McCarthy seems to argue that the only hope is to invent hope, and to expect to live in the margins of such a society, hoping that in a future contingent moment, meaning will be rekindled. Matheson offers the reader the idea of embracing love when it all too briefly appears. Matheson's vision is just as bleak as McCarthy's but his

contingency lies in existential moments; McCarthy's lies in a stubborn refusal to let go of transcendence, even when such belief is marginalized in the postmodern. In this chapter, I will examine the post-apocalyptic metaphor; further chapters will examine other ways in which to find meaning or power in a world without history or apparent meaning.

The Beginning of the End: *I Am Legend* and the Search for Meaning in Meaningless Existence

Richard Matheson's popular 1954 novel *I Am Legend* tells the story of Robert Neville, ostensibly the last man on Earth. A plague (driven in part by bombings) has either killed much of the population or turned them into vampires. Thus, the last human battles hordes of zombie-like monsters before finally succumbing to the new population of vampiric creatures who supplant humanity. The novel acts as a post-apocalyptic story as well as a cautionary tale about how morality is a construct; Neville, afraid of the "vampires," kills them wantonly during the day while they are helpless. By the end of the novel, he recognizes the fear he evoked and also recognizes that normalcy and morality is a "majority concept" (Matheson 169). He is the evil being, not they. However the novel, appearing as it does in 1954, also establishes the trope of trying to find meaning in a postmodern existence through the metaphor of a post-apocalyptic existence, though certainly Matheson had no name for such a condition. *I Am Legend* is not about the end of the world so much as it is about how to live in a world without overarching meaning (without belief in transcendent metanarratives) and without history (teleology.) The novel is about the end of teleology, the end of modernism. Neville's eventual death offers

no deeper meaning; it is, like life seems to be in a postmodern landscape, random. It is Neville's recognition of such that makes this novel revolutionary and essentially launches a metaphorical genre—the post-apocalypse as the postmodern: the apparent end of meaning in a postmodern landscape.

Lyotard notes the “postmodern condition” is one of an “incredulity toward metanarratives.” While of course Lyotard was referring to any overarching belief that drives the zeitgeist of a culture, the timing of postmodernity suggests that among these institutions or narratives that postmodernism would come to deconstruct were those of nationality (thus the breakdown in trust in the government); rationality (or enlightenment thinking as epitomized by modernist and scientific teleology); and, of course, religious narratives (which often had already been displaced by scientific teleology in modernist epistemology.) *I Am Legend* comments on all three of these directly. The first and most obvious is the national metanarrative, but as almost all apocalyptic novels and stories of the time focus on this metanarrative (generally within the context of the Cold War and nuclear Armageddon), the novel's distrust or disregard of nationality is nothing particularly unique.⁷ It is the commentary on religiosity and science (teleology) in the novel that is innovative.

⁷ Suffice it to say that most apocalyptic stories of the time are cautionary tales about nationality and governments getting out of control. The aforementioned *A Canticle for Liebowitz*, for instance, demonstrates that a misguided belief in nationality and trust of government will inevitably lead to war; novels and films such as Nevil Shute's *On the Beach* and *Fail-Safe*, by Eugene Burdick and Harvey Wheeler, also warn of trusting governments and nationalities. And of course, Stanley Kubrick's classic *Dr. Strangelove*, itself culled from the novel *Red Alert*, by Peter George, argues for the absurdity of trust in any government. This distrust arises, as we shall see in further chapters, from obvious governmental overreach in both World War II (in many instances, including the

The existence of the vampires themselves represent an end to religious belief. As Neville experiments on the creatures, he discovers that there are two types—one type consists of the living vampires (such as his neighbor, Ben Cortman) who are diseased and dying and who have some semblance of apparent connection to their previous humanity. Cortman, for instance, remembers Neville and returns to his house every night in the hopes that the man will come out so that Cortman can kill him and drink his blood. That said, these creatures seem to have lost any other kind of will. They are drawn to living blood, but often unable, because of limited agency, to get it. So, while Cortman can intone “Neville, come out!” each night, he cannot (for instance) use tools to try to open Neville’s door. The second kind of vampire is the dead; as with Neville’s wife, Virginia, these are creatures who die of the plague and come back from the dead. They are the undead, shambling through existence with no will. Most scholars who trace the history of the popular contemporary “zombie” trope conclude that *I Am Legend* is where the shambling zombies that now infest our cinemas first appear. Deborah Christie, for instance, makes this argument in her book *Better Off Dead*, noting that George Romero, generally considered the first and foremost director in the zombie genre, has admitted that his concept of zombies (then called “ghouls”) for the ground-breaking 1968 film, *Night of the Living Dead*, comes from the 1965 film *The Last Man on Earth*, itself an adaptation of *I Am Legend*. Matheson may call his creatures vampires, but as we look back, we know a zombie when we see one.

bombings of Dresden and the use of nuclear weapons) and by the executions of the Rosenbergs, all by a supposedly “righteous” United States.

In the contemporary zombie, we see the questioning of what makes us human, but that questioning is couched in postmodern terms. “Zombie” is not a term invented in Romero films. The term originally appeared in film in racist post-colonial movies like *White Zombie* and referred to humans apparently brought back to life as slaves by a sorcerer or voodoo master of some sort.⁸ Originally coined in Haiti to describe these slaves, the word zombie entered popular US culture through a fear-mongering book called *The Magic Island*. Written by William Seabrook and published in 1929, the book told of these soulless slaves, apparently dead men, working the cane fields for the rich slave-master. Chera Kee notes that for decades the zombie became a symbol of an “ideological critique of . . . capitalist exploitation” and racism, wherein whiteness was the norm and the other was presented as monstrous (Kee 15). Zombies represented both greed and fears of miscegenation. Over time, the zombie came to represent, as had cannibalism before it, the demarcation between civilized and uncivilized societies in popular film. But that use of “zombie” was very different from the zombies we know and love today. “Zombiism, as it was first presented to US audiences, was not a disease, nor was it irreversible; it was a state, not unlike being under hypnosis” (Kee 21).

The zombie, then, was not really an undead version of a self, but rather a soulless husk imbued with “consciousness” by a greater power. The Cartesian duality of a

⁸ Actually, of course, these were generally people drugged and thus under ostensible control of a “sorcerer” at least until the drug wore off. Zora Neale Hurston, among other anthropologists, studied this phenomenon. Eventually, an ethnobotanist, Wade Davis, claimed to identify the two drugs responsible for the Haitian zombie. For more information on the scientific basis of this phenomenon, Davis’ two books on the subject are 1985’s *The Serpent and the Rainbow* and 1988’s *Passage of Darkness: The Ethnobiology of the Haitian Zombie*. While these anthropological and chemical origins are important, this study is focused not on the scientific truth of zombies but their portrayal in popular and literary culture.

separation between mind (or soul) and body (or the physical) remains in effect in this construction. The mind (or soul) is separate from the body; the creature does not move of its own volition but rather through the mind of another. There is a higher power, a purpose for the zombie's existence. However, in the new contemporary zombie invented in *I Am Legend* by Matheson, the creatures come to (un)life not through the control of another or through a religious narrative, but rather through a disease. The will (the mind and/or soul) is not completely disconnected from the body; the creatures retain memories and desires from their former lives, but are under no one's control. When Neville's wife, Virginia, claws her way out of her grave, she is not under someone else's control; she shambles to Neville's door nonetheless. The Cartesian model is shattered. When the dead come back to life more or less randomly, the entire question of a religious or transcendental philosophy is problematized. How can there be any talk of an afterlife? As Deborah Christie notes, "If zombies are both alive and dead, if they retain portions of both mind and body, then they force us to rethink the foundational philosophies that have informed our interactions with birth, life, death, and the hereafter" (Christie 68). That the word "zombie" took on this new meaning in the postmodern era is telling. Nick Muntean writes that,

The modern zombie arose after the . . . cultural impact of the atrocities of World War II (i.e., the Nazi concentration camps and the aftermath of the atomic explosions in Hiroshima and Nagasaki) rendered the psychological threat of the Voodoo zombie (that of losing one's autonomy to another) obsolete, replaced instead by the far more disturbing possibility of an existential anxiety (that one could continue to live, but be nothing) (Muntean 84).

These creatures are alive but have limited agency. They exist for no real purpose. This popular version of the zombie concept was born in World War II.

This is the world that Robert Neville faces and any beliefs he had in transcendental existence are shattered. After his wife dies and is buried and claws back to the surface looking for him, Neville is apparently forced to kill her again, this time with a stake through the heart.⁹ He again buries her, in a mausoleum so no one can desecrate her corpse. He visits her from time to time, in an attempt to remember his previous life. During one such visit he notes, “If I could die now . . . peacefully and gently, without a tremor of a crying out. If I could be with her. *If I could believe* I would be with her” (Matheson 37, italics added). Neville cannot believe. Like a citizen in a postmodern civilization, he has accepted the reality that there is no afterlife, no transcendental existence, no Cartesian model of separate soul and body. How could he, as the last man on Earth, surrounded by the purposeless undead, come to any other conclusion? Indeed, he, too, is one of the purposeless undead, though he simply hasn’t accepted it (yet). He is “still alive . . . heart beating senselessly, veins running without point, bones and muscles and tissue all alive and functioning with no purpose at all” (37). Neville is more like a zombie than he is like a human, in part because no one is like him and humans are social creatures. Neville is alone.

Deborah Christie, writing about the “modern zombie,” ties the trope to Robert Pepperell’s concept of the “post-human,” noting that the “post-human” indicates “that our conceptual construction of what it meant to be human is undergoing a profound

⁹ Of course, this detail is one reason that Neville conflates these zombies with vampires; in later narratives, the trope of a stake through the heart would be replaced by a bullet through the brain. In either case, the comment on Cartesian duality remains the same, though dependent on either a religious or a rational worldview. The heart (or soul) or the mind (will) of the creature must be destroyed.

transformation” (Pepperall, qtd in Christie, 68, italics in original).¹⁰ Fredric Jameson writes that part of the cultural turn toward postmodernity involves the “death of the subject” or “the end of individualism as such” (Jameson 5). He argues that subjectivity or individualism was a trait of modernist thought and aesthetics. Modernist painters, for instance, had very individual styles, each unique unto itself. This style is “linked to the conception of a unique self and private identity, a unique personality and individuality.” He argues that in his conception of postmodernity, “this kind of individualism and personal identity is a thing of the past [and the] . . . individualist subject is dead.” He then asks whether the subject has disappeared in the postmodern or if the concept of the subject was a modernist construction, that, “it never really existed in the first place; there have never been autonomous subjects . . . [and] this construct is merely a philosophical and cultural mystification which taught to persuade people that they ‘had’ individual subjects and possessed some unique identity” (Jameson 6). Jameson looks around himself and sees a world where subjectivity has disappeared and this observation makes him question whether such individual subjectivity ever truly existed.

Neville faces the same sort of realization with the introduction of the modern zombie and perhaps he ponders the same question that Jameson does. Either unique transcendent subjects had been lost when the world ended, or subjectivity never really existed but is, rather, a myth. The zombies may be simply a truer reflection of humanity than Neville seems to be. For Jameson, the demarcation point for this loss of subjectivity (or the realization that it is a construction) is the rise of consumerist postmodernity after World War II; for Neville, of course, it is the post-human revolution of the zombies.

¹⁰ He makes this contention in his book *The Post-Human Condition*. See Pepperell.

Matheson, in this very time-period, metaphorically represents Jameson's cultural turn. Christie also ties both Matheson and the zombie trope to this periodization, noting that the novel shows that "we have been identifying *humanness* within an outdated context" (Christie 76, italics in original). Then she connects *I Am Legend* to George Romero's 1968 film *Night of the Living Dead*, and argues that "the notion that there is ultimately no discernible difference between the living and the dead suggests that the corpse of traditional [modernist] humanism is as fluid and mobile as the walking corpses of the dead" (Christie 80). What it means to be human has changed, and with that change is either the loss of subjectivity or the realization that subjectivity is, itself, a construction. As Steven Zani and Kevin Meaux note, "the point is that loss of control, loss of meaning, is constant in the zombie narrative" (Zani 114). The same could be said of Jameson's postmodernity. When we have lost control (or agency) we have lost meaning from a modernist perspective.

The novel also reflects Lyotard's concept of an incredulity toward metanarratives more directly and satirically. In the early days of the plague, Neville is drawn into a religious revival tent, where the faithful are urged to confess their sins and accept that the plague is a punishment from God. Matheson paints this scene harshly: "Robert Neville backed away, bumping into flailing-handed, white-jawed true believers screaming out succor from the lowering skies" (113). The believers are portrayed as frighteningly as are the vampires. Later, Neville ponders faith: "In a typical desperation for quick answers, easily understood, people had turned to primitive worship as the solution. With less than success. Not only had they died as quickly as the rest of the people, but they had died with terror in their hearts, with a mortal dread flowing in their very veins . . . to find

themselves clawing back up through the earth” (115). When these believers became zombies, they hated their very post-human existence.¹¹ This rejection of a modernist epistemology for a religious one is typical of literature and our very society in times of plague, and reflects what Renee Girard calls the “second plague” of a societal breakdown. “Historians still argue whether the Black Death was a cause or a consequence of the social upheavals of the fourteenth century,” for instance (Girard 834). Zani and Meaux note, “As a culture, we easily backslide into pre-Enlightenment rhetoric to explain our own widespread illnesses, even in the face of a great deal of scientific or secular rhetoric to the contrary” (Zani 106). There is much that we cannot explain. The novel shows this backsliding for what it is—desperate attempts to explain the unexplainable through failed metanarratives. *I Am Legend* satirizes and deconstructs transcendent belief.

The modernist view of teleological rationality is similarly shattered in *I Am Legend* and Neville has similar doubts about science and progress. Indeed, science is unable to save humanity. Early in the novel, Neville seems to trust science: “Things should be done the right way, the *scientific way*” (27, italics added). However, when Neville visits a library and enters the Science Room, he sees, “All these books . . . the residue of a planet’s intellect, the scrapings of fertile minds, the leftovers, the potpourri of artifacts that had no power to save men from perishing” (78). In addition to the whole of scientific progress being unable to save humanity, Neville himself faces such failure on an individual level. In an attempt to give his life some meaning, he studies biology to try

¹¹ This detail is another reason many of the zombies seem like vampires to Neville; this belief and dread that fills their mind as they die remains in their consciousness (such as it is) when they come back to life. When they see a cross, or themselves (as a zombie) in a mirror, shame drives them away, as in the vampire myths of old.

to figure out the germ and to see if there is a possible cure. This search has the effect of apparently changing his life for the better as he becomes less alcoholic and self-pitying during this stage of the novel: “He found, to his surprise, that he actually gleaned pleasure from practicing orderliness” in scientific experiments (85). However, it does nothing to actually solve the problem. He makes some apparent progress, finally discovering the bacillus at fault for the disease, but fails to get any further. There is no redemption in science.¹² “World’s gone to hell. No germs, no science,” he concludes (93). So modernist epistemologies like science are useful in that they give life a purpose for a time, but they are ultimately revealed to be empty. They lead nowhere.

When Neville discovers a living dog, both metanarratives of science and religion fail him once again. The dog brings joy into his life, and also, in a way, brings religion and science back into his life as well, if only briefly. Neville finds himself praying for the dog. “To his complete astonishment, he later found himself offering up a stumbling prayer that the dog would be protected. It was a moment in which he felt a desperate need to believe in a God that shepherded His own creations” (96). And when he finally gets the dog to trust him, he uses all of the scientific knowledge he has discovered of the germ in an attempt to keep the dog alive, particularly when Neville discovers that the dog has the disease. For some fifteen or so pages, Matheson writes of Neville’s attempts to save the dog, but cruelly spends just one small sentence ending the battle with little explanation: “In a week the dog was dead” (110). Once again, religiosity and scientific teleology fail. Death holds no significance; it is simply random and omnipresent. The

¹² All three filmed versions, however, do offer redemption in a mix of science and religion, saving the old world rather than doing what the novel does—letting it die.

dog's death is the final blow; Neville ultimately loses all faith in metanarratives. He has come to accept the uncomfortable numbness of postmodernity. "Burying the dog had not been the agony he had supposed it would be. In a way, it was almost like burying threadbare hopes and false excitements. From that day on he learned to accept the dungeon he existed in, neither seeking to escape with sudden derring-do nor beating his pate bloody on its walls" (111). The metanarratives of the past have become "threadbare hopes and false excitements." Like 1950s America around him, Neville, in his suburban home with anything he could ever want, is living life seemingly without purpose.

He falls back into routine. He builds up his house in such a way as to provide defense from the zombies and allow him to live a relatively normal and almost ritualistic life. Every day he makes more dowels with which to kill the vampires. He even makes a list of his daily routine, but "he never seemed to get ahead" (16). The routine makes him avoid the real questions of his existence. "Better do this and better do that, he thought morosely. There were so many damned things to do, he'd never get to the real problem" (22). Like the ennui felt by so many housewives in the 1950s,¹³ or even their husbands who worked for corporate America, while the daily threat of nuclear Armageddon hung over their heads, Neville does what he does but feels that something—a deeper purpose—is missing. That "real problem," that lack purpose, is stasis, is an existence without transcendence or progress. "Time was caught on hooks. Everything stood fixed" (69). Later, Neville thinks, "What was he going to do? Choices seemed pointless now. What

¹³ Famously called "the problem that has no name" by Betty Friedan in her book *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963. I am in no way suggesting that this feeling of women, due to their lack of agency, is the same as their husbands' (or even Neville's). However the generation itself felt a lack of meaning, but, perhaps, in starkly different ways and levels.

did it matter *what* he did? Life would be equally purposeless no matter what his decision was” (72, italics in original). The analogy here with studies of ennui in the 1950s, such as *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit*, is stunning.¹⁴ When one reads the “end of the world” in *I Am Legend* as metaphorical, one can see Matheson describing the truth of 1950s America waking up to its own postmodern reality. Bernice Murphy ties the suburbanization of America to films like *Night of the Living Dead*, noting that characterizations of 50s suburbia called that suburbia, “shoddily constructed, repetitive, [and a] joyless hell” (Murphy 120). It was the dream of a cheap home ownership, but she notes the rise of Levittowns as a way in which “alienation and depersonalization” grew in post World War II America, and led to popular horror films that featured internal rather than external threats. These films focused “on dangers that were literally closer to home” (Murphy 123.) The ennui of such a suburban existence suffused with quiet desperation describes Neville’s uncomfortably numb existence quite well, especially his intense fear, as Americans’ “initial glee soon gives way to boredom and deadening ennui” (Murphy 125). In the famous Port Huron Statement in 1962, the Students for a Democratic Society noted that, as possibly “the last generation in the experiment with living,” the obsession with routine is really “a glaze above deeply felt anxieties about their role in the new world” (“Port Huron” 51-52). Matheson has described these feelings through metaphor. His weaving of the post-apocalyptic metaphor with non-Cartesian zombies that inherit that world is groundbreaking and prophetic. As the 60s would bloom, young people

¹⁴ In addition to *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, other books exploring this phenomenon include David Riesman’s 1963 book *The Lonely Crowd* and 1952’s *What Makes Sammy Run?* by Budd Schulberg.

would attempt rebel against this zombie-like experience, leading to the very existence of groups like the modern SDS.

When Neville finally dies he realizes that, “in spite of having lived with death all those years, in spite of having walked a tightrope of a bare existence across an endless maw of death . . . personal death was still a thing beyond comprehension” (164). He refers to life as a “habit . . . I got . . . used to . . .” (165). With Neville’s death offering no meaning to the reader, his life also offers none. When Neville finally kills himself, it is just another pointless death.¹⁵ As Deborah Christie notes about both Neville’s death and the deaths of various characters in *Night of the Living Dead*, “Death is . . . no longer a state of being that has meaning [and] . . . if death no longer has value—sacred or otherwise—how are we to consider the value of life?” Tying this realization to Giorgio Agamban’s concept of a permanent state of exception, Christie argues that, “dying itself

¹⁵ This suicide is notably different from the endings of all three films made from the novel. In 1965’s *The Last Man on Earth*, Neville dies having discovered a cure; the new vampires are unaware that he has saved them and given the cure to them and they kill him in a church, thus reassuring the viewer’s faith in both the transcendent metanarrative of religiosity and the salvation of science. Rather than rejecting both metanarratives, the film tries to combine them. In 1971’s *The Omega Man*, Neville is not an everyman, as he is in the novel, but rather a scientist who, like in the earlier film, has discovered the cure and administered it to himself. His very blood (with its antibodies) has become the serum that will save the others. As he dies, his arms spread as if on a crucifix. Dutch (a character who has the disease but who is “not too far gone”) reaches into the water baptism-like to retrieve the last bottle of the serum/blood. Thus, again, both a religious metanarrative and a scientific one are reinforced. And in 2007’s *I Am Legend*, (more a remake of *The Omega Man* than a more faithful adaptation of the novel) Neville is again a scientist who also finds the cure. He has lost his faith, however, and that faith is reignited when he meets Anna (another human) who tells him she can hear God talking. At first he does not believe her, but eventually he passes the cure on to Anna, after “listening” to God. He dies protecting her so she can bring the serum to the still surviving humans. This act gives his life meaning and allows a post 9-11 audience to reaffirm their faith that things happen for a reason. Thus, in all the film versions, Neville’s death has meaning that can be tied to both scientific teleology and religious transcendence, something the novel specifically and pointedly does not do.

has no purpose anymore” (Christie 79). If death is everywhere, then individual death is no longer meaningful.

For Matheson, the cultural turn from modernist teleology to postmodernist contingency is the end of the world. What happiness can be found in such an existence? Obviously we need to find our own contingent meaning, but that meaning will not be transcendent or universal. Neither science nor religious belief offers redemption. For Matheson (or at least for Neville) that contingent meaning is expressed existentially, through love. When Virginia, dies (the first time, anyway), “the world had shuddered to a halt” (69). For him, the death of a loved one is the same as the end of the world. One can read the novel as simply a metaphor for life after the death of a loved one. Later Neville rhapsodizes, imagining a woman who had died a virgin: “To die, he thought, never knowing the fierce joy and attendant comfort of a loved one’s embrace . . . all without knowing what it was to love and be loved. That was a tragedy more terrible than becoming a vampire” (79). We may all be zombies, but we can and must love nonetheless. *I Am Legend* teaches that moments are transitory and that we must make the most of them to find love; however, there is no salvation, scientific or religious, and no greater meaning than existence. Neville—and by extension the novel—is resigned to postmodernity, but still continues to find momentary or temporary meaning within that postmodernity. He never truly rediscovers love after his wife dies and the world ends. While he sleeps with Ruth, it is telling that he wakes up crying for his wife. The only meaning he finds in this postmodern post-apocalypse is meaning he constructs—through the routine of work. However, such construction is only necessary after the death of his wife, that moment when “the world had shuddered to a halt” (69). Without that love,

fleeting as it may have been, Neville's life would *never* had had any meaning. Neville's response to postmodernity is existential, a response that offers some solace, but not truly meaningful agency. His death, finally gives the reader no hope for transcendence, either spiritually or through scientific teleology. According to *I Am Legend*, this is the world we inherit after World War II.

Without Hope, What Hope Would There Be? The Postmodern Post-Apocalypse and *The Road*

Things have not changed much since 1954; in fact, to paraphrase Eisenhower, things are more like they are than they ever were. Jean Baudrillard argues that we already live in the post-apocalypse. "Everything has already become nuclear, far away, vaporized. The explosion has already occurred" (Baudrillard, qtd in Heffernan 171). While *I Am Legend* seemed to demonstrate the fear of a cultural turn toward postmodernity, Cormac McCarthy's Pulitzer-Prize winning 2006 novel, *The Road*, demonstrates that the world the former novel prophesied has fully come to pass, despite (or perhaps because of) the awakening of the 1960s. *I Am Legend* did not quite know what to make of this future; *The Road* yearns to return to the metanarratives of the past, while recognizing the truth of their deconstruction. Writing about postmodernity, Jameson notes that postmodern artists (or writers), "of the present day will no longer be able to invent new styles and worlds—they've already been invented . . . this means that contemporary or postmodern art is going to be about art itself . . . [and] will be involved in the necessary failure of art and the aesthetic, the failure of the new" (Jameson 7). Thus,

according to Jameson, there will be nothing new in postmodern apocalyptic stories; however, they will be about the very failure of those stories.

Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* demonstrates Jameson's theory. Like other contemporary post-apocalypses, *The Road* acts as a metaphor for postmodern existence, but it also shows how a writer who desperately pines for a modernist sensibility metaphorically presents that struggle in his prose. McCarthy is a writer who, in a postmodern world, chooses to write about what it means to live (and to write) in such a world. McCarthy truly decries postmodernity and wishes for a better (or at least different) existence while also, in contradiction, accepting the postmodern reality as truth. In *The Road*, many of the same conceits of other post-apocalyptic tales appear—marauding bands of “others” (in this case, cannibals, but not zombies); destroyed infrastructure; and the second plague of chaos and societal breakdown. However, *The Road* is also about words and how the loss of meaning of words (that is, their reference to the real) is the same as a general loss of meaning. Without meaning connected to words, writers have lost the ability to write about anything meaningful. Words without referents are the end of the world for McCarthy.

The novel starts by referencing Plato's Simile of the Cave. The novel's protagonist, the man, wakes from a dream in which his son, “led him by the hand . . . [where] light [was] playing over the wet flowstone walls” (McCarthy 3). In Plato's cave analogy, the light of the fire is an illusion, but the prisoner is led from the cave to finally see the sun, the ultimate truth of the world. With this analogy, Plato introduces the shapes or the forms—the ideals. Blinded by the physical world, we tend to ignore what Plato would call reality (or truth)—the ideal. Thus, the shadows on the wall are the illusions of

a daily life of work and other social constructs, are what we pay attention to, while the fire itself and the sun (representing here the transcendent, meaning that exists prior to any social construction) go unnoticed (Plato 316-326). This is of course a transcendent narrative, and one that had been the bedrock of our philosophies and existence until the postmodern era.¹⁶ In this formulation, the shadows on the wall are the signifier representing the signified (the fire or the sun.) True meaning, in Plato's analogy, lies with the signified, not the representation or the signifier. To take this analogy a step further, words are meaningful only because they signify something deeper, something real. The father's dream, then, is of a world with meaning, with ideals, with spirits, with God, and he is led to this truth by the boy. Of course, then he wakes in the reality of the post-apocalyptic landscape, one that is "barren, silent, godless" (4). Even the winds are "secular" (177). Plato's forms do not exist in such a world. McCarthy continues to reference the cave nostalgically throughout the novel, usually through memories long past, such as when the man remembers a trout-filled stream, watching the trout, "as they turned on their sides to feed. Reflecting back the sun deep in the darkness like a flash of knives in a cave" (42).

The Road is the story of a father and son traveling south to warmth in a post-apocalyptic world. Trees are ash, houses destroyed, and most people are dead; those who are not dead are not to be trusted. As if to demonstrate the inability to write about or describe such a postmodern world, none of the characters in *The Road* have names. The father is simply referred to as "father" (or papa) while the son is referred to as "son" (or

¹⁶ Of course, this is the existentialist formulation, but it is not until the postmodern era that the existentialist beliefs really take hold.

boy.) The land they are in goes nameless. Even the road on which the father insists he and his son travel goes nameless. Things that are not named, then, are slowly lost because like shadows in Plato's cave, the name is not important; only what the name represents is important. But here any names are useless because they represent nothing. McCarthy plays with postmodernism, offering that, when names become meaningless (because a sign is just an empty signifier) why bother with names at all? McCarthy describes how Plato's philosophical outlook is fading in postmodernity:

The world shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities. The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion. Colors. The names of birds. Things to eat. Finally the names of things one believed to be true. More fragile than he would have thought. How much was gone already? The sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so of its reality. Drawing down like something trying to preserve heat. In time to wink out forever (88-89).

In other words, as we lose sense of the ideal, of the transcendent, words themselves lose their meaning because they no longer represent the transcendent. Words are just words, names are just names. The father feels this loss more poignantly than he does the loss of physical things or even human lives. When the boy and the man see someone on the road, the boy asks who it is. The man replies, "I don't know. Who is anybody"(49)?

Later, however, they meet a man on the road who does give a name—Ely. It is telling that the name Ely acts as a referent (in this case a referent to the prophet Elijah from the Old Testament who is destined to appear again before the coming of the messiah) and that that referent is then "shorn of its meaning." Ely, like his namesake, tells the duo stories, but later recants:

"I made [the stories] up.

What else did you make up?

I'm just on the road the same as you. No different.

Is your name really Ely?

No” (McCarthy 171).

So much for Biblical referents! Even McCarthy's lack of punctuation (in this case, quotations) seems to suggest an undifferentiation among characters. Everyone and everything is the same. Names are just labels, invented. The symbols are just symbols, “referents shorn of meaning.” There is nothing for the symbols to represent anymore.

However the father—and, by extension, McCarthy—pines nostalgically for a life with meaning. Even as all evidence points to the contrary, the father continues to promote a grand narrative. In the first place, while everyone, including his own wife, has given up, and even as he is dying, the father drives himself and his son toward the south, toward some sort of salvation. This he does despite reality, even though he argues that “everything depended on reaching the coast, yet . . . he knew that all of this was empty and [had] no substance to it. There was a good chance they would die in the mountains and that would be that” (McCarthy 29). Like Robert Neville in *I Am Legend* or the characters in *Night of the Living Dead*, the man’s (and the son’s) death will hold no meaning. However, he denies this truth to his son by telling him that things will be better in the south. He also continues to tell his son stories in an attempt to get him to believe that there once were narratives that mattered, before the postmodern revolution, offering hope in nostalgia. And this he does despite realizing, at least on an intellectual level, that such hopes are vain, that such dreams are “siren worlds” that would entice him and drown him (McCarthy 18). He also tells the son that everything will be alright, that “all the trees in the world are going to fall sooner or later. But not on us.” The son asks how

he knows they will make it. "I just know," the father responds (McCarthy 35). When his wife had killed herself, surrendering to the world around them, she derided the man for his continued, stubborn beliefs. "You talk about taking a stand," she says, "but there is no stand to take" (McCarthy 57). If there are no deeper ideals to fight for, then we are simply fighting for mere existence. What stand is there to take in such a world? For the man, that stand is a nostalgic yearning for a pre-postmodern existence. His wife sums up how the world now sees itself, in a particularly postmodern self-referential line: "We are [just] the walking dead in a horror film" (55.) Thus, while there are no actual zombies in *The Road*, McCarthy makes it clear that, in postmodernity, we are *all* zombies. Again, we know a zombie when we see one.

The most consistent and moralistic grand narrative the father tells the son is a particularly un-postmodern one, that they are the "good guys." This happens throughout the novel; for instance, when the son asks if they would ever kill and eat a dog or a human, the father tells him no, and when the son asks why, it is because they are the "good guys." "We will always be [the good guys]," the father assures him (McCarthy 77). Good guys "don't give up" (137). Thus, like *I Am Legend* before it, *The Road* comments on the concept of an inherent or transcendent morality. In the former novel, Matheson casts doubt on the existence of a transcendent moral code, showing that the majority constructs morality for the purposes of maintaining power. Neville has that power and the apparent moral high ground for the first part of the novel; in the second, the vampires claim both. *The Road* implies the opposite.

For most of the novel, despite the overwhelming odds, the man and the son seem to act morally, even if it is the son who inspires the man to do so. On the road they

constantly meet bands of cannibals and thieves, but the boy and the man act under a moral code. Even though they have little food, they give some to a starving man on the road. When they find a shelter,¹⁷ long since abandoned, with food and heat and clean water, the boy insists the people who had prepared the shelter were good guys. The boy even offers up a prayer of thanks to the “good guys” and says that, “we know that you saved it for yourself and if you were here we wouldn’t eat it no matter how hungry we were and we’re sorry that you didn’t get to eat it and we hope that you’re safe in heaven with God” (McCarthy 146). The boy accepts his father’s tales, and believes the narrative of good guys and bad guys and a God in heaven. The man also notes that the son is “carrying the fire” (McCarthy 129), and the boy is constantly being described in religious terms: When the father washes him it is like “an ancient anointing” (McCarthy 74); the boy’s hair is a “golden chalice, good to house a god” (McCarthy 75). The man explains to his son that he is going to take care of him because he “was appointed to do that by God” (McCarthy 77). He even tells Ely that the boy is a god.

These descriptions (and many more) suggest that the father, in a postmodern world where God is dead, attempts to teach his son transcendent beliefs deconstructed in postmodernity, in spite of the evidence of that deconstruction. Indeed, Ely tells the man that, “there is no God and we are his prophets” (McCarthy 170). Other men are described as “creedless shells” (McCarthy 28); the landscape is described as “[b]arren, silent, godless” (McCarthy 4). Only the man and the son seem to refuse to accept this secular,

¹⁷ Notably, the shelter is off the road. While the road offers a way to go, it offers no real safety or succor for the pair, unlike the more marginal areas off the road, out of the mainstream of culture.

postmodern world despite all the evidence to the contrary. The man, however, knows better (or should):

He walked out in the gray light and stood and he saw for a brief moment the absolute truth of the world. The cold relentless circling of the insensate earth. Darkness implacable. The blind dogs of the sun in their running. The crushing black vacuum of the universe (McCarthy 130).

This scene contrasts that of the prisoner being freed in Plato's cave analogy, who discovers the truth of the sun and its warmth and light (representing God). The prisoner dares to look below the surface; here the surface is all there is. The "absolute truth of the world" is postmodernity, an existence without transcendence, but the man preaches transcendence to his son anyway, seeming to pretend that there is deeper meaning. Even as he lies, he seems to believe his words might invoke a pre-postmodern world back from the ashes. "Not all dying words are true and this blessing is no less real for being shorn of its ground" (McCarthy 31). When the words have no meaning, shorn of their referent, the writer must still act as if they do. "Make a list. Recite a litany. Remember" (31). Again, referencing Plato and his forms, McCarthy writes, "Evoke the forms. Where you've nothing else, construct ceremonies out of the air and breathe upon them" (74). The novel seems to hope that mere words will somehow raise the spirits that Plato wrote about, that remembering the signifier will give life to the signified. The man tells the son "old stories of courage and justice as he remembered them" (McCarthy 41). If there is no transcendent truth, McCarthy seems to suggest, perhaps invoking it will make it real.

Unlike what Matheson does, however, McCarthy seems to suggest that these methods work. The transcendent moral code, for instance, is apparently upheld when the man breaks it. Shortly after the man assures the boy they would not take the food, even of

the dead, the man does steal food, out of vengeance. After a vagabond takes the duo's food and clothes, the man hunts him down, not just to get their equipment back, but also for revenge. He leaves the thief naked and alone in the cold on the road, essentially killing him, and rationalizes his actions. "You didn't mind doing it to us," he says when the thief protests about being left to die (McCarthy 257). Later he says to the boy, "he's going to die anyway" (McCarthy 259). The boy judges his father based on the code. They argue and the boy cries. When the man says, "you're not the one who has to worry about everything," the boy replies, "Yes I am . . . I am the one" (259). Convinced that the boy is right, the two look for the thief, but never find him. That night, the man again tries to rationalize his actions to the boy: "I wasn't going to kill him." Before falling asleep, the boy finally replies, "But we did kill him" (260).

The man here has become one of the "bad guys." From this point on, his illness grows stronger and he gets weaker, while the boy gets stronger. Unlike in *I Am Legend* in which moral codes are shown to be hegemonic constructs, in *The Road*, moral codes remain transcendent. Not long after the man exacts his revenge, he finally dies of his illness. The novel is structured such that the reader can recognize that it is the man's transgression of the moral code that punishes him; like Moses, he cannot get to the Promised Land. However, his death allows the "good guys" who had been discreetly following the duo (but had been afraid of the father's quick temper as evidenced in his leaving the thief to die) to approach his son. The father's sins literally keep him from reaching redemption, while the boy does reach that Promised Land, a land where he becomes part of a nuclear family.

Unlike Neville's death in *I Am Legend*, then, the father's death in *The Road* is suffused with meaning. Just before the father dies, McCarthy again references Plato's cave: "Drip of water. A fading light. Old dreams encroached upon the waking world. The dripping was in the cave . . . [i]n that cold corridor they had reached the point of no return which was measured from the first solely by the light they carried with them" (280). As he dies, the father recognizes the world of the living as the cave; he recognizes that the only meaning in this world is the meaning we bring to it. He is leaving the cave of illusion as he dies. The boy waits next to his dead father for three days. For the first time, the novel makes reference to one of the pair's names, as the boy invokes his father, saying "his name over and over again," before wandering off in grief (281). This invocation calls to mind the father's earlier litanies, an attempt to bring back spirits of the dead. The novel ends with "good guys," a veritable nuclear family of a man, woman, and two children, finding the son after he has left his dead father, and adopting him. "You don't eat people?" asks the boy. "No. We don't eat people" is the response, proving they are good (McCarthy 284). They even waste a precious blanket to cover the father's body. The woman talks to the boy about God, but he conflates God with his father and speaks to him every day. "The woman said that was all right. She said the breath of God was his breath yet though it pass from man to man through all of time" (McCarthy 286). These people have found a way to survive in a world without transcendence and yet maintain their belief in transcendence.

However, they, while similar to the pair in their shared moral compass, are quite different in their methods of finding agency in postmodernity. Unlike the father, who stays on the road—the mainstream of the postmodern society where they meet beggars

and thieves and cannibals (“creedless men”)—the nuclear family is content to live in the margins *off* the road. They tell the boy, “If you stay you need to keep out of the road. I don’t know how you made it this far” (283). The novel even implies that these people have kept off the road and in the shadows watching the pair throughout their journey. The boy had seen a child early in the novel, when exploring a house off of the road. While the father doubts the boy’s story at the time, the group at the end of the novel seems to verify the sighting. “There was some discussion about whether to come after you at all,” says the man who finds the boy after his father dies (283). Perhaps one day, they will leave the margins and return to the road, but for now, they are content to exist in a postmodernity that marginalizes them.

McCarthy’s litany, then, creates a happy ending where none could be expected, implying perhaps that invoking the forms can bring them back to life in postmodernity. However, this salvation exists only on the margins. The road represents the path laid out for people, received cultural assumptions, a path unlikely to change. Still, there is the possibility for transcendent meaning and safety on the margins. Thus the agency McCarthy offers us in *The Road* is two-fold: One can invent hope through a stubborn belief in transcendence, hoping to change the world. Or one can accept life in the margins and find that, even with no real way to change the world, one can find a way to live and survive. Of course, this path suggests that postmodernity may be temporary and that the post-postmodern existence will be more like the pre-postmodern existence. The novel, however, seems to suggest otherwise in the last scene where McCarthy again describes trout in the stream, invoking, one last time, Plato’s forms:

On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing, which could not be put, back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery. (287)

This passage suggests that the forms do exist, but that we will never again embrace them.

In a novel as bleak as *The Road*, the sudden introduction of the family in the last few pages seems unsatisfying, more a hope than reality. That seems the basic message of the novel; when we are without hope, we need to invent it. The difference between *I Am Legend* and *The Road*, however, is the level of belief in their contingency.¹⁸ *I Am Legend* asks the reader to find contingent meaning in moments existentially. Meaning exists in fleeting moments of real emotion. *The Road* asks the reader to maintain transcendent belief in the face of postmodernity in the hope that, in some future contingent moment, that belief will again become ascendant. While these both offer meaning, neither offers meaningful agency.

The postmodern is post-apocalyptic, and Matheson and McCarthy are two who approach the lack of meaningful agency in a world of the “walking dead” directly through metaphor. In both cases, the novels argue for a sense of contingency within a landscape that offers no transcendent meaning. In *I Am Legend*, that contingency is to find and celebrate love when one can, while knowing that the moment of love is fleeting. *The Road* is similar; the love between the father and son is clear, but they both believe, despite the evidence, that it is also transcendent. When the father dies, the boy believes he still talks to him. *The Road* argues that repeating stories shorn of their meaning can make those stories true through sheer belief. However, such stories are bound to marginalize

¹⁸ The concept of contingency will be further explored in later chapters, in terms of historical fiction, but particularly in the novels of Kurt Vonnegut.

their tellers. So, authors in a world where, as Jameson noted, “individualism and personal identity is a thing of the past” do, indeed, still have something to do (Jameson 6). They are wrestling with the very question Jameson poses. If this is a postmodern world, then how does a writer deal with such a world, except by writing about how to deal with such a world? McCarthy simply rejects postmodernity and implies that it is death for an author to accept it, fighting stubbornly for a grand narrative. McCarthy yearns to find the world whole again, to break the trap of the familiar postmodern post-apocalyptic narrative of the past fifty or so years, a narrative presaged by Matheson. In postmodernism, it seems, writers are trapped, for good or ill, and end up writing about that trap.

Other authors have written about this postmodern post-apocalypse through different metaphors; the next chapter will examine how authors, such as William Styron, Robert Coover and E. L. Doctorow, metaphorically represent the postmodernity they inherit through the metaphor of a complete loss of teleological history. The end of history is also the end of the world as we knew it. Obsessed with history, these writers also write about the very trap of postmodernity that McCarthy writes about.

Chapter Two

A Distant Ship's Smoke on the Horizon: The Post - Historical Fiction of Doctorow, and Coover

Introduction

For some writers of the postmodern period, the post-apocalypse is the era following the end of history. We live in Fredric Jameson's "series of perpetual presents," (Jameson 20) never able to grasp a history that offers any real meaning since, deep down, we suspect (and can provide evidence to support this view) the historical narrative is biased. While Jameson seems to condemn this loss of history, seeing it as yet one more example of a society that concerns itself with surface rather than depth,¹⁹ some postmodern authors, such as E. L. Doctorow and Robert Coover see the deconstruction of history as an opportunity to resist the received cultural assumption of powerlessness in at least three ways.

First, they deconstruct history to remind us that history is simply a narrative and, therefore, a place of ideological struggle between those with power and those without.

¹⁹ In fact, while Jameson and Lyotard both define postmodernity, it should be noted that Lyotard's "incredulity toward metanarratives" may contradict Jameson's formulation; for Jameson postmodernity is distinctly related to late capitalism, a metanarrative that, he might argue, drives existence today. Thus whereas Lyotard sees the deconstruction of religious or scientific metanarratives, Jameson might see that such deconstructions are not driven by incredulity but rather by the dollar. For Jameson, then, films like *JFK* are not deconstructions of history so as to make more sense of the world (as we shall see director Oliver Stone suggests) but simply an attempt—a successful one at that—to make lots of money.

This deconstruction is a constant reminder that any historical narrative, even one claiming authority, is necessarily political and so challenges the easy view of history as a singular narrative. In truth, we only have a fictional representation of history. This view liberates us from the hegemonic historical narrative and offers a multiplicity of histories. Second, given the space to play with historical narrative, they actually attempt to rewrite history, giving voice to the voiceless, rehumanizing the dehumanized, and telling their stories. This *reconstruction* of history offers a chance for the powerless to gain some sense of agency and to resist the official narrative; previously silenced figures, then, are given a role in a new history. This formulation can also allow us a more empathic view of historical events and people, allowing us to more deeply understand those voices silenced by the dominant historical narrative. Third, understanding that history is political, that the powerless can be given voices in history, and that journalism is the first draft of history, frees authors like Norman Mailer to mix history, journalism and fiction to wrest some control in the present and the historical future. Moments in history are not necessarily random, though the postmodern view might suggest they are; rather they are contingent and offer the opportunity resist the dominant narrative and rewrite history as it happens.

Thus, even as many view the end of history as the end of the world, the post-apocalyptic trope actually allows some hope. This chapter will briefly examine how the postmodern view of history is dominant in popular culture as seen in popular film. Then I will examine how historicist fiction works much as history itself does to reflect present concerns by examining the historical Nat Turner and critical responses to William Styron's postmodern novel *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. Finally, this chapter will examine two postmodern authors of historicist fiction, Robert Coover and E. L.

Doctorow, showing how they demonstrate these modes of resistance through the lens of what for them is an apocalyptic moment for America, the Rosenberg Trial.

History on Film and Confessions About Nat Turner

As noted, one of the tenets of postmodernity, Fredric Jameson famously asserted, is, despite a nostalgic mode, a loss of history—an existence in, as he put it, “a series of perpetual presents” (Jameson 20). In terms of artistic representation in postmodern terms, history is portrayed as a story that may or may not be related to what was once believed to be a true historical narrative. A novelist or filmmaker may tell an “historical” tale that deals with artistic representation that may not be literally historical but is self-reflexive, overlaying a veneer of historicity over our present (contemporaneous) concerns. We write historical pieces about ourselves, but they *feel* like history (with or without historical accuracy.)²⁰ Thus, according to Jameson, *Star Wars* becomes a nostalgic film, reminiscent of a time when such serials were either seen on screen or on TV. While not

²⁰ Historical verisimilitude may, in fact, be a red herring; an essay called “*Platoon* and the Mythology of Realism” by Thomas Prasch shows how director Oliver Stone worked hard to get tiny details correct about the Vietnam War for his film *Platoon*. From what soldiers carried to the music they listened to, every detail was attended to. However, these historically accurate details remain set pieces for a morality play that was more about how the war felt to Stone than it was an accurate portrayal of fact. On a personal note, having seen the film *Titanic*, I walked away both impressed and nonplused. The dialogue and the concerns of the story (particularly its critique of class structure from an apparently more egalitarian time) had struck me as anachronistic at best. A friend who saw the film at the same time I did, and considered himself a scholar of the (actual) Titanic’s history, however, gushed at how every detail of the ship was correct and that many of the quotes and details about the sinking were exact. Still, the film *Titanic* is not about the sinking of the Titanic but rather about the approach of the end of the industrialized and inexplicably disastrous 20th century.

about the 1930s or the 1950s, *Star Wars* feels to an entire generation like those earlier times. *Star Wars* is obviously not an historically accurate film. But Jameson would argue that films that claim to be historical (or that incidentally seem to be historical) are also never historically accurate. Certainly, few would argue that a film like Quentin Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds* [sic] is historically accurate—the assassination of Hitler therein would certainly belie such a claim. However the film certainly *feels* historical and may, in fact, act as a nostalgic mode for comic books produced during the war, such as Marvel's *Captain America*, wherein the hero actually fulfills the wishes of millions of young boys by actually slugging Hitler, or *Sgt Fury and His Howling Commandoes* and their stories of everyman heroics during World War II. A film like Steven Spielberg's *Lincoln* focuses on historical accuracy (right down to, apparently, how Lincoln's voice sounded) yet remains a wish fulfillment for *our* time. If only we had politicians who could bring together warring factions in Congress now the way Lincoln did then (at least as he did in the film)! Jameson writes that our society "has become incapable of dealing with time and history," so our films are nostalgic but represent our current zeitgeist (Jameson 10). In a postmodern universe, all artistic or literary representations of history are actually representations of "our ideas or stereotypes about that" history that, in essence, replace present concerns. Oliver Stone is perhaps the most famous (or infamous) film director when it comes to "historical" films. Certainly, films like *JFK* and *Nixon* are not, technically, historical.

Given this fact, and Jean Lyotard's assertion that we live in an age of incredulity toward metanarratives, it seems that history, a metanarrative (famously, "written by the winners") is, itself, fictionalized. That is, historical narrative as written by historians is

also a veneer of apparently authentic historicity covering contemporaneous concerns—a perpetual present disguised as historical fact. An historical novel is always experienced in the context of its own time. Children are not taught history; we do not read history. Rather, we read how history “feels” to us.²¹ Thus, like Oliver Stone obsessing over historically accurate details in *Platoon* but writing a contemporaneous morality play, historians focus on historical accuracy to tell authoritatively the narrative that they want to tell, a narrative reflecting their own ideological concerns. Linda Hutcheon notes that the narrative of history is not a factual narrative—that is, not the apparently random facts and events that make up history (things that have happened) but rather it is the meaning we draw (or construct) from these facts and events. History, then, is a narrative created to make sense from the random events of history.²² And given that much (if not all) historical fiction is self-reflexive, it follows that historical fiction, in part at least, is an attempt to make sense of the present. Certainly a part of this phenomenon is that art has infiltrated culture in unforeseen ways. Historian Stanley Karnow is quoted as noting that, for most high school and college students, the film “*JFK* is the truth” (Carnes 273). David Halberstam’s contemporary review of the film *Platoon* suggested that “thirty years from now, people will think of the Viet Nam War as *Platoon*,” a piece of hyperbole not

²¹ Historians often recognize this possibility and consciously try to be more accurate and less subjective in their historical writing; thus the focus on primary documents in historical texts rather than on retrospective narratives.

²² This formulation comes from, among other places, the chapter “Re-Presenting the Past” in Hutcheon’s *The Politics of Postmodernism*. For more, see Hutcheon, *Politics*.

so far off the mark (Halberstam, qtd in Hillstrom 235).²³ But part of the phenomenon is also the incredulity toward metanarratives; history has been a metanarrative throughout, well, history. In postmodernity that narrative is questioned. This questioning leads to further reworkings of the historical narrative. When people who build the past are dead, who interprets their existence?

This reworking or reclaiming of the historical narrative by postmodern authors can be called the novelization of history, a phenomenon that owes itself to man's desire to pull meaning from random events—that is, to find structure in chaos. That meaning, given the form and content of postmodern art (as described by Walter Benjamin and Linda Hutcheon) is always necessarily ideological. This basic concept of history as a narrative is examined here through William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, a novelization of the historical man and his "confessions." Who was Nat Turner—the historical figure, the myth or the man?

Reviews of his book, released in 1966, dealt mainly with the problem of Styron's lack of historical accuracy. Styron seems to set himself up for this criticism in the author's note before the contents page:

I have rarely departed from the known facts about Nat Turner and the revolt of which he was the leader. However, in those areas where there is little knowledge in regard to Nat, his early life, and the motivations for the revolt (and such knowledge is lacking most of the time), I have allowed myself the utmost freedom of imagination in reconstructing events—yet I trust remaining within the bounds of what meager enlightenment history has left us about the institution of slavery.

²³ Some veterans of the war certainly did not appreciate this view. "Such a possibility disturbed [them as they] contended that Stone painted an excessively grim picture of American behavior in the war" (Hillstrom 235).

Despite this caveat, critics complained that Styron was far too loose with the facts of Nat Turner. Herbert Shapiro, writing about the book and its critics, suggests that Styron should be allowed quite a bit of leeway here. “Of course it is true that a sensitive artist seeks to imagine himself in the shoes of his characters, seeks to identify with them, as the method actor seeks to imagine himself the personality he portrays on stage” (Shapiro 99). Therefore Styron should be allowed to fictionalize, to a certain extent, Turner, although, “. . . one can expect the historical novelist to have familiarized himself with what documentation was readily available. Styron does not appear to have done so” (Shapiro 101). Little in Styron’s book directly contradicts the original *Confessions* published in 1831—and the few details that do, Shapiro argues, are irrelevant. However, Shapiro, like many critics, seems to want it both ways—while allowing Styron to stray from the factual, he demands that the author be “true” to the details about Turner’s life that matter to *him* [Shapiro], regardless of the documentation. “There is not a scrap of evidence,” writes Shapiro, “that Turner was contemptuous of his own people” (Shapiro 101). Nor is there any evidence he wasn’t. While seeming to take Styron’s side against other critics, Shapiro also points out inaccuracies. Who decides the difference between major and minor inaccuracies? Obviously the subjective reviewer himself does. Shapiro also attacks some white critics who defend Styron. When Eugene Genovese writes that the detail of whether Turner had a wife (Styron does not include the character of his wife) is unimportant to the story that Styron tells, Shapiro writes derisively, “In writing about a white historical figure, one wonders if any reputable scholar would contend that the existence or the non-existence of a wife did not matter at all” (Shapiro 102). Of course, in a contemporary political climate, the character of the wife takes on ideological

significance. The issue of Turner's supposed lust for white women (in Styron's novel) takes on political overtones in the 1960s. Historical accuracy seems to be important sometimes and not others, but the difference is not factual or historical, but rather ideological. The search here is not for the "true" Nat Turner, but for the one who best represents one's political views. Indeed, a good argument could be made (and, in fact, has been by Seymour Gross and Eileen Bender in *History, Politics and Literature: The Myth of Nat Turner*) that there is no way to know the 'historical' Turner. Gross and Bender argue that the 'historical' Turner that each critic evokes is at best an historical myth and, at worst, an invention of the political agenda of the critic. Thus the question must be raised whether it is possible to be truthful when writing a historical narrative.

First of all, as Kenneth Greenberg suggests in the introduction to the historical *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, "[i]t is best to begin by noting that Nat Turner is not the author of the original *The Confessions of Nat Turner*" (Greenberg 8). He, and Gross and Bender, note that the man Turner supposedly confessed to, Thomas Grey, has his fingerprints all over the original document. Grey "structures the work . . . decides when to quote and when to paraphrase," and makes a list of the murdered whites. The only witnesses to the actual confession were Grey and Turner himself. Even the certifications of authenticity strike Gross and Bender as "too much" effort as if to cover up an obvious fiction (Gross 492). In fact, Turner, who will subsequently become an ideological weapon used by many different sides on the racial debate, is first turned into such a symbol by Grey himself. Grey's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* represents the first effort by someone to make sense of the Turner murders in print and the first effort (though certainly not the last) to use Turner to incite racial paranoia in a select population, by

instilling fear in Southern whites, offering “evidence” of the evil nature of African Americans and arguing against abolition. Gross and Bender determine that Grey was “. . . a very shrewd man who knew precisely what he was doing and why; and that his pamphlet is a political document in the most basic sense of the word” (Gross 492). Grey makes a “deliberate attempt to depict Turner as a possessed, deluded, religious maniac so as to short-circuit any disturbing thoughts about the institution of slavery” (Gross 493). In an attempt to explain Turner’s actions Grey paints him as a maniac to delegitimize Turner’s righteous argument against slavery. In Grey’s version, Turner is schizophrenic—he has visions, he can read without having been taught, and he hears voices. While many of these details may be true, most scholars agree that Turner was unlikely to use certain phrases and words that appear throughout the document. Gross and Bender note:

For example, in the opening paragraph of the “Confession” Turner says that his early childhood “laid the ground work of that enthusiasm which has terminated so fatally to many, both white and black, and for which I am about to atone at the gallows.” Since Turner was convinced of the supernatural support of his insurrection, we would hardly expect him to characterize his religious commitment as “enthusiasm” since by the 19th century the term had only derogatory connotations, as is clear from Gray’s later use of the word. Moreover, how can we possibly reconcile the idea of having to “atone” for his “enthusiasm” with his response to Gray’s query concerning Turner’s feelings of guilt—“Was not Christ crucified?” Atone implies a sense of personal wrongdoing; the identification with Christ implies rectitude and holy sacrifice (497).

There are, of course, many more examples, showing that Gray (or Grey, depending on the source) at the very least heavily edited and perhaps invented much of the *Confessions*, creating a fictional character called Nat Turner.

Clearly, Styron was not the only writer to invent a character named Nat Turner for his own political or literary purposes. Many other versions of Nat Turner have existed in the intervening years between these two. As Gross and Bender write, “Unwittingly, the *Confessions*, directly or indirectly, set in motion a process of reverse mythologization by giving the antislavery intellectuals a romantic symbol which they could recreate in terms of their own passionate convictions” (Gross 500). Harriet Beecher Stowe, for instance, took literally Turner’s phrase, “was not Christ crucified,” and re-invented Turner into a messiah figure in her appendix to 1856’s *Dred*. In her version, Turner becomes a “sacrificial prophet of emancipation” (Gross 501). Other anti-slavery proponents did the same, and folklore grew among the slaves themselves. In reaction, slavery proponents, portraying Turner as maniacal or evil, propagated new versions of the *Confessions*. These versions were published, some with additions and some with subtractions, in an effort to sway public opinion. Often, “these materials were used repeatedly . . . as if its source were the original Gray pamphlet” (Gross 498). Thomas Wentworth Higginson, an abolitionist, first details (or invents) what the critic Shapiro found so important—Turner’s wife. In his 1861 chronicle, “Nat Turner’s Insurrection” (which he attributed to newspaper accounts of the massacre rather than the *Confessions*) Higginson “delves” into Turner’s “past.” “He has a wife whom he cannot protect from sexual ‘outrage,’ scars on his body which may have come from white hands, and a band of blacks that ‘had been systematically brutalized from childhood’ and who ‘had seen their wives and sisters habitually polluted by white ravishers” (Gross 501). Thus, Styron is not the first white writer to sexualize Turner’s story. Incidentally, though importantly from a political

perspective, Higginson also portrays Turner as resolute and compares him to John Brown.

Styron is also not the first writer to assume Turner's identity in the first person.²⁴ William Wells Brown, a former slave, does just that in sixteen pages of his *The Black Man, His Antecedents, His Genius and His Achievements*, published in 1863. Gross and Bender point to Brown's "novelistic bent" (he wrote three separate and very different versions of his own autobiography) as he invents more details about Turner which may or may not be true. The point is, of course, "[i]t is perhaps impossible by now to unscramble all but the most salient facts of the Turner insurrection from the legendizing matter which has been spun around it . . ." (Gross 499). Rather, these materials are political treatises using what the authors claim is the "real" (in each case different) Nat Turner as a political symbol. Styron does the same thing couched in his liberal white guilt and surrounded by the specter of the Black Power movement in the 1960s. He tries to use Turner to make sense of history and of his own zeitgeist. In other words, he does nothing different than any other writer—including Grey—has done when writing about Turner, or, possibly, any other historical event or personage. The bottom line is that *The Confessions of Nat Turner* is, at the least, a good reminder of the ways that the narratives of history work within the context of their times and ideology.

What all these versions have in common is the fact that they are all *stories*—indeed, they are all Romances, elevating the hero (or villain) to legendary status—that is, raising up the individual, focusing on the emotion of the hero (or the victims), all in an

²⁴ Of course, one could argue that Grey himself assumed Turner's identity in first person his original "confessions."

attempt to answer the question that the simple facts cannot answer: Why did this murdering rampage happen? Grey's version suggests religious fervor or insanity; Stowe's version, a righteous response to slavery; Styron's may actually be the most nuanced version, offering psycho-sexual reasons, as well as the gamut between Grey's religious maniac and Stowe's messiah. However, they all attempt to find *meaning* by telling a story and each seems to assume that meaning is there to be found, rather than constructed. Sometimes, as we've seen, that meaning is more relevant to the author or his time, but we assume it is there. Why?

Humans are, biologically speaking, pattern-seeking animals, argues Michael Shermer in his book, *How We Believe*. This pattern seeking rises, he writes, from natural selection. We find "patterns in nature even when they do not exist or have no real significance" (Shermer 34). He points to people seeing, say, Jesus in a tortilla, as a simple example. Citing evolutionary biologists, he suggests that this pattern seeking nature is an offshoot of evolution, explaining, "[t]hose who were best at finding patterns (standing upwind of game animals is bad for the hunt, cow manure is good for the crops) left behind the most offspring. We are their descendents. The problem with seeking and finding patterns is knowing which ones are meaningful and which ones are not" (Shermer 38). This difficulty explains the widespread belief in astrology, for instance, in which people imagine patterns that do not exist. Shermer points to an experiment conducted by psychologists Stuart Vyse and Ruth Heltzer, involving a video game. One group was given points for specific successes they had in negotiating the world inside the game; the other was simply given points randomly. Both groups subsequently claimed that points were given in patterns; the group given points randomly *found* a pattern to the scoring.

“We seek and find patterns because we prefer to view the world as orderly instead of chaotic, and it is orderly often enough that this strategy works” (Shermer 62). We expect narratives to be teleological and thus imagine that random events are cause and effect.

Given this search for order in what is sometimes a random, chaotic world, it is not surprising that humans then find teleological patterns in history. Shermer offers the “Bible Code” as just one example—certainly conspiracy theories such as those proffered by the films *JFK* or *The Da Vinci Code* are others. There is a meaninglessness to JFK’s death; our pattern-finding brain instead finds meaning, a pattern, a conspiracy, a cause. Shermer also cites Madonna, speaking shortly after Princess Diana’s death, asking that the audience stop gossiping about Diana and “look for the deeper cause” of her “tragic death.” Shermer notes that Madonna asks us to stop telling stories—itsself a pattern-finding (or creating) mechanism—about Princess Di while at the same time finding her own pattern and offering her own meaning to the random event. However, Shermer writes, “Princess Diana died an ignoble [and statistically common] death, and that does not make for a very interesting story” (143). As in filmed versions of Richard Matheson’s *I Am Legend*, people want to find meaning in meaningless death. The true story of Diana’s death has no heroes nor villains nor meaning, so we construct our own. Interestingly, this is the same argument proffered by Arthur Miller when discussing the factual discrepancies from the Salem Witch Trials of 1692 and his play on the subject, *The Crucible*. The addition of an affair between John Proctor and Abigail Williams makes the story more interesting, gives us heroes and villains, and allows the audience to find meaning and relate to a 400 year old event. Styron does much the same thing in his update of *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. Humans are pattern-seeking creatures.

It's a short jump from pattern-seeking to storytelling. Shermer points to another experiment by psychologists that shows that students, given logic problems, are far more likely to solve those problems if they are couched in a story, "especially one involving people and relationships in which the students are to detect cheating and rule breaking in social contracts" (Shermer 149). It is not hard to come to the conclusion that humans are not just pattern-seeking; they are also pattern-*creating*. That is, they like to tell stories, even if they are not true, to explain a random existence. However, anthropologist Misia Landau takes that a step further, according to Shermer, "arguing that stories are not just *about* our reality, they help *create* our realities" (Shermer 149). He quotes her as saying:

Narrative then is . . . a defining characteristic of human intelligence and of the human species . . . We have certain stories, or deep structures, for organizing our experiences. Each deep structure comes in many versions and in several different modes. For example, the Cinderella story is embedded not just in fairy tales but in novels, films, operas, ballets, and television shows. Some narratologists, stressing the central role of narrative in human experience, would further argue that we have not only different versions of stories but different versions of reality which are shaped by these basic stories. (Shermer 149)

As in postmodern epistemology, all stories are referential to other stories. Certainly, one can see different embedded stories among the various versions of *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. The messiah of Stowe's version, for instance, like Moses, does not live to see the Promised Land of abolition. In Higginson's version, a monstrous system drives a good man to righteous rebellion, much like the monster in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Grey presents us with a madman from birth, a villain driven by religious fanaticism. These are tropes, often used in fiction, but now appearing in what are ostensibly historical works. Humans use narrative to make sense of their reality—and the ultimate narrative is history.

Historians might argue that the narratives they present are unbiased and free of such unconscious (or conscious) manipulation, but historians are human too.

History is, itself, an interpretation of chronological events, an attempt to make such events make sense to historians or a contemporary audience. At its simplest level, for instance, 21st century readers must have 19th century concepts explained to them as they read 19th century history. However, historians, as they consider their audience, also weave a narrative out of the chronological events. In his book, *Metahistory*, Hayden White writes that historians create stories, use various modes of emplotment and argument and ideological implication, in part, to “represent processes of selection and arrangement of data from the unprocessed historical record in the interest of rendering that record more comprehensible to an audience of a particular kind” (White 5).

“Emplotment,” according to White, provides “the “meaning” of a story by identifying the kind of story that has been told (White 7). In other words, one can examine the plot structure of a particular historical text and discover the type of tale—Tragedy, Comedy, Romance—an historian is telling and one will discover what moral or point the historian may (unconsciously) want his readers to walk away with. Histories are also “motifcally encoded”—that is, chronological events are fitted with motifs (White 6). Rather than simply listing such events, historians will assign causes, effects, terminations, or resolutions. This ‘emplotment’ and these ‘motifcally encoded’ histories are likely related to Landau’s embedded narrative. Of course, historians suggest that they do nothing of the kind—the difference between history and fiction “resides in the fact that the historian ‘finds’ his stories whereas the fiction writer ‘invents’ his . . . [but] invention also plays a part in the historian’s operations” (White 6-7). Historians may decry, for instance,

William Styron's rewriting of *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, but, White argues, they *also* make stories out of history for an audience of their contemporaries.

Clearly, there is a difference between an historical account and one invented from whole cloth. In one instance, at the least, one can check sources and research methods to come to a conclusion as to the veracity of the historian's work. However, in a Lyotardian postmodernity, the line between the two seems to blur more than ever. Films like *JFK*, *Titanic*, or *Saving Private Ryan* are attacked or praised for their historical accuracy (or lack thereof), but they are really part of a larger trend that suggests that people routinely accept that history, itself, is fictionalized. When discussing the veracity of history as opposed to his 'historical' films, Oliver Stone, director of *Platoon*, *JFK* and *Nixon*, notes that historians argue that his films, unlike written histories, are intensely subjective. He explains, "I don't think you can ever put together an objective viewpoint" (Stone 260). The implication is that if all history is subjective, and fictionalized to an extent, why not demonstrate this fictionalization by making that fact of fictionalization more obvious? "[W]e as dramatists are undertaking a deconstruction of history, questioning some of the given realities . . . [presenting] an ambivalent and shifting style that makes you aware that we are watching a movie and that reality itself is in question" (Stone 260). Stone finishes by noting that he, as an artist, *and* historians are attempting to find "truth" in the story of history, but, "[t]he truth is elusive, so we must arrive at it from a combination of the conscious and unconscious lives of the individual" (Stone 261).

Whether Stone accomplishes the goal of making the “fictionalization” of history more obvious is debatable.²⁵ Still, in many ways, Stone’s attitude is consistent with the postmodern view, suggesting no qualitative difference between history and fiction. In the end, historical film (and other narrative vehicles) tends to symptomatically represent the ideology of the zeitgeist of the time of the film’s production rather than the time period that the film claims to represent. Indeed, film studies have focused on film’s symptomatic meaning for some time. David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, for instance, in their classic film studies textbook, *Film Art*, focus on the symptomatic meaning of film. Such a view is supported by Linda Hutcheon’s contention that all art, at least in a postmodern age, is necessarily political. Hutcheon sees all postmodern art as inherently political (or, at least, ideological) and so, too, are all narratives (or deconstructions of narratives) of history. In her formulation past events have, indeed, happened, but we only have access to them via various sorts of historical texts. She writes, “past events are given *meaning*, not *existence*, by their representation in history” (Hutcheon, *Politics* 78, italics in original). Past events come to signify within the ideological construct of particular history. The lessons we learn from history are lessons rooted in the political attitude of the historian or the political zeitgeist from which the historian writes. Past events have no meaning unto themselves; we instill them with meaning through our (necessarily) political narrative.

²⁵ Certainly, *JFK* offers nothing to the viewer to suggest that what he is seeing is fictional (and, indeed, the aforementioned poll showing more people believe Stone’s version of the killing of JFK than any other belies his point.) His newer films, like *Nixon*, which features the ghost of Nixon’s mother talking to the former president, go out of their way to show that the narrative is being altered however.

Part of this attitude, at least in Stone's and Styron's cases is, I would suggest, due to the Baby-Boomer Generation from which they spring (and Stone represents) which learned to distrust authority. As Stone himself notes, growing up and having been fed "official" lies about Vietnam, one tends to distrust official versions. "But from what I know about history," he says, "not only from my personal experience of it in France and Russia and America, in Vietnam and Asia, but also from reading—I know that many of these subjects are ambivalent" (Stone 259). Certainly, one can understand, having seen the Soviet model of history digested for decades by the masses, that history at least *can* be subjective (or even created) and, perhaps, may always be so. Stone's "deconstruction" of history, then, is one that is not about the particular story, but rather, about history itself. Not coincidentally, Stone's generation is also the generation in which postmodernism waxes. Robert Coover's novel, *The Public Burning*, and E. L. Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel* are, in many ways, a perfect postmodern deconstruction of history along these lines, by way of detailed, psychological, sociological, political and symptomatic studies of the Rosenberg trial. Both authors seem to sense an apocalyptic moment when the supposedly righteous United States chose to execute two apparent innocents, and since that moment, we have been living in the post-apocalyptic landscape where history has ended.

The Rosenberg trial has, for many reasons, been fodder for many authors of American literature; the trial is, itself, a revealing and pivotal and apocalyptic point in American history, highlighting the (often legitimate) fears of the Cold War consensus and the abuses of power that arose from such fears. Such a time in history can often be a lens through which Americans can see themselves at both their best and their worst. Indeed,

many writers reexamine the entire McCarthy period, often through thinly disguised historical narratives.²⁶ In much the same way the modernist writer John Dos Passos focused on the trial of Sacco and Vanzetti as a lynchpin in modernist America's existence, so too many postmodern authors have come to view the Rosenberg trial as a focal point in our postmodern existence, part of the nuclear Armageddon that gave birth to postmodernity. As the truth of Vietnam had exposed the lies of history for Oliver Stone, so, too, the Roseneberg Trial exposes the lies of a righteous nation and even of the rationality of the modernist (enlightenment) epistemology for postmodern writers. The trial, deconstructed, reveals the hegemonic nature of the historical narrative and, thus, "reality itself is in question" (Stone 260). Apocalyptic language indeed!

Two of these authors, John Coover and E. L. Doctorow, almost simultaneously²⁷ wrote about the trial from the vantage point of some twenty-five years after the event. Both novels see the event as the end of modernism and perhaps the first step into a post-apocalyptic postmodernity that offers little meaningful agency. That postmodernity can be seen as the world after the apocalypse of World War II—and, indeed, the atomic age. For these authors, this historic moment marks the end of history itself.

²⁶ Arthur Miller famously wrote *The Crucible*, ostensibly set in seventeenth century Massachusetts, to highlight how much the McCarthy hearings were, in fact, like witch trials. So even contemporaneously, we see an author writing about his time through the veneer of historicity. The phrase "witch hunt" has since come into vogue in large part due to Miller. When asked by the HUAC about the similarities between his play and the trials he found himself facing (he was even denied a passport to see the first overseas staging of *The Crucible* in Europe), he noted that a comparison between the two events was "inevitable" (qtd in Sagan, 248).

²⁷ Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel* was published in 1971; Coover's *The Public Burning* in 1976, though after some years of legal wrangling.

Doctorow's novel, *The Book of Daniel*, published in 1971, recreates the trial through the fictional point of view of the (now grown) Rosenberg children. The reader is asked to empathize with formerly iconic (or even controversial) but voiceless characters. In effect, Doctorow humanizes the Rosenbergs, but also attempts to humanize their accusers and killers. Doctorow also seems to suggest that history is a dehumanizing hegemonic narrative invented by historians and this fact has become clear due to the Rosenberg trial; in effect, his generation lives in a confusing postmodernity (an incredulity toward metanarratives) in part due to the trial itself. We are left wondering which history to believe, in effect, putting an end to history as a teleological narrative, but also given a multiplicity of narratives from which to choose.

Coover published *The Public Burning* in 1976, and his novel, far more postmodern in style than Doctorow's, accomplishes some of the same achievements. However, its deconstruction of the narrative of history is more pervasive and frightening and it makes the contention that believing in an historical narrative at all is dangerous. The trial itself, in Coover's formulation, represents Hutcheon's concept of history—that of constructing meaning or truth from random events. The trial, much like history (the search for truth in an historical narrative) is a sham; there is no truth, no progression, no meaning. There is only a hegemonic or victorious narrative or a verdict. However, we as a nation are so soaked in a triumphalist historical narrative that to recognize that narrative as false is not only difficult, but also dangerous. We live in a world where teleology is an illusion, and history has ended. Any attempt to find meaning in this post-apocalyptic landscape (that is, to make meaning from history or progress) is doomed. The novel seems to imply that history must be constructed for the present to make any kind of sense

of the past to the masses. The construction of history, then, gives meaning to a meaningless present, indeed, a meaningless existence, but being aware of that construction may allow for actors to create counter narratives. Thus, both authors offer the possibility of a multiplicity of contingent historical narratives.

The Rosenberg Ride at Disneyland: E. L. Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel* and The Trial of the Century Re-imagined (Take One)

E. L. Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel* attempts a reclamation of history, particularly the apocalyptic moment of the Rosenberg Trials, using as characters the (fictionalized) Rosenberg children, particularly the older son, Daniel. In this novel, set in 1967, the Rosenbergs are re-christened "Isaacson"²⁸ and the novel follows the now-grown son Daniel as he investigates both his sister's (Susan) recent entrance into a mental health facility and his own (and our nation's) history as regards his parents. That history, Daniel deduces early on, has led to his sister's breakdown, as Susan says to Daniel during a visit, "they're still fucking us" (Doctorow 19). Daniel's attempts to investigate this mysterious phrase (with the pronoun-without-antecedent "they," not to mention "us") causes him to not only meet with Susan's friends and collaborators (she has taken in with late 60s radicals and has become an icon to them, representing the effects of the system as both the daughter of socialists and of parents killed by that system) but also to investigate, perhaps for the first time, the circumstances of his parents' executions. Thus

²⁸ This name is, of course, as Biblically charged as the novel's title. Esau and Jacob were the sons of Isaac and, of course, Jacob's lineage gives us Daniel and Jesus.

Daniel embarks on a study of American history. The novel is, in many ways, a personal search for historical truth in a postmodern age.

The novel allows the reader to investigate with Daniel; that he is a seriously flawed character is important. Daniel seems to take on the characteristics of both Biblical sons of Isaac—Esau and Jacob. He seems by turns devious and loving. The reader is allowed to empathize particularly with flashbacks of the child Daniel; the scenes of his having, as a child, to deal with his parents' incarceration and execution allow the reader to see the human side of what has become over time an iconic moment. Rather than simply seen as a symbol, the Rosenberg Trial is seen through the innocent eyes of a child who, sometimes selfishly and sometimes through real need, just wants his parents home. In this way the novel essentially gives voice to the voiceless, the voices silenced by the hegemonic historical narrative. Daniel describes, for instance, the children taken to protests of the trial. The boy has to constantly remind Ascher (their guardian) that Susan is "only a little girl, you know" (Doctorow 30). This works as a reminder to the reader and the rest of America as well. Daniel feels "the crowd as a weight that would crush him to death" as his hat falls off his head and he loses Susan's grip. "Ascher was pulling him on and Susan disappeared in the closing ranks behind him" (31).

These scenes are effective. In the adult Daniel's memory, when the Isaacson's are arrested, the young Daniel and Susan cannot comprehend it. The reader cannot help but empathize with the two children who are about to lose their parents in ways they cannot possibly understand and the guilt or innocence of the Isaacsons becomes irrelevant. Despite the iconic status that the trial will take on, despite the hyperreal status of the children of the Rosenbergs, this empathy works to keep the events of the trial real, or at

least to feel that way for the reader. That said, the adult Daniel often takes out his anger on his step-parents and his wife. Daniel beats his wife and thus, as we will see with Coover and Nixon, the narrator of *The Book of Daniel* is revealed as flawed. However, those flaws are not designed to present a parody but rather to show him, too, as real, as human.

Daniel looks back in an attempt to understand his sister's words. Who are "they" and who is "us" and how are "they still fucking us" anyway? The immediate and obvious answer, given her use of the word "still," is that the US government is still fucking over his family. They "fucked" the Isaacsons by killing their parents and they are "still fucking" them through possible harassment. Indeed, Susan's most recent political cause was not designed to change the system but simply to prove her parents' innocent. She attempts to use what political agency she has (as a powerful symbol, to be sure) to discover the truth in history. And if she, so close to the actual reality, needs to somehow rediscover and reinterpret history, how can anyone else know what history is? Doctorow also goes out of his way at the beginning of the novel to question (parodize) the truth of historical narrative by occasional commentary. As if to trivialize the lived experience of the children, Doctorow notes, "many historians have noted an interesting phenomenon in American life in the years immediately after a war . . . [of] emotional fever for fighting a war [that] cannot be turned off like a water faucet . . . This is a phenomenon noted by many historians" (33). The repetitive use of the cold analytical phrase this "phenomenon" noted by unnamed historians and the use of passive voice all work to undermine these historical observations. They are essentially meaningless, especially to a child. Historians

(and history) it seems are also fucking “us.” History is presented as cold and detached disinformation.

Susan and Daniel have become icons and represent an entire generation, the generation of Oliver Stone, borne of a moment that has an official history that even those closest to it distrust. These are the “real” characters from that history dealing with the “real” emotional consequences and history is unreal even to them. Thus, the “us” here is also the generation of an historical moment, the moment when everything changed, the children of a psychologically post-apocalyptic America. Doctorow raises the specter of the Bomb, the specter that haunts a generation, simply through commenting on the Rosenberg Trial, but he also raises it in the descriptions by Daniel of his childhood:

I remember standing on the porch of our house on Weeks Avenue. It was a warm afternoon and I had scraped my knee on the sidewalk. My mother came out to tell me that an atom bomb had been dropped on Japan. I looked up in the sky over the schoolyard, but the sky was clear. I listened for the sound of the bomb, but the sky was quiet (109).

Expecting the destruction to come from the enemy, Daniel instead realizes that “we” dropped the bomb on “them.” From that moment on, everything had changed. What had once been a world of certainty is now uncertain, and the Rosenberg Trial (or the Isaacsons in this fictional version) is a symbol of this uncertainty. “Of one thing we were sure. Everything is elusive. God is elusive. Revolutionary morality is elusive. Justice is elusive.” (54). Daniel, like the generation of Oliver Stone, longs nostalgically for a world that makes sense, that has meaning, from his post-apocalyptic viewpoint.

Susan and Daniel are searching for their parents, yes, but they are also searching for an historical narrative that allow them meaningful agency in a world in which they have become not human but iconic. All of the people who interact with them, either see

them as a symbol of injustice or evil, but to the siblings, each of those people “is just one of the thousands of intruders in my life, in my sister’s life—one of thousands of guides, commentators, counselors, sympathizers and holders of opinion” (37). The novel takes the reader from the real (the suffering of the children) to the symbolic (the children as icons.) Like Nat Turner, the children “belong” in a public space. Echoing the reflections of Jean Baudrillard’s “precession of simulacra” from *Simulacra and Simulation*, the children of the Rosenbergs have no connection to the “real” Rosenbergs and thus, the Rosenberg Trial never really happened; rather the moment is iconic, a simulacrum which, in the end, represents nothing, even to those deeply involved. That people ascribe meaning to historical events may be inevitable, but none of those meanings can touch whatever profound truth exists in the moment. And thus, with an inability to reach any such truth, Baudrillard would argue that no such truth exists, and nor does any relation between the symbolic (the public Rosenbergs and their children) and the real (the actual Rosenbergs and their children.)

Through Daniel and Susan’s quest for historical reclamation, *The Book of Daniel* essentially shows that we live in a post-apocalyptic postmodernity at the end of history. Baudrillard wrote about Disneyland: “The imaginary of Disneyland is neither true nor false. . . The world wants to be childish in order to make us believe that the adults are elsewhere, in the ‘real’ world and to conceal the fact that true childishness is everywhere—that it is that of the adults themselves who come here to act the child in order to foster illusions as to their real childishness” (Baudrillard 13). Referring to the imaginary of Disneyland as “infantile degeneration,” Baudrillard’s point here is that, “Disneyland exists in order to hide that it is the ‘real’ country, all of ‘real’ America that *it*

is Disneyland . . . to make us believe that the rest [of America] is real, whereas all of Los Angeles and the America that surrounds it are no longer real, but belong to the hyperreal order and to the order of simulation” (Baudrillard, italics added, 12).²⁹ At this level of the precession of simulacra, we have no access to the real and thus, the real does not exist for us. This truism holds in terms of the historical narrative. Historical events become symbolic and are no longer pure events; this has always been the case as this chapter has noted for such events as Nat Turner’s insurrection. However, in our postmodern existence historical events are *immediately* mediated. History and present events are no longer real but constructed or, as Baudrillard would call them, “hyperreal.”

Thus, it is not surprising that the climax of *The Book of Daniel* takes place in Disneyland and that it leaves the reader questioning the very fabric of history, meaningful agency, and reality in a postmodern landscape. All of Daniel’s attempts to look back and make meaning from the death of his parents have led him to what he assumes and hopes will be a dramatic confrontation with Dr. Selig Mindish, the witness whose “confession”³⁰ led directly to the Isaacsons’ convictions. Mindish’s daughter and son-in-law, Linda and Dale, acting as his intermediary, will only agree to meet with Daniel in such a public space as Disneyland. This setting allows Doctorow to write at length about Disneyland and, by extension, the world in which we live. Noting that it is a world of capitalist value, Doctorow writes, “The ideal Disneyland patron may be said to be one who responds to a process of symbolic manipulation that offers him his culminating and

²⁹ In some ways, Baudrillard is describing historiographic fiction and historians’ obsession with the facts of history. The outcry at fictionalizing history simply makes us believe that there is a real history, while the truth is that all history is constructed.

³⁰ I use quotes here because the novel makes clear that the confession is suspect at best.

quintessential sentiment at the moment of purchase”(305). He then makes an extensive list of corporate sponsors. The point is that Disneyland is a Jamesonian postmodern structure, one that offers what we might take to be real experience but which is actually symbolic experience and one which is, in the end, simply about money. However, Doctorow goes further, noting that Disneyland is the working model for all existence in postmodernity:

Obviously there are political implications. What Disneyland proposes is a technique of abbreviated shorthand culture for the masses, a mindless thrill, like an electric shock,³¹ that insists at the same time on the recipient’s rich psychic relation to his country’s history and language and literature. In a forthcoming time of highly governed masses in an overpopulated world, this technique may be extremely useful both as a substitute for education and, eventually, as a substitute for real experience (305).

What Doctorow is proposing here is Baudrillard’s precession of simulacra. If we are not careful, we will find ourselves in an existence where our “rich psychic relation” to “history and language and literature” will be lost because, as we continue to use “shorthand.” The symbols of that shorthand will only become connected to other symbols of shorthand and will no longer connect to the real “history and language and literature.” For Daniel, Disneyland represents this fear. He does note, however, in a particularly Jamesonian touch, that what Disneyland does better than anything else is handle crowds and move people around. This, he notes, is Disneyland’s “real achievement” (305). Daniel’s—and by extension, Doctorow’s—disdain for Disneyland and what it represents is palpable.

³¹ The myriad references to electricity, shock, and electrocution are legion in the novel—examples of Doctorow’s sometimes grim humor in a novel about a public electrocution.

When Daniel finally confronts Mindish, it is appropriately in Tomorrowland, the land of the future. Mindish is riding in a toy car when Daniel first sees him gripping “the wheel waiting for the new run to begin. His arms are bare, he wears an Hawaiian shirt. He is incredibly old” (307). In short, as Dale tells Daniel, Mindish is senile. Daniel’s confrontation, then, comes to naught. History remains distant, unknowable. We are already in the Tomorrowland that Doctorow has warned us about. However, there is one instant of the “real” here; just as Daniel and Susan and their parents have become empathetic to the reader in this novel, so, too, does the novel’s apparent antagonist, the man whose confession sent the Isaacsons to their deaths. Linda cries as she introduces her senile father to the man whose parents he killed. He responds, “It’s Denny?” Doctorow adds, “For one moment of recognition he was restored to life. In wonder he raised his large, clumsy hand and touched the side of my face. He found the back of my neck and leaned toward me and touched the top of my head with palsied lips” (309). This is the final moment of the confrontation and it seems a real and emotional one. However, it has no connection to the past or even of the reality around it; that it takes place in Disneyland (and, in particular, Tomorrowland) suggests that it finally recognizes the unreality of everything else around it and the future.

There is no satisfaction for Daniel, no truth to be discovered, and no closure. Immediately, the prose moves on to, first, a description of the wonders of modern science keeping people who essentially are already dead alive for a few more days. “Recently in Houston, Texas, surgeons implanted a new heart in the body of a fifty-four-year-old car salesman whose own heart was killing him. Two weeks after the surgery, the salesman rejected the new heart” (309). There seems a meaninglessness in this attempt at survival,

especially as we exchange hearts. These people seem to strike Doctorow as dehumanized, mere zombies. Doctorow is again painting postmodernity as post-apocalyptic. Then, the novel depicts, a final time, how Daniel and Susan have been and still are held up as icons from both sides of the political spectrum. In a final flashback, as they (as children) are prepared for one rally, Daniel notes, “There was a question about the signs” that the demonstrators would use around the children. What should they say? But the implication from Daniel is clear; the children *are* the signs. “Our public experiences were heartstoppers. The image was of two good, fine, children. Those who were close to us knew better” (310). The implication is Linda Hutcheon’s—that at its heart, everything is ideological. The children, too, are dehumanized.

Finally, the executions follow and Daniel notes that, “The truth was beyond reclamation”(312). Doctorow decries postmodernity because it does not help us to find truth. Such is our reality. The novel then splits into multiplicities, offering three different endings, suggesting that multiple views of history may become the norm in the Tomorrowland of postmodern America. The third possible conclusion sees Daniel pushed out of the library by radicals taking over the campus. “Close the book, man,” one such tells Daniel, “what’s the matter with you, don’t you know you’re liberated?” (318). This third ending seems to suggest that it is a mistake in the first place to seek meaning or truth in history; the moment now is what matters. That moment may be contingent. Applying the philosophy of Hannah Arendt here, the only way to be free from history is to act in that contingent moment. She writes, “liberation and freedom are not the same. . . . [L]iberation may be the condition of freedom but by no means leads automatically to it” (Arendt, *Revolution* 19). Unlike what Oliver Stone suggests, being liberated (disabused)

from the mantle of an official history is not the same as freedom. To be truly free, we must “close the book” on history and act.

This, then, is the liberated world that Doctorow says we live in—a world where we have, indeed, disabused ourselves of the notion that history is truth. We are “liberated” from the “shackles” of overarching metanarratives like history. However, in such a world, what meaning is there? History has become so hyperreal as to make our very existence hyperreal. This post-apocalyptic landscape seems to offer little hope for the future and no meaning for the present if we have no access to the real. We are convinced, through this received cultural assumption, that action is irrelevant. The novel suggests that the only hope for agency and resistance in such a landscape is an acceptance of this reality and an attempt to create contingent individualized (multiple) histories from this perspective. Robert Coover, in *The Public Burning*, writes one such individualized history while he also, like Doctorow, deconstructs the teleological narrative (though in a different way.)

Comic Book History: Robert Coover’s *The Public Burning* and the Rosenberg Trial Re-imagined (Take Two)

Robert Coover also sees the Rosenberg trials as a sort of apocalyptic moment, a realization of the ambivalent and chaotic nature of what will become the postmodern era. The protagonist and narrator of Coover’s *The Public Burning*, set during the trials, is a

historical Richard Nixon³², then Vice President to Dwight D Eisenhower. Nixon works at the apparent behest of the nationalist historical narrative to make sure the Rosenbergs are tried and, if found guilty, executed. The narrative of history that Nixon has come to believe—indeed, the one he was taught in schools and through the media—is profoundly nationalist, a parody of Manifest Destiny. At times the character of Uncle Sam appears and speaks to Nixon. Nixon describes Sam as,

a figure gaunt and grand, the emptiness of ages in his face, and on his back the burden of the world . . . pinning a Merit Badge on the American soldier of the FEAR patrol . . . [h]is eyes burning fiercely like Mandrake the Magician's, a transfiguring glory in his bosom and a wad of chaw in his jowls . . . with a smile of Christian charity [and with] the Pow'r that hath made and preserved us as a Union. (64)

Sam is more than a symbol of power. He appears to Nixon as a sort of eternal superhero watching over the fortunes of the US. “He’s been committed ever since [the American Revolution] to propagating the Doctrine of Self-Determination and Free Will and bringing the Light of Reason to the benighted and superstitious nations of the earth, still groping clumsily out of the Dark Ages” (8). Nixon eagerly accepts this comic book narrative, in part because it is so pervasive and in part because he sees himself as an historical figure, invited by Sam to be as heroic as Lincoln or Washington.

The narrative is also a way for Nixon and the American masses to make sense from an apparently random historical narrative—it represents the tautology of Manifest Destiny. America is a great nation; therefore America was meant to be a great nation and is guided by an invisible force, the superhero known to Nixon as Uncle Sam. Coover parodies the official historical teleological narrative that has, in his time, long since

³² The use of Richard Nixon as a narrator (and in a particularly savage way) is one of the reasons the novel’s publication was delayed.

ended. Nixon finds evidence for Manifest Destiny in the words of one whom he calls the “primordial incarnation” of Sam, George Washington. Here Coover begins what will be a familiar trope of the novel, quoting, for his own purposes, historical or contemporaneous figures (generally through the eyes of his narrator). Washington, “once put it: ‘No people can be bound to acknowledge and adore the invisible hand which conducts the affairs of men more than the people of the United States. Every step, by which they advanced to the character of an independent nation, seems to have been distinguished by some token of providential agency’” (8). Thus, Nixon finds meaning providential, in historical moments that have created the nation he loves, and sees in a random narrative, a teleological progression driven by Uncle Sam. Coover writes,

Throughout the solemn unfolding of the American Miracle, men have noticed this remarkable phenomenon: what at the moment seems to be nothing more than the random rise and fall of men and ideas, false starts and sudden brainstorm, erratic bursts of passion and apathy, brief setbacks and partial victories, is later discovered to be –the light of America’s gradual unveiling as the New Athens, New Rome, and New Jerusalem all in one—a necessary and inevitable sequence of interlocking events, a divine code, as it were, bringing the Glad Tidings of America’s election, and fulfilling the oracles of every tout from John the Seer and Nostradamus to Joseph and Adam Smith (8-9).

This misunderstanding of history as teleological recalls Hutcheon’s warning: “past events are given *meaning*, not *existence*, by their representation in history” (Hutcheon, *Politics* 78, italics in original). And while this history is, according to Nixon, manifest, to paraphrase Eisenhower himself, it is more so now (1953) than ever: “Something like this force [Uncle Sam] seems to have been at work all over the world these past few weeks: everything tumbling irresistibly into place” (9). Uncle Sam also spends the novel

spouting garbled clichéd phrases³³ (“we rips what we sew!”) (64), phrases that children (as Nixon had) learn in grade school and that are, essentially, meaningless memes for American Manifest Destiny. He quotes presidents and story books, reminding us, for instance of “Honest Abe.”

Uncle Sam has battled throughout history against the evil forces of what Nixon calls the Phantom, who, in his present incarnation, is a communist super-villain. The novel establishes the Phantom as the force that inspired the Rosenbergs to betray their own country and also the force fighting against the Rosenberg executions. At times the Phantom seems to be winning this battle—such as when Supreme Court Justice William Douglas declares a stay of execution for the so-called traitors. Nixon firmly believes this narrative of the super villain. He says, for instance, when ruminating on the guilt of the Rosenbergs, that, “Of course, they had had congress with the Phantom, I truly believed this, they had touched the demonic and were so invaded: and their deaths, I knew, would kill a part of the Phantom” (144). The basic conflict of the novel is established in a blistering parody: The much-derided (by the 1970s, when Coover is writing) Nixon in his younger anti-communist incarnation, works with the power of Uncle Sam to discover that the Phantom had successfully tempted, and thus damned, the Rosenbergs. By extension, the parody allows the average American to question the authority of Uncle Sam himself

³³ Among the many such quotes are: “For we hold these truths to be self-evident: that God helps them what helps themselves, it’s a mere matter of marchin’; that idleness is emptiness and he who lives on hope will die with his foot in his mouth; that no nation was ever ruint by trade; and that nothin’ is sartin but death, taxes, God’s glowin’ Covenant, enlightened self-interest, certain unalienable rights, and woods, woods, woods, as far as the world extends!”(7)

and the triumphalist narrative. It is a caricature, a pastiche, of history and, in 1977, a particularly effective and amusing one.

However, that parody is also not far from the actual reality of the early 1950s. Molly Hite explains: “*The Public Burning* both literalizes and exaggerates the ideological shift [of the Cold War . . .] rendering the key Cold War premise of an overarching Soviet threat as an article of theology: not a pragmatic or politically theorized assessment of a volatile international situation, but an element of belief, grounded on direct revelation or the authority of someone claiming direct revelation” (Hite 86). In other words, this view of history is not simply the imaginings of a flawed, hubristic character; it is the received cultural narrative of the nation, a spiritual or religious vision, at least as it seemed during the Cold War consensus of the 1950s. Coover establishes this contention by directly quoting contemporaneous politicians and media, such as *The New York Times*. *Time Magazine* gets special treatment, for instance, presented as the poet laureate of America, providing a framework for that triumphalist narrative. For example, writing about *Time Magazine*’s response to the initial Rosenberg verdict, Coover quotes the magazine directly and puts that quote in verse:

it
was a
sickening and
to Americans almost
incredible history of men
so fanatical they would destroy
their own countries & col
leagues to serve a
treacherous
utopi
a

Coover also quotes newspapers and celebrities (often politicians like Eisenhower himself)³⁴ from the time period. The Rosenbergs' judge, for instance, Irving Kaufman, has part of his verdict written in verse:

I believe your conduct in putting into the hands of the Russians the A-
bomb years before our best / Scientists predicted Russia would perfect the bomb
has already / Caused, in my opinion, the Communist / Aggression in Korea, with
the / Resultant casualties exceeding fifty thousand and who knows but millions
more of / Innocent people may pay the price / Of your treason. Indeed by your
betrayal *you undoubtedly have altered / The course of history* to the disadvantage
of our country (25, italics in original).

So, not only Nixon, but also all these myriad historical sources seem to equate communism with the Phantom, a view that is confirmed in the Cold War consensus of the age. This use of direct quotation demonstrates that the caricature is very close to the truth of how Americans, particularly within the scope of the Cold War Consensus, viewed themselves and their country.

Of course, writing as he is in the midst of the 1970s and the Watergate hearings, Coover has given readers a character that they recognize as deeply flawed. Therefore Nixon's comic-book view of America is tied to that character and we see the narrative for the comic book it is. Coover deconstructs history so that we may take a more nuanced view than Nixon's. However, the echoes of others quoted, such as *Time*, reinforce the popular conception of the pastiche. According to Coover, this comic-book *is* the lens through which Americans view and viewed their history.

This deconstruction and demonstration of a simplistic narrative is not all Coover does. Nixon also equates his (triumphalist) narrative of history against those who would

³⁴ Indeed, Coover quotes verbatim (again, transcribing in verse) one of Eisenhower's complete speeches as an "Intermezzo" to the novel on pages 149 – 156.

deconstruct that narrative (presumably, people like Coover!) as one of a meaningful existence versus mob rule. “In a larger sense,” muses Nixon about the Rosenberg trials, “I recognized this was another round in a contest which has been waged since the beginning of time between those who believe in the right of free expression and those who advocate and practice mob rule to deny that right,” not noting the irony of the statement (208). “A mob, you see, does not act intelligently. Those who make up a mob do not think independently. They do not think rationally” (207). To disabuse oneself of the comic book concept of Manifest Destiny is to act irrationally, outside the modernist notion of enlightened thinking. To deny the narrative is to become a mob, to act emotionally, and life would not make sense. As Hite notes, “The constant danger for the anti-communist inhabitants of this world is not that the Phantom will prevail but that he will be revealed as non-existent: for as a guarantor of the fundamental unreality of his followers, the Rosenbergs in particular, he must have unshakable reality himself, and his reality, too, is an article of Cold War faith” (Hite 91). Nixon depends on the existence of the Phantom as much as he does on Uncle Sam so that his world will not be a world of mob rule—his world will make sense. The existence of the Phantom and Uncle Sam allow his belief in teleology to sustain him in a post-apocalyptic world without history.

The need for a scapegoat means that the Rosenbergs’ execution will bring sense to the world. Rene Girard, in his essay, “The Plague in Literature and Myth,”³⁵ notes that

³⁵ This essay, obviously, is about plague narratives; however, the plague narratives feature the same thematic clusters (the second plague of societal breakdown; mimetic doubling; and scapegoating) as do post-apocalyptic tales, particularly since World War II. Thus, the “scapegoat” almost always appears in such tales, including *I Am Legend* and all its filmed versions. Someone “guilty” must die so that order can be restored, the old world brought back, or a new world born.

the scapegoat acts as way of bringing a world thrust into chaos back to a familiar order and that return reinforces the narrative of the scapegoat's guilt. "The positive effect of such a transfer [of the scapegoat], the end of the crisis, must necessarily be interpreted as a confirmation . . . as absolute proof that the "real culprit" has been identified. A faultless relationship of cause and effect appears to have been established" (Girard 842). The death of the Rosenbergs will defeat the forces of irrationality and chaos—the very forces that Nixon might equate with postmodernity.

Also, as noted, Nixon has a personal hubristic reason for wanting to protect and promote this triumphalist narrative—he sees a place for himself in this grand historical metanarrative, sees himself being added, figuratively, to Mount Rushmore. Part of this delusion is certainly his wanting to be president and his view that presidents, as agents of Uncle Sam, are special. "[I]t must be admitted, *all* American Superchiefs [presidents] are 'men of destiny'" (161, italics in original). But those who more willingly allow Uncle Sam to use them are even more special. When Sam "chooses" Nixon at this precise moment, the Vice President is, "shaken, but oddly I also felt like I was very near the center of things. There's been a point to all this, after all, I thought. . . . I felt swarmed about with fears and absences. Paradox. But I felt protected at the same time. I had a feeling that everything in America was coming together for the first time: an emergence into Destiny" (95). The religious language continues, as he says later, in the glow of the successful execution of the Rosenbergs, "I felt singled out, touched by a special grace, a unique destiny: I was God's undercover agent in a secular world" (526). The Rosenberg Trial is the time for Nixon to shine: "I was lucky enough to be alive just at the moment we were, for the first time, really getting up steam. It was our job now—it would be my

job—to bring this new order of the ages to the whole world. . . . [Eisenhower] was only preparing the way for the New Order that it was my destiny, and through me the destiny of my generation, to bring to the world” (59). Therefore, he willingly accepts and promotes the comic book view of history and actually allows himself to be used by it.³⁶ He essentially gives up his own free will to the narrative.

He does all this despite, deep down, recognizing the random nature of life and history. “After all, I’d become Vice President of the United States of America by a chain of circumstances not all that different [from the Rosenbergs’], one thing drifting into the next, carried along by a desire, much like theirs, to reach the heart of things, to participate deeply in life” (128). Rather than accept the random nature of both his life story and the postmodernist historical narrative, Nixon chooses to believe the modernist teleological narrative which both offers meaning and a place of honor for him within that teleology. He “felt like one chosen” (80) and notes that he had “. . . long since learned that with Uncle Sam nothing was mere happenstance, you had to listen to him with every hole in your body”³⁷ (81). He speaks, throughout the novel, of being “used” by Uncle Sam to bring down the Rosenbergs. Their guilt or innocence is irrelevant to the narrative. Nixon sees an historical moment here, through which, by sacrificing his will to Uncle Sam’s, he can achieve immortality, like Washington and Lincoln before him. History becomes self-fulfilling.

³⁶ Of course, in the end, this acceptance may turn out to be a mistake as history (in the form of Uncle Sam) anally rapes Nixon with the Washington monument in what has to be the most memorable scene of the novel.

³⁷ This line, no doubt, offers a grotesque foreshadowing of the anal rape scene.

Nixon also compares history to the Rosenberg trial itself (and, by extension, all trials and the justice system.) Just as he recognizes the random nature of history and his life story but chooses to believe a narrative that offers destiny, Nixon also recognizes the artificiality of the trial process. Coover establishes Nixon's view of trial as theater—indeed, he reminisces about a play he was in as a young man, Ayn Rand's *Night of January 16th*. In that play which was essentially a trial in which the audience acted as the jury, Nixon notes, “. . . there was no final conclusion to be drawn, no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ judgment, the evidence was ambiguous, the testimony contradictory . . . [d]epending on our various performances, the verdict changed from show to show.” Nixon played the DA in the show and, “prided myself on winning more nights than I lost—one of my most successful roles actually” though he “would have taken just as much pride in winning for the defense” (120-21). Nixon sees no need for truth or a correct verdict in this theater; what matters is the performance. What people come to believe from the performance is truth.

This play represents a postmodern view of history, one that takes into account perspective. One wonders what these other “roles” are that Nixon is referring to—certainly a reference to his political career. He also refers to the “artifice of a courtroom trial” (124). Nixon then notes that the prosecuting attorney in the Rosenberg trial understands quite well the concept of a trial being more about performance than truth. “The genius of Irving Saypol . . . was how well he understood all this [theatricality] and used it in the Rosenberg trial. He even stole one of my lines from the play” (121). Nixon never questions the morality of the trial, since his “basic conviction” based on his chats with Uncle Sam, is that “the Rosenbergs were guilty as hell” (81-2). Nixon sees the trial

as a play wherein the players are willing pawns in the hands of either Uncle Sam or the Phantom:

Not only was everybody in the case from the Judge on down—indeed, just about everyone in the nation, in and out of government, myself included—behaving like actors caught up in a play, but we all seemed moreover to be aware of just what we were doing and at the same time of our inability, committed as we were to some higher purpose, some larger script as it were, to do otherwise. (117)

Then he notes that Rosenberg’s lawyer did not do a very good job of creating what we might call a counter-narrative to that of the prosecutors, despite getting the facts right. His story does not resonate to the jury, to the American people. “Thus, the Rosenbergs and their lawyers were the only ones not rehearsed, and were in effect having to attempt amateur improvisation theater in the midst of a carefully rehearsed professional drama. Naturally they looked clumsy and unsure of themselves . . . and so, a bit like uneasy liars”³⁸ (121). The prosecution, on the other hand, rather than focusing on truth, instead weaves convincing fiction, and makes their lies more believable,

. . . to make what might later seem like nothing more than a series of overlapping fictions cohere into a convincing semblance of historical continuity and logical truth—at least long enough to wrest a guilty verdict from the impressed jury. True, [the prosecuting attorney] accomplished this more with adjectives and style than with verbs and substance . . . (122)

For Nixon and, presumably, the government and the public, the importance in a trial lay, not in finding a true verdict, but rather in its theatricality, in its coherence to a logical and aesthetic narrative, even if that narrative disguises immorality or even randomness. A trial is about style, not substance—a damning and cynical view of America’s justice

³⁸ Clearly, based on the public’s view of the 1970s disgraced Nixon exposed as a clumsy liar himself, this is another ironic line.

system. The trial is akin to hiding a postmodern reality beneath a veneer of a modernistic fiction.

Nixon conflates the very concept of a jury trial (our justice system) with historical narrative. Even in the above quote, that conflation is present—a “historical continuity” is an important part of the trial process. As in a trial, when it comes to a historical narrative, justice or truth or even facts are all irrelevant; what matters is the resonance of that narrative; the story needs to make sense and manifest itself teleologically. A trial is a sort of introduction to the theater that is history: The Rosenberg Trial was, “*a little morality play for our generation* [. . .] our initiation drama, our gateway into History” (120, italics in original). Thus, we see history as a trial wherein there are facts presented, but the coherence of the narrative matters more than the facts. Whoever writes the more persuasive narrative gets to define the meaning behind those facts. Nixon muses, “What was fact, what intent, what was the framework, what was essence? Strange, the impact of History, the grip it had on us, yet it was nothing but words. Accidental accretions for the most part, leaving most of the story out What if we broke all the rules, played games with the evidence, manipulated language itself, made History a partisan ally?”³⁹ (136). For Nixon, both trials and history are scripted.

Uncle Sam cements the connection of the theatrics of a trial with the theatrics of history since both deal with the past, a past to which we have no connection and thus one that the powerful and/or persuasive get to define:

Hell, *all* courtroom testimony about the past is ipso facto and teetotaciously a baldface lie, ain’t that so? Moonshine! Chicanery! The ole gum

³⁹ This is another ironic line from Nixon since he has, of course, made history a “partisan ally” by tying it to Uncle Sam.

game! Like history itself—all more or less bunk as Henry Ford liked to say . . . the fatal slantiindicular futility of Fact! Appearances, my boy, appearances! Practical politics consists in ignorin' facts! *Opinion* ultimately governs the world . . . and so a trial in the midst of all this flux and a slippery past is just one set of bolloxeratin' sophistries agin another. (86, italics in original)

Of course, in this case, two people are executed due to the persuasive sophistry rather than concern for the truth. Coover demonstrates how history, not truth, that those in power are both seduced by and promulgate, has devastating effects on those subject to the powerful and persuasive. The narrative of history is hegemonic. With *The Public Burning*, Coover has essentially described the postmodern view of history, to paraphrase Lyotard, a “history” of which we should all be incredulous. The triumphalist view of history is presented as false. However, wonders Nixon, “what is the alternative” (104)?

Coover demonstrates that the historical narrative is a way to make sense from a random existence, even in small ways. Nixon's wife, Pat, is incredulous when he uses the word “accident” to explain his demeanor one morning, the implication being that there are no accidents. So he re-examines the question and decides that it is not accidental and that his earlier run-in with demonstrators was, in fact, the cause of his demeanor. Nixon muses, “Perhaps this is true, I'd thought. After all, history is never literal. If it were, we'd have no pattern at all, we'd all be lost” (Coover 203). Therefore history has to be “read” to understand what it “means,” and without that interpretation, people would be “lost.” Nixon sees any attempt at deconstruction of the historical narrative as simply another tactic by the Phantom. Having equated history with “nothing but words,” Nixon notes,

Of course, the Phantom was already onto this, wasn't he? Ahead of us again. What were his dialectical machinations if not the *dissolution of the natural limits of language*, the conscious invention of a space, a spooky artificial no-man's land, between logical alternatives? I loved to debate both sides of any

issue, but thinking about that strange space in between made me sweat. (136, italics added)

What Nixon has essentially described here is his fear of a postmodern perspective, a perspective that allows no overarching truth but rather a series of different lenses, different spaces, from which to view reality (or history.) The Phantom is decidedly postmodern.

There is a moment in *The Public Burning* in which, in the public square near where the Rosenbergs are to be electrocuted, meaning seems to dissipate. Nixon loses his pants and, trying to distract the crowd from this fact, he tries to give a speech. The mob laughs at him and calls him a liar, beginning to see through his words. Panicked, suggests that standing in front of them with his pants down demonstrates his adherence to the truth, and urges the crowd to the same, and they follow suit. All across America, “Cowboys were dropping their chaps, the Pilgrims, the Riverboat Gamblers . . . governors and judges, secretaries and bureaucrats . . . “ (483). Uncle Sam sees Nixon’s actions as a cheap stunt, but Nixon, caught up in the moment fatefully announces that everyone in America has his or her pants down, except Uncle Sam himself. So Sam obliges and, as he does so, darkness falls.

It is “the nighttime of the people” (487). Americans see behind the veil—America as it truly is rather than the triumphalist narrative that Nixon and Uncle Sam attempt to sell. Rather than the triumphalist narrative of Uncle Sam, there is no narrative at all. Unable to make meaning, crowds become mobs and then become amorphous blobs. Nixon notes that meaning itself disconnects from reality. “In the nighttime of the people, everything is moving and there is nothing to grab hold of. The very pavements seem to

dissolve into an undulating quagmire” (487). In this “nighttime of the people,” the triumphalist historical narrative collapses and is lost and postmodernity reigns. The people try to make sense of historical moments but cannot piece them together. Coover invokes Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible* (playing in a theater down the block) and equates the darkness and madness of the street with the woods of the 17th century Massachusetts setting of the play: “[i]t was not easy for these people, the people of Salem;⁴⁰ for the edge of the terrible wilderness was close by, full of mystery, dark and threatening, the Devil’s last preserve” (490). The darkness of the wilderness is conflated with the darkness of a postmodern view that holds no anchor for traditionalists:

Amid a crescendo of ticking clocks, mad diabolical laughter, shattering glass, and recurring notes of impending doo-oom, the eidola squatters and gloomy birds, frat rats and dirt farmers, puritans, populists, and brainwashed vets rise now to intermingle with those of coffinmakers and craven cowards, desperadoes and draft dodgers! What is truth? What is perversity? In the nighttime of the people it’s all one. (491)

Truth itself, or rather the constructed narrative that Coover has already revealed to the reader, is lost. The narrative collapses, for those in the street, for Nixon, and for the reader himself. The result is confusion and deep fear, the end of the world as we have known it. The crowd panics as nothing makes sense to them, and the reader is left to try to find meaning in an apparently meaningless passage.

Nixon sees this lack of meaning and truth as relativism, but it is in fact the postmodern view—that is, as Linda Hutcheon has argued, events are given meaning by the narrative rather than having inherent meaning. We make meaning through the

⁴⁰ Here, he makes the connection that the people of Salem in the play and the people of America now on the streets awaiting the Rosenbergs’ execution are one in the same.

narrative of history, not of history itself.⁴¹ Nixon attributes this breakdown to the Phantom, but the reader can see it is really simply a lack of historical metanarrative. What is interesting about the moment, though, is how the crowd—representative of the American public—responds. They are frightened and incapable of dealing with this lack of meaning. They need their lives to make sense. Coover seems to suggest that, while we do live in a world without inherent meaning, we *need* narratives, particularly some sort of metanarrative, to survive, to make sense of the chaos. Postmodernity, for the average American, really is the end of the world. Of course, Uncle Sam takes advantage in this particular contingent moment, by “saving” the crowd and pushing his narrative of the Phantom against their fear.⁴² In the end, the crowd re-embraces Sam’s narrative and “[n]othing has really happened, they’re all still okay! It’s like coming out of a scary movie—nothing but camera tricks, the illusory marvels and disasters of Cinerama and 3-D, th-th-that’s all f-folks! Lights up and laugh!” The people begin “encouraging each other to shake a leg and [make] a generally raucous appeal for national unity”⁴³ (496). It is a catch-22. We need narratives to make sense of history, but those narratives are hegemonic. Uncle Sam’s triumphalist narrative takes hold in part because we fear the alternative.

Coda: History as a Novel

⁴¹ She also notes that that meaning is always ideological.

⁴² One wonders what might have happened if someone in the crowd had managed to find his way to the stage and take command of the contingent moment—this is the one hope of postmodern historical narratives, that those enslaved by history act in contingent moments.

⁴³ This “national unity” that demands the execution of the Rosenbergs, of course.

Robert Coover allows the reader to see an actual deconstruction of the triumphalist historical narrative within his novel. The picture he paints of a postmodern reality is a frightening one—indeed, it’s apocalyptic. It is Fukiyama’s end of history, at least in a Jamesonian sense. Suddenly, people are living in a perpetual present, a world without a teleological historical metanarrative (or with multiple narratives) within which to find meaning. To somehow deconstruct the hegemonic narrative of history that continues to drive itself is to also face a world without apparent anchor, without truth. Coover seems to offer little hope that Americans are brave enough to take this step, that, when we see the narrative fall apart before our eyes, we will fear meaninglessness and grasp any truth to avoid it. Perhaps Coover’s dénouement, then, offers little hope. Indeed, even as, at the end of the novel, Uncle Sam sodomizes Nixon with the Washington Monument, Nixon notes that this crime is happening to the nation too. But, he still accepts his fate: “Whatever else [Sam] was, he was beautiful . . . the most beautiful thing in all the world” (534.) His last words to Uncle Sam profess his love. Nixon stands in for the American public here. The words of Susan Isaacson in Doctorow’s *The Book of Daniel* are apt here, as history is “fucking” Nixon and “fucking” us and, even as it does, we accept that fate lovingly.

In a future postmodernity, then, how will the American public react? The only hint is the children’s reaction to the Rosenberg execution: “fascinated by the first two jolts, they are now bored by the third.” They ask, “What’s history?” and complain, “that they want to go home or go see Mickey Mouse or use the toilet” (510). This response and its evocation of Disney also harkens back to *The Book of Daniel*; in a postmodern sense,

history has become a Disney ride, with the execution of two potentially innocent people boring by comparison. Whether this view is a progression or a regression depends on one's view of the "nighttime of the people."

However, at these moments of complete breakdown, in apocalyptic moments such as the darkness in Times Square (which, itself, refers to the execution of the Rosenbergs, the apocalyptic moment for Coover and Doctorow) in *The Public Burning* there is a contingent chance for competing narratives to unfold. Yes, Uncle Sam re-establishes control, but at that moment of darkness, the opportunity does exist for other narratives, perhaps those marginalized by Uncle Sam and others, to rise. What Coover offers here is a moment of contingency, similar to what critic Josh Coleman suggests is offered to Billy Pilgrim at the end of Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*,⁴⁴ a chance to take control of his fate. Only this contingency offered by Coover is not simply a chance for personal agency, but for a social movement. If, in these moments of doubt, the marginalized can gain the stage (in social/political terms, the stage can refer to any form of media), the "mob" might be introduced to a new historical narrative, one that gives voice to the voiceless and humanizes the actors of history. These contingent moments are paramount. We must be aware of these moments and offer, when we can, a more nuanced multiplicity of narratives that allow for more than one voice. Using the character of Richard Nixon, a disgraced ex-president at the time of publication, Coover equates the moment of the Rosenberg trial with the contemporary United States in the mid-70s. This, then, is a moment of contingency for history—but then perhaps every moment is such a moment.

⁴⁴ This formulation will be examined in the following chapter.

Norman Mailer, in his 1968 book *The Armies of the Night*, focuses on such a moment in history to demonstrate this idea. Mailer essentially argues that journalism, as the first draft of history, is inherently subjective and, therefore, often fictionalized. The subtitle of his book is “History as a Novel; the Novel as History,” suggesting that these are one in the same. Like Coover, Mailer quotes *Time*, a blurb about the infamous 1968 March on the Pentagon and Mailer’s part in it. He then spends several pages describing his ego, his drunkenness, his overworked machismo, his greed, his sexism and his misanthropy. His “history,” then, seems to become a naval-gazing exercise in solipsism (he constantly refers to himself as the “Beast”) rather than any attempt at an unbiased history (or even a history at all) of the March. In other words, his “history” becomes more about him than of what he is ostensibly writing about. His reasoning, however, is similar to Coover’s attempt at deconstructing the very fact of “history.”

To write an intimate history of an event which places its focus on a central figure who is not central to the event, is to inspire immediate questions about the competence of the historian. Or, indeed, his honorable motive. The figure he has selected may be convenient to him rather than critical to the history. Such cynical remarks obviously suggest themselves in the choice of our particular protagonist [Mailer himself]. It could be said for this historian, there is no other choice. (Mailer 53)

Mailer has set up his audience for the same sort of realization that Coover has come to. Having been introduced to the flawed “historian,” the readers recognize that the history is, itself, fictionalized and flawed. After giving the readers a sense of the historian, Mailer then recounts his history—a novelization—of the March on the Pentagon. He allows his version to be compared to the ostensibly unbiased and factual *Time* version to provoke the reader to decide which is more unbiased and which is more “true.” The answer, of

course, is neither; the only difference is that Mailer has allowed the reader to see his bias, to see his attempts at fictionalization, while *Time* has not.

The real question, then, is which version becomes, or at least influences, “official” history—and the fact that two versions exist, of course, negates the entire concept of “official” history. In effect, Mailer deconstructs journalism and, by extension, history. This view, it seems, is the predominant one today—that everyone is biased and that objectivity is a fool’s goal. The goal, for Mailer and Coover is a multiplicity of historical narratives. This multiplicity echoes the (three) ends of Doctorow’s novel. But, like the radical says in the third version, “Close the book, man . . . don’t you know you’re liberated?” For both Doctorow and Coover, this new understanding of historical narratives as multiple and contingent offer something like liberation, if not true freedom. There are opportunities here to weave history as it happens. Participants must grasp contingent events and create multiple narratives that will allow for agency and resistance to less humanistic narratives (the hegemonic metanarratives of History, Religion and Triumphalist Government) and tell their own, humanistic, histories. As we shall see, Kurt Vonnegut who, also, assumes a postmodern post-apocalypse, demonstrates how such a feat might be accomplished from within postmodernity and how contingent moments can lead to individual and possibly social transformation.

Chapter Three

This Is Not How I Am: The Paradox of Transformation in the Post – Human Fiction of Kurt Vonnegut Jr.

Kurt Vonnegut, like E. L. Doctorow, Robert Coover, Cormac McCarthy and Richard Matheson, sees the postmodern period as post-apocalyptic. In such a world, characters, that in former times might have been protagonists, seem more like zombies, buffeted about by fate. Critic Josh Simpson writes, “Vonnegut forces his readers to consider what it means to be human in a chaotic, often absurd, and irrational universe” (Simpson 262). Todd F. Davis is more direct: “Vonnegut’s belief that the universe is purposeless is not his main theme; it is his assumption” (Davis, 11). Postmodernity is Vonnegut’s canvas. Vonnegut’s apocalyptic turn likely can be traced to the moment when he climbed up from the bomb shelter as a prisoner of war in Germany and beheld what the Allies had done to the non-military target of Dresden with their fire-bombing. As he famously wrote, “Dresden was like the moon now, nothing but minerals” (*Slaughterhouse* 178). Or perhaps the moment was years later when he petitioned the US government for information about that fire-bombing only to be told that such information was top-secret. The point is that, as Coover and Doctorow watched the modernist world dissolve in the deconstruction of the nationalist and historical narrative through the Rosenberg trials, Vonnegut’s faith in a transcendent narrative was shattered when he witnessed first hand that military machinery in the supposedly righteous United States trumped individual moral choice. Vonnegut’s writing is full of characters that seem

unable or unwilling to act in the face of the overwhelming tragedy borne of World War II, unable to act in the post-apocalyptic postmodernity of the late 20th century.

While all his work wrestles with this dilemma, Vonnegut really hit his stride in his fourth novel, *Cat's Cradle*, in which the postmodern metaphor is presented in a world destroyed by ice. The novels that follow, then, are metaphorically post-apocalyptic—their worlds exist, yes, but that existence is similar to that described by Richard Matheson in *I Am Legend*, in which, “Time was caught on hooks. Everything stood fixed” (Matheson, 69) and “Choices seemed pointless now. What did it matter *what* he did? Life would be equally purposeless no matter what his decision was” (Matheson 72, italics in original). Particularly in the three works that follow *Cat's Cradle*—*God Bless You Mr. Rosewater* (1965); *Slaughter-House Five* (1968); and *Breakfast of Champions* (1972)—Vonnegut presents characters who seem to have no meaningful agency, no way to resist the powers that be. However, Vonnegut also presents characters who act, and act ethically, regardless of received cultural assumptions about powerlessness. These characters demonstrate the concept of transformation, and offer a sort of hope in a post-apocalyptic postmodernity.

As an ACLU attorney who calls himself the “Liberal Viewer” shows in a YouTube video called “Fox News Obituary Trashes Kurt Vonnegut,”⁴⁵ when the beloved author died April 11, 2007 at the age of 84, the Fox News channel ran an obituary. That obituary, in addition to being at the very least unflattering, also repeated the assumption that Vonnegut’s fiction and life reflected a helpless attitude toward meaningful social change. While giving a nod toward Vonnegut’s progressive views, the obituary calls Vonnegut’s philosophy one of “despondent leftism.” Perhaps predictably for someone

⁴⁵ The video can be found at the link: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1SiVasR2Gzo>

who calls himself the “Liberal Viewer,” the narrator of the video notes that even at Vonnegut’s death, FNC cannot bring itself to simply praise the author without commenting on his “leftist” political views, which, of course, deviate from those of the network. However, equally egregious, in my view, is the use of the word “despondent,” a word that suggests a despairing surrender to the status quo. That status quo in Vonnegut’s novels includes a dying, polluted planet, a rampant militarism, and a consumerist capitalism that defines the meaninglessness of our lives—in other words, the post-apocalyptic landscape of a Jamesonian postmodernity.

To be fair, the writers of the Fox obituary are not the first critics to see in Vonnegut an overwhelming fatalism.⁴⁶ But other critics see, instead, a pragmatic postmodernist, a voice speaking for the dispossessed, one that recognizes the hopelessness of reality but strives to work within the framework of that reality to make the most of such an existence.⁴⁷ However, I argue that Vonnegut is, rather, an agent for change who demonstrates in his work the concept of transformation. Characters are transformed in Vonnegut’s works through acting ethically despite a narrative that suggests action is impossible or irrelevant. This transformation, not the intended effect of the action or its goal, is what truly matters. In Vonnegut’s novels, most characters act like zombies, but the possibility of re-humanization exists. In fact, Vonnegut’s prose demands free action rather than resignation in the face of overwhelming metanarratives of

⁴⁶ See Uphaus and Messent.

⁴⁷ See Davis and Klinkowitz.

powerlessness, particularly within Jamesonian and Lyotardian postmodernity.⁴⁸

Regardless, Vonnegut's message is certainly not simply "despondent."

A quick look at some of these critical views will demonstrate these differences. Within the scope of postmodernity critics have focused on Vonnegut's obsession with free will or the lack thereof.⁴⁹ As postmodernity is Vonnegut's canvas, his characters accept received cultural assumptions about meaningful agency. Fate is not the meaningful dictate of absolute purpose, but rather an ideological narrative that inscribes the discursive practices of hegemonic authority. Characters *learn* they have no free will. The actual question of free will, then, is moot. For some critics (and, apparently, Fox News), his novels suggest a depressing fatalism. Robert Uphaus and Peter Messent, for example, see Vonnegut's response as resigned—that is, as a way of dealing with a postmodern life in which humans have no control. In the face of forces that devastate the world, Billy Pilgrim in *Slaughter-House Five* can only control how he *feels*; thus, given space to exercise his imagination, Pilgrim can find comfort but cannot meaningfully affect reality. "The novel's one word conclusion—"Poo-tee-weet?"—preserves the terrible dilemma of human imagination trapped within the historical context of death [and]. . . reinforces the pattern of *imagined* happiness projected against the backdrop of slaughter" (Uphaus 170, italics added). Other critics, however, such as John May, and Jerome Klinkowitz, see Vonnegut's "fatalism" as a simple pragmatic approach to postmodern existence. They

⁴⁸ As noted in the introduction, there are as many definitions of postmodernity as there are theorists in the field, however this work focuses on Lyotard's "incredulity toward metanarratives" and Jameson's late capitalist postmodernity.

⁴⁹ For Vonnegut, free will equates closely to a sort of meaningful agency—the ability (or inability) of a character to make actual meaningful choices rather than culturally imposed selections, and act in ways that resist habituation or received cultural assumptions.

argue that Vonnegut challenges the status quo in purely pragmatic terms—in doing what we can from within our post-apocalyptic existence to bring comfort to those who need it. John May, for example, writes, “We may not be able, Vonnegut is saying, to undo the harm that has been done, but we can certainly love, simply because they are people, those who have been made useless by our past stupidity and greed, our previous crimes against our brothers” (May 28). A third critical view suggests Vonnegut’s responses to power are improvisational. Critics like Daniel Cordle and Todd F. Davis agree that Vonnegut suggests we act pragmatically when we can, but also suggest that, because of the contingent nature of reality, that pragmatic response can sometimes be efficacious. Acting in just the right situation can effect real change, but those situations are rare.

My view is closest to third critical camp, but Vonnegut’s demands for agency do not simply reduce to the pragmatic and are also not simply a negotiation within a web of power. Rather, action—direct action as opposed to theoretical contemplation—can lead to transformation, and that transformation itself creates meaningful agency. Vonnegut asks his characters to act, and action can only happen when characters reject all received cultural assumptions that claim to be truth, including the assumption that meaningful agency does not exist in this postmodern post-apocalypse. Like the children in E. L. Doctorow’s *The Book of Daniel*, everyone in Vonnegut’s books (and by extension, all of us) has become iconic, Baudrillard’s simulacra. Acting ethically in the face of a narrative that delegitimizes such action creates space that allows for that agency and humanizes or authenticates the actor. For Vonnegut, acting from within a narrative that denies free will is what makes one heroic—or human, essentially creating an individual subject in an post-apocalyptic postmodernity that denies any subjectivity. Such action in the

postmodern condition is tantamount to the philosopher Hannah Arendt's concept of (individualized or social) transformation, the difference between liberation and freedom.⁵⁰ This moment of action, for Vonnegut, is the moment of transformation. Perhaps we have been convinced by postmodernity that we are all zombies, "doomed to collide and collide and collide," but free action can transform us and make us human again (Vonnegut, *Breakfast 224*). That transformation itself is as important as any other possible result of the action.

Postmodern Religion: *Cat's Cradle*

Vonnegut ends the world with ice-nine in *Cat's Cradle*, published in 1963. In this apocalyptic novel Vonnegut overwhelms the reader with characters who seem to have no real agency. These characters, including the narrator of the novel, John, certainly seem to be buffeted by a fate over which they have no control. And by the end of the novel, that destiny leads to the destruction of human life on Earth. Thus, it is easy to make an argument for Vonnegut's "despondent" fatalism. Conversely, critics such as Todd Davis see, rather, characters that negotiate this fate by accepting narratives of love (epitomized in the novel as the narrative of the Vonnegutian religion of Bokononism.) This view sees the novel as a sort of primer on how to survive—and act humanely if not with agency, from within a chaotic and postmodern narrative of meaninglessness. The choice seems to be destiny or chaos. The constant reminders of a lack of agency, of apparent

⁵⁰ For Hannah Arendt, only men who act are free, as opposed to those who are simply liberated. Freedom implies action; liberation implies the possibility of action but is dependent on the actions of another (to allow that liberation.)

despondency, are overwhelming. However, the overwhelming nature of the prose acts mimetically, representing how it *feels* in a postmodern existence where resistance seems impossible. So in *Cat's Cradle*, Vonnegut is in essence establishing his postmodern world. He then shows us characters—Julian Castle and Harold Minton—who *do* act in meaningful (if ultimately fruitless in terms of the goals of their actions) ways in this world. These actions present the hope of transformation—of characters that resist the postmodern assumption of powerlessness.

Cat's Cradle begins by introducing the narrator John—or Jonah: “if I had been a Sam, I would have been a Jonah still—not because I have been unlucky for others, but because somebody or something has compelled me to be at certain places at certain times, without fail. Conveyances and motives, both conventional and bizarre have been provided. And, according to plan, at each appointed second, at each appointed place this Jonah was there” (1). This opening is a classic example of Vonnegut’s use of passive voice as a stylistic device. Such a grammatical form lends itself to the passivity of Vonnegut’s characters; passive voice implies domination—an object “being acted on” rather than a subject “acting.” Even Vonnegut’s grammatical style comments on agency. Like a zombie in a post-apocalyptic landscape, even narrators in Vonnegut’s novels do not act; they are acted upon. This first paragraph also intimates the narrator’s acceptance of his fate. John has accepted a metanarrative, in this case, a religious or transcendent one, which works to deny agency. The use of “Jonah” as the narrator's name forces the reader to consider the problem of free will in Christianity. If God knows all that is going to happen, how do we have free will to make real choices that can alter that future? The biblical Jonah is told by God that he has free will, and is then told *what to do* by God (to,

in this case, preach his Word). Jonah chooses not to do what God asks, and tries to escape his responsibility. He is swallowed by the fish, taken back to shore, and, eventually, he accepts God's narrative and preaches God's Word. God's concept of "free will" in the Biblical Jonah's case is satirical (or, at least, ironic.) In the face of the metanarrative of the Christian God, Jonah has no true freedom. He is liberated in that he is given free will, but he cannot act on that free will, as God demands his service. So through the lens of Arendt, Jonah is liberated, but not free; his freedom depends on another. Whatever agency Jonah has is not meaningful. Vonnegut's character of John/Jonah comes to the conclusion that he, like the prophet before him, has been driven by destiny, a conclusion he draws because of his belief in Bokononism.

In *Cat's Cradle*, Bokononism is a religion invented by a charlatan, Bokonon, who like John, came to the island of San Lorenzo as if driven by fate. His religion, which he himself calls a "pack of [lies]" (Vonnegut, *Cat's* 191) is designed to make people who have no recourse feel better about themselves and their lives.⁵¹ San Lorenzo, as it turns out, is the perfect place for such a religion to sprout. The people are so poor because, "God, in His Infinite Wisdom, had made the island worthless" (125). Bokonon decides to build a utopia here—an illusory one that will make people happy regardless of their lot in life. As he writes in his religious "Calypso," "I wanted all things / To seem to make some sense / So we could be happy, yes / Instead of tense / And I made up lies / So that they all fit nice" (127). In many ways Bokononism represents the view of those who argue that

⁵¹ An argument can be made here that Vonnegut stylizes his religion after the Dadaist movement which, as described by Greil Marcus in his book *Lipstick Traces*, was a philosophy that, "was a slipknot, your basic Sophistry 1-A: everything I say is a lie" (Marcus 179).

Vonnegut suggests we can control only how we feel. The world may not make much sense, but we can choose to believe lies that make it seem like it does.

Bokonon's religion is quickly naturalized. Vonnegut's world is chaotic, but Bokononism provides illusory meaning in a world without meaning and everything "makes sense." Everyone on the island becomes a Bokononist, even those who claim to be Christian.⁵² Bokononism is improvisational, a sort of postmodern religion. Unlike a metanarrative like Christianity it does not offer universal rules and morals to guide action. Rather, morality is improvised. Todd Davis writes that since, "Vonnegut, like other postmodernists, believes that claims for objectivity and neutrality no longer hold water" (Davis 9), then we must create our own fantasies and Bokononism represents this process. It is a cultural turn toward postmodernism. This view is different than simply believing in illusion for the sake of feeling better. Davis views Vonnegut as a "postmodern humanist,"⁵³ who sees no transcendent narrative but preaches kindness

⁵² Christianity remains the "official" religion of San Lorenzo so that the island nation can maintain good relations with the U.S. and Bokononism is officially outlawed, though even the island's dictator, Papa Manzano, is secretly a Bokononist.

⁵³ Of course, there is a basic problem with Davis's thesis. Even though he establishes that "daily, local activity" is how a "postmodern humanist" acts, that action is still based upon an overarching view of humanism, modernist or not, and becomes, as Al Cacicedo notes in a review of Davis's book, "a fixed point in the postmodern chaos" adding that Vonnegut's emotional response based on humanism, "tentative, local, and non-assertive though it is—fills the void with a transcendent value that, as Davis shows, remains absolute regardless of the fictive context" (Cacicedo 117). In other words, Davis seems to suggest that Vonnegut is not just attempting to resist the mandate of powerlessness imposed by postmodernity, but also, despite his deconstruction of universal values, postmodernism itself. Cacicedo writes of Davis's thesis that, if true, ". . . then the future that Vonnegut envisions is post-postmodern, centered once again on a transcendent subject—not God or a master narrative but the individual human" [as opposed, perhaps, to the universal human of a modernist humanism] (Cacicedo 117). I believe this last formulation is the closest to the truth. Despite Davis's claims, he seems to argue that Vonnegut is not pretending to believe for the sake of agency, but rather, *actually*

anyway.

Vonnegut's movement toward action through the writing of fiction appears to transcend the modernist paradigm, recognizing the pluralist nature of reality and the postmodern deconstruction of narratives. The petites histories—small localized narratives for living—that Vonnegut offers are based on traditional humanist values but do not operate within a grand narrative or totalizing schema as such narratives once did. For Vonnegut, there is never a dogmatic claim to “truth.” (Davis 13)

While denying transcendent truth Vonnegut still subscribes to a form of malleable humanism, depending on the situation in which we act, through Bokononism. According to Davis, Vonnegut embraces humanism as a *pragmatic* approach to effecting change, rather than a philosophical or theoretical one. However, the absurdity of such a religion should also be clear. In Bokononism, “it is not possible to make a mistake” (Vonnegut, *Cat's* 203). Whatever happens is meant to happen. Therefore, rather than an inspiration for ethical or resistant action, Bokononism acts as the same sort of mandate of powerlessness as postmodernity and works as a sort of Manifest Destiny. No action cannot alter fate. Bokononism inspires only apathy, offers liberation but not freedom. The characters of San Lorenzo accept their fate with a happy resignation, even as they are essentially enslaved and ultimately die in mass suicides. The improvisational ethics of Bokononism are no panacea.

John says at one point that Bokononism tells him that, “God Almighty knew all about me, after all, that God Almighty had some pretty elaborate plans for me” (69). This belief makes him *feel* better about his situation certainly but also makes him accept his

believing in a transcendent humanism (though, notably, not a modernist humanism.) Thus, as Cacicedo points out, Davis argues that Vonnegut does follow a metanarrative of ethical action. Were this not a postmodern existence, such a path might not seem trite or nostalgic.

fate, for good or ill. The narrator has conflated the situatedness of Bokononism with a faith in destiny. His rejection of Christianity for Bokononism is ironic. Other characters, Bokononist and Christian alike, however, also feel themselves blown by the winds of fate.⁵⁴ Davis argues that Bokononism, because of its ever-changing dogma and its confession that it is a lie, shows the flawed thinking in a grand narrative and, therefore, is a better way of approaching *all* narratives. “Absolutism, the absurd belief that one's own ideas are unerringly correct, that one's actions may be driven by an essential good or purity, leads to the dark conclusion of *Cat's Cradle*” (Davis 63). However an ever-changing illusory narrative is just as bad as an absolutist one—no character that believes in Bokononism (including John/Jonah) does anything to prevent the end of the world because in the belief of the religion, “it is not possible to make a mistake” (Vonnegut, *Cat's* 203). If Bokononism really is a critique of the metanarrative of religion, it is a complicit critique, one that, as Jameson would say, “reinforces the logic” of the consumerist capitalist postmodernism from which it rises (Jameson 20). A “malleable humanism” fails to provide meaningful agency.

The world ends, destroyed by *ice-nine*, in part because so many characters (caricatures, really) meekly accept their fate and believe various fantasies—some of them Bokononist, some of them Christian, some of them nationalistic, some of them scientifically teleological, and some of them romantic. Franklin Hoenikker, for instance

⁵⁴ The Crosbys, for instance, seem nonplussed when the world ends around them and continue to live as if nothing has changed. Franklin Hoenikker talks about a “Fata Morgana” that draws him to San Lorenzo. “Gentle seas then nuzzled Frank's pleasure craft to the shores of San Lorenzo, as though God wanted him to go there” (83). Bokononism teaches that “it is not possible to make a mistake” because everything is pre-ordained (203).

who actually gives the *ice-nine* to Manzano (who will then accidentally release it and destroy the world) feels that it is his destiny to do so because he believes the fantasy that he is as scientifically clever as his brilliant father (who invented *ice-nine*.) If Vonnegut is making an editorial comment here, it should be noted that a belief in destiny and/or the acceptance of a cultural assumption of a lack of agency kills everyone. Even as everyone dies, everyone remains resigned to fate. John writes of the Mintons (the American ambassador to San Lorenzo and his wife) dying romantically, hand in hand, without even an apparent effort to save themselves; he writes of his own “ritualized” (280) responses to life after the apocalypse; and, in fact, Bokonon has left word that the only sane response to this insane world *is* an acceptance of fate. The religious leader recommends suicide and thousands of people—including the beautiful Mona—kill themselves, because Bokonon notes, “God was surely trying to kill them, possibly because he was through with them, and . . . they should have the good manners to die” (271). It is, as John even notes, a depressing and cynical end. Yet, in the midst of hopelessness, Vonnegut (or John, at least) tells of a few characters that act in non-habituated ways, regardless of the situation, and regardless of the expected result of their actions.

These characters have no illusions; they recognize that the comfort they give others will be fleeting and that any resistance they offer will be futile. The telos, or goal, of their actions seem hopeless in the hegemonic narrative in which they live. However, they take action anyway and, briefly, become more than caricatures. They become protagonists. As *ice-nice* devastates the population of San Lorenzo, Julian Castle and his son, “set out on foot . . . to give whatever hope and mercy was theirs to give” (285). John refers to the Castles’ actions as “meaningful, individual [and] heroic” and he praises them

(285).⁵⁵ Ambassador Minton, too, becomes a protagonist, who speaks truth to power. Before the celebration of the San Lorenzan veterans of World War II (the “hundred martyrs to democracy,” who had died in a torpedo attack before their ship even got out of the harbor) he, the official representative of the U.S., gives a speech. However, he acts contrary to the received cultural assumptions of his position (ambassador), his nation, (the U.S.), and the situation (a “patriotic holiday”) (254). He is, in fact, an actor who changes his own lines: “He had a written speech with him—fustian and bombast . . . [but he] put [it] away.” He announces, “I am about to do something very un-ambassadorial . . . I am about to tell you what I really feel” (253).⁵⁶ The speech, then, while praising the dead, also wonders at the absurdity of sending children off to die. Should such things really be celebrated, asks Minton? “The answer is yes, on one condition: that we, the celebrants, are working *consciously* and tirelessly to reduce the stupidity and viciousness of ourselves and of all mankind” (255, italics added). Minton acts unhabituatedly and urges those around him (and the reader) to also act deliberately.

⁵⁵ Indeed, as a few critics, including Stanley Schatt have noted, at times the characters’ very names suggest Vonnegut’s opinion of their actions. Julian Castle’s initials (JC) seem to represent Christ.. “Julian” suggests the Roman source of (modern) Christianity, while “Castle” works intertextually with Kafka’s novel, *The Castle*, which is, more or less, about a God no longer there. Other names of caricatures/characters also have significance. As noted, “John” and “Jonah” are important Biblical references, representing both the questions of free will in Christianity, but also, perhaps, the Gospel of John (in this case transcribing the actions of Bokonon rather than Jesus.) Other characters have names that are intertextual, easily connoting historical or literary figures or natural or religious phenomena: Newt, for instance, both identifies as grotesque (representing a newt or a salamander) and also ironically connotes a great scientist, Isaac Newton (though the shortened version of it suggests that Newt does not live up to the name—much as Franklin Hoenikker does not live up to his namesake of Benjamin Franklin.)

⁵⁶ It is hard not to hear Vonnegut speaking directly to the reader through this speech. He does something very un-novelist—he tells us exactly how he feels.

These characters are transformed; however, the reader never sees results. They act freely, but in both cases, die soon after and the world still ends. As seen with many of the weak characters in *Cat's Cradle*, Vonnegut feels for those who seek illusory solace because of how painful life is; but he *respects* those who refuse those illusions and act with deliberation anyway. In the introduction to one of his earlier novels, *Mother Night*, Vonnegut writes, "We are what we pretend to be. So we must be careful about who we pretend to be" (v). In much the same way, Vonnegut might suggest that we must pretend our ethical work has meaning and efficacy even from within a metanarrative that assumes it does not because that improvisation will define who we are, and becoming a subject—becoming "human"—is, for Vonnegut, itself an act of resistance. Regardless of the metanarrative that surrounds them, Castle and Minton find meaning in their own narrative of situational ethical action.

Cat's Cradle and Bokononism provide a template for Vonnegut's situational ethics and resistance that evolves in the next few novels. Here Vonnegut tries to find a way of expressing the concept of localized and improvisational ethics, what Davis would call his postmodern humanism. However, both Bokononism and Davis's formulation seem futile. Julian Castle manages to alleviate suffering (at the likely cost of his own life), but he does nothing to change the world. Likewise, Ambassador Minton's speech changes nothing. However, Vonnegut still celebrates these actions because the characters are transformed from zombie-like caricatures acted upon to characters who, instead, resist, and deliberately act themselves.

Postmodern Economics: *God Bless You Mr. Rosewater*

Vonnegut's next novel is *God Bless You Mr. Rosewater*. The postmodern post-apocalypse in this novel is Marxist—*Rosewater* describes a landscape charred by late capitalism. Again, Vonnegut overwhelms his readers. As with *Cats' Cradle*, *God Bless You Mr. Rosewater* works by making the reader feel the overwhelming sense of powerlessness, of having one's fate determined, this time not by religious narratives but by economic forces. Most of the characters in the novel, even the rich ones (who may be liberated, but not free), seem to live at the whim of economic circumstance. Like zombies who clamor for brains in postmodern horror films, these characters clamor to “slurp” at the “money river”(*Rosewater* 122). However, among all these characters—including the poor Rosewater County inhabitants, U.S. senators, insurance salesmen, lawyers and those, like the presumed protagonist, Eliot Rosewater, born into enormous wealth—is a different sort of character, Harry Pena. Pena seems a minor character, only appearing briefly in a scene in which he is contrasted with Fred Rosewater (a poor insurance salesman) and then merely referred to by others later. But Vonnegut, as he does for Julian Castle and Ambassador Minton in *Cat's Cradle*, praises Pena for choosing to live deliberately in spite of a capitalist/consumerist narrative. In a novel of impotent men who have no agency, Pena is portrayed as a deeply masculine man who makes real choices. He is the only character who seems to live an authentic existence. And it was not always that way; Pena was once an insurance salesman himself and had to transform his life (through action) to reach this point of authenticity.

God Bless You Mr. Rosewater is likely Vonnegut's most expositional novel.⁵⁷ The reader never sees Pena's transformation. Rather, as with much of the back story, that transformation is referred to and explained, but never shown. The novel introduces a character that has been transformed and that has an authentic subjectivity in a Jamesonian postmodern existence, but does not demonstrate that moment of transformation. And as with *Cat's Cradle*, Vonnegut first overwhelms the reader with what seems to be "despondent leftism."

Born into the Rosewater fortune, Eliot Rosewater has more than enough money⁵⁸ to do whatever he wants; in America, after all, wealth is power. However, though liberated because of his wealth, he is not free of the capitalist system. When he attempts to use his wealth to help the poor and sick of Rosewater County, his father, lawyers, and, eventually the rule of law itself intervenes. He may use his money in any way he chooses except to give it away, because giving it away delegitimizes the very system that gives him apparent, though not actual, agency. Eliot is a lot like the Biblical Jonah again—liberated, but not free, given apparent free will but unable to actually use that agency to change the status quo. When he attempts to give small sums to supposedly undeserving people while living among them, the lawyer Norman Mushari comes to the obvious conclusion that Eliot is insane and begins the battle to strip him of his fortune. Acting on one's free will again—and to help humanity, no less—only seems to prove that one

⁵⁷ Much of the novel is written in back-story, transcribed notes, or letters. Very little actually happens in the story making it one of Vonnegut's most passive novels. The beauty of *God Bless You Mr. Rosewater* lies in that exposition, however. At one point, in a letter to his heirs, Eliot Rosewater tells a history of the Rosewater Foundation that can be read as a sort of new historicist critique of the American historical myth of manifest destiny and Horatio Alger.

⁵⁸ \$87,472,033.61 to be exact.

doesn't really have *meaningful* agency.

Because of an accident of birth, Eliot Rosewater has a very different life than the poor people of Rosewater County (who seem very much like the poor of San Lorenzo) and even than his distant cousin, Fred, who lives far away in Rhode Island. Money, in America, is a sort of Manifest Destiny. Because he is rich, he is expected to speak and act a certain way, accepting the hegemonic discourse of the wealthy in the capitalistic metanarrative of the US. Instead he chooses to live among the poor and give them bundles of money that doesn't really help their situation at all. The poor and ugly, meanwhile, are just that, and unable to improve themselves, even with Rosewater's apparent Christ-like unconditional love.

Vonnegut has written another satire, this one a satire of the American capitalist system, in which money dehumanizes, either through having it, or through desiring it, and dehumanization for Vonnegut means a loss of meaningful agency. Money makes people act like zombies. Try as he might, Eliot cannot do as he wishes without appearing insane, and if he appears insane, then he loses his liberty to act. His father explains to him, referring to his squalid office, "If this were the set on a stage, when the curtain went up, the audience would be on pins and needles, eager to see the incredible nut who could live this way." Eliot's innocent question follows: "What if the nut came out and gave sensible explanations for his place being the way it is?" His father responds, "He would still be a nut" (220). Perception is reality. Todd Davis compares Rosewater to Kilgore Trout, the destitute science-fiction writer who Rosewater admires (and who will appear,

in some fashion, in each succeeding Vonnegut novel).⁵⁹ He notes that the capitalist system here is the “grand narrative” much like religion was in *Cat's Cradle*. Trout's narratives, science fiction stories with morals, are the sorts of smaller, local narratives humanity needs, according to Davis. “As is often the case in Vonnegut's world, those who have stories to tell that may improve the life of humanity toil in obscurity and poverty, while those who rule the social and financial worlds spin narratives of injustice and inequity that destroy the human spirit” (Davis 72). Trout's stories, off-the-cuff as they are, reflect the improvisation of Bokononism.

Critic and Vonnegut biographer Jerome Klinkowitz notes that one of the reasons Vonnegut often chooses science fiction as a genre (for himself or his character Kilgore Trout) is that the “secret” of science fiction is “[t]he same as Vonnegut's: knowing that reality is not an absolute condition but only a human description changeable from describer to describer and completely relative according to culture” (Klinkowitz, *Effect* 71). Trout's solutions (and Trout offers a solution for Eliot near the end of the novel, one that may save the Rosewater fortune) are improvisational. Eliot Rosewater waxes poetic when talking about science fiction as a form, noting that science fiction writers are,

⁵⁹ Many critics, including Schatt, have noted Kilgore Trout's—like Julian Castle's before him—connection to the name of Jesus. The death and destruction is implied in his first name (either as a contrast or a reminder of Christ's death on the cross) and the “fish” is implied in his surname, representing the original symbol for Christ. Regardless, as Christ taught with his parables, Trout will teach with his science fiction stories for the next few novels. Indeed, even Vonnegut himself makes the comparison directly in *God Bless You Mr. Rosewater*: Trout is described physically as a “frightened, aging Jesus, whose sentence to crucifixion had been commuted to imprisonment for life” (162). When Eliot asks Trout why he shaved his beard, Trout's response, in reference to his appearance and his job (society's “greatest prophet's” job at a “trading stamp redemption center”) (19), is “[t]hink of the sacrilege of a Jesus figure redeeming stamps” (267).

the only ones talking about the *really* terrific changes going on . . . with guts enough to *really* care about the future, who *really* notice what machines do to us, what wars do to us, what cities do to us, what big, simple ideas do to us, what tremendous misunderstandings, mistakes, accidents and catastrophes do to us. (Vonnegut, *Rosewater* 18, italics in original)⁶⁰

Thus, science fiction—and particularly Trout’s work—seems to offer a new sort of Bokononism—improvised parables that can offer paths to ethical action. However, Eliot is drunk when he makes the former pronouncements, and is, throughout, depicted as schizophrenic. As Vonnegut explains, the reason science fiction (at least Trout’s works) and pornography are often conflated is that what they had in common, “wasn’t sex but fantasies of an *impossibly* hospitable world” (*Rosewater* 21, italics added). While parables, these stories remain impossible fantasies. Trout’s stories are like Bokononism—illusions that may make one feel better, but that offer no real change.

Eliot is not the only rich character to consider giving his money away; Stewart Buntline once considered such an action as well, but was talked out of it by his lawyer, McAllister. McAllister tells him to accept the way life is. “Giving away a fortune is a futile and destructive thing. It makes whiners of the poor, without making them rich or even comfortable. And the donor and his descendants become undistinguished members of the whining poor” (179). Wealth, then, is pre-ordained, and whether one has it or not, one’s life is ruled by it. In *God Bless You Mr. Rosewater*, the received cultural assumptions about money are what drive people to surrender free will. Eliot himself seems to prove McAllister’s words prophetic. While we never see Eliot’s ultimate fate beyond his being confined to an insane asylum, we do see that his doling of money helps

⁶⁰ Note the italics are likely meant ironically here; these writers are not “really” noticing any of these points Eliot raises.

no one. Indeed, when he gives money to one of his “clients” to buy a motorcycle, that person dies in a motorcycle accident. Despite his intention, working within the system kills rather than cures in this instance. Notably none of his “clients” ever get out of their hardscrabble lives; rather Eliot gives them money that convinces them that things are better when they are not. The lazy are still lazy; the sick are still sick. As Stanley Schatt writes, “such action does not solve these people's problems; it merely postpones them” (Schatt 72).

Eliot's distant cousin Fred Rosewater, meanwhile, spends his time trying to sell insurance because he is convinced that he needs to for his economic survival. He hates the job, but he is resigned to his fate. His father, in a similar situation, had killed himself; if fate doesn't intervene, Fred will follow suit. “Sons of suicides often think about killing themselves at the end of a day, when their blood sugar is low. And so it was with Fred Rosewater when he came home from work” (196).⁶¹ Still, when he discovers a book that recounts his family history, he is amazed that he is the descendant of Scotch nobility. However as he reads further in the book, he discovers (in a particularly Vonnegutian twist) that it is hollow; it has been eaten out by maggots. Only the arrival of Norman Mushari at his front door stops Fred from hanging himself. Much like Eliot has done with the poor people of Rosewater County, Mushari offers Fred the possibility of money—Eliot's fortune—to postpone his troubles and keep him from suicide, at least temporarily. There is a dull inevitability in the lives of the poor and middle class; and the rich, who have the power to do something to change it, are convinced by cultural assumptions to

⁶¹ This is a particularly powerful line when one remembers that Vonnegut himself was the “son of a suicide.” His mother killed herself while Vonnegut fought in World War II, a story that Vonnegut himself tells in *Breakfast of Champions*.

choose not to.

There are three characters in *God Bless You Mr. Rosewater* who *seem* to use their free will. Eliot, obviously, is one of them, for a time. Even though he “cannot,” he gives away bits of his fortune, at least until the legal battle begins to prove that he is insane. His reasoning is then examined and Trout, of all people, comes up with a convincing reason within the metanarrative of capitalism for Eliot’s actions. Trout explains that Eliot is conducting an experiment to see whether it is possible to love unconditionally, to “love people who have no use” (Vonnegut, *Rosewater* 264). The lesson for the capitalists is that such an experiment, applied universally, is doomed to fail. However, applied surgically, the sentiment dovetails nicely with Davis’s view of postmodern humanism and Jerome Klinkowitz’s view of pragmatic resistance. Trout notes one specific example of such postmodern humanism—that of Eliot’s (and, by extension, Vonnegut’s) love and respect of volunteer firemen. Trout says to Eliot,

Your devotion to volunteer fire departments is very sane . . . for they are . . . almost the only examples of enthusiastic unselfishness to be seen in this land. They rush to the rescue of any human being, and count not the cost. The most contemptible man in town, should his contemptible house catch fire, will see his enemies put the fire out. And, as he pokes through the ashes for remains of his contemptible possessions, he will be comforted and pitied by no less than the Fire Chief . . . [t]here we have people treasuring people as people. It’s extremely rare. So from this we must learn. (266)

This is the lesson that Davis and Klinkowitz and other critics suggest we take from this novel. Rather than resisting, we must do what we can from within the metanarrative to bring comfort to those who need it. Live within the capitalistic narrative, yes, but volunteer. John May’s earlier observation is just as apt here: “We may not be able, Vonnegut is saying, to undo the harm that has been done, but we can certainly love,

simply because they are people, those who have been made useless by our past stupidity and greed, our previous crimes against our brothers” (May 28).

However, Vonnegut problematizes this view. Eliot’s free will is, as noted before, not really free. Rather than actively using his agency, Eliot has simply changed his narrative (like John/Jonah becoming a Bokononist rather than a Christian) so that he might feel better about his actions. Inevitably, like Buntline (and others) before him, he has returned to the life of leisure. The book ends with Eliot finally giving away all his money to the poor in what he believes will be a magical solution: “Eliot fell silent, raised his tennis racket as though it were a magic wand. ‘And tell them,’ he began again, ‘to be fruitful and multiply’”(275). Eliot has accepted Trout’s narrative, a narrative borne from a science fictional perspective and, thus, one of those “fantasies of an impossibly hospitable world” (21). Davis sees this acceptance (of a localized narrative) as positive. He writes, “the most important task before us is to find narratives that create purpose” (Davis 74). However, this “solution” offered by Eliot either need not be taken seriously or can be seen as inapplicable to the capitalistic reality of life outside the asylum. He is painted as truly schizophrenic.⁶² Despite his father’s protestations that Eliot is sane, this action takes place in an insane asylum, and only after Eliot has woken up and lost some two years of memory. His actions in such a state will bear little legal weight. Trout’s narrative does create an illusory purpose for Eliot. The question is whether it does

⁶² Scenes of Eliot’s schizophrenia abound in the novel. Perhaps the most telling is when he answers the “red fire phone” only to discover it is not someone calling in a fire, but rather his poor client Mary Moody calling simply to talk: “God *damn* you for calling this number . . . [s]tupid sons of bitches who make private calls on a fire department line should go to hell and fry forever!” When she calls back on the other line, Vonnegut writes of Eliot, and his response to her sobbing, that he “honestly didn’t know [why she was upset.] He was ready to kill whoever had made her cry” (213-14, italics in original).

anything more significant. As Stanley Schatt points out, the playful way in which Vonnegut writes this final passage (using the tennis racket as a magic wand, for instance) suggests a fantasy. Even though Eliot has broken free once again from the capitalist narrative, he will accomplish little in reality. Schatt notes, “Eliot's last act is shrouded in ambiguity. . . . Vonnegut paints such absurd pictures that the godlike Eliot evokes laughter rather than devotion” (Schatt 79).

The lawyer Norman Mushari also seems an active character; however, his actions are not free. Money has dehumanized him. Despite appearing to have agency, Mushari is doing what's expected—he has bought into the received cultural assumptions of the capitalist narrative, a narrative taught to him in law school. According to his professor, Leonard Leech, “a lawyer should always be looking for situations where large amounts of money were about to change hands” (4). Leech’s name itself demonstrates the blood sucking nature of this system. Mushari is taken in by the learned desire to be rich, and it makes him evil—indeed, the only real villain in all of Vonnegut's novels. His love of money is learned behavior.

One character, Harry Pena, does seem immune to the dehumanizing and emasculating effect of the capitalist system. He does not seem to care much for *any* narrative and, like Vonnegut, revels in deconstructing those narratives. Fred Rosewater wishes he could be like Pena, who was once, like Fred, an insurance salesman before he decided to work in the outdoors as a fisherman. When asked by Fred if he “liked” the “picture of a French girl in a bikini” in the *Randy Herald* newspaper, Pena responds incredulously, “That’s not a girl. That’s a piece of paper.” Fred demurs, and Pena shows how easily Fred falls for the narratives placed in front of him:

You're easily fooled. . . . It's done with ink on a piece of paper. That girl isn't lying there on the counter. She's thousands of miles away, doesn't even know we're alive. If this was a real girl, all I'd have to do for a living would be to stay home and cut out pictures of big fish. (153)

As Schatt describes him, “[s]urrounded by lesbians . . . homosexuals . . . impotent utopic dreamers . . . and ambitious asexual lawyers, Pena is the only heterosexual in the novel” (Schatt 76). Indeed, few characters, including Eliot himself, manage to procreate.⁶³ Eliot, for instance, once finds himself with an erection. “Oh, for heaven’s sakes,’ [Eliot] said to his procreative organ, ‘how irrelevant can you be?’”(93). Vonnegut writes that Pena, however, is “one of the few men in Pisquontuit whose manhood was not in question” (152). In other words, in Schatt’s reading, equating masculinity with power, Pena is one of the few men in town who has meaningful agency. The rich diners at the Jolly Whaler watch him and his sons work each day in the harbor. The family responds by urinating over the side of the boat. “Fuck 'em all, boys. Right?” says Harry (184), showing contempt for the upper classes and, by extension, the whole of the capitalist system. But as with Julian Castle and Ambassador Minton in *Cat’s Cradle*, that agency may well be in vain in terms of a specific goal. When Caroline, Fred’s wife, asks if “men like Harry will always win?” she is told that they fight against the inevitable. Bunny Weeks, who in addition to owning the Jolly Whaler and kowtowing to the rich patrons inside, is also a director of a bank, notes that Pena is broke. “Bunny, to his credit, was not happy about this. ‘That’s all over, men working with their hands and backs. They are not

⁶³ Those who do procreate—Buntline and Senator Rosewater, for instance—manage to do so only once and their descendent line seems destined to stop after giving birth to lesbians or to utopic dreamers who will have no children of their own. Harry Pena, meanwhile, has three apparently fertile sons.

needed” (186). Still Pena earns the respect of other characters and of Vonnegut.⁶⁴

Working outside, making something of his life, Pena evokes jealousy even among the wealthy patrons of the restaurant. Caroline even says he is “so much like God” (184).

Pena is not dehumanized by the effect of money; he is free. Others may discuss how to be liberated; Harry Pena simply acts. This is the difference between mere liberation and freedom to philosopher Hannah Arendt—the difference between contemplation and action.

Vonnegut sets up this distinction by making the comparison between Fred Rosewater and Pena. As noted, Pena was once, like Fred, an insurance salesman. Told by a doctor that “working inside” was killing him, Pena abruptly and completely changed his life.⁶⁵ “Harry became what his father had been—a trap fisherman” (152). This change is given as a quick back-story, but the implication is that this “very healthy man” (150) was once exactly like Fred—weak and subject to the capitalist system. Then, in a moment of unplanned action—a moment of improvisation—he completely changed his life. As we will see with both *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Breakfast of Champions*, this transformation is similar to Hannah Arendt’s view of individual transformation, creating a “very healthy man” in the midst of many sick men who live their lives in response to capitalistic whims.

Fred Rosewater, the Buntlines, Norman Mushari, Senator Rosewater and even

⁶⁴ Note Vonnegut’s editorialization here: “to his credit.” Vonnegut, too, is sad that Pena and those like him—apparently authentic individuals—are losing in the hegemonic narrative of late capitalism.

⁶⁵ The reader is never told how, exactly, working inside is “killing” Pena; I would argue that it was simply making him inhuman. And “working inside” here can be read as “working inside a system” rather than outside it or against it.

Eliot all appear weak (and, in most cases, literally impotent) next to a man who not only “had a head and shoulders like Michelangelo might have given Moses or God,” but also three healthy sons (151.) While not showing the reader the moment of transformation, Vonnegut has painted a picture of the result—a man who follows no narrative written for him and who has agency amidst characters who bow to economic demands. Pena’s transformation allows him to live authentically while those around him worry about pornography and money. While the reader eventually learns that Pena is failing (at least in capitalistic terms), he himself does not seem distraught and, indeed, is even disdainful of the very system that calls him a failure. In a novel full of characters who have become more like zombies in a late-capitalist system, Pena is a transformed character, one who rises above the received cultural assumptions about power equating to money.

Transformation of the Postmodern: *Slaughterhouse-Five*

The novel *Slaughterhouse-Five* focuses on Vonnegut’s apocalyptic moment—the firebombing of Dresden, which the author witnessed. In this novel Billy Pilgrim, probably the most famous of Vonnegut’s protagonists, is unstuck in time, apparently has no free will, and seems to fit the perspective of fatalist critics. Pilgrim, too, like Jonah in *Cat’s Cradle*, faces the problem of free will in Christianity. Supposedly kidnapped by the alien Tralfamadorians, he can see his future and his past, so how can that future be changed? He accepts the Tralfamadorian narrative of time, and, Vonnegut notes of Pilgrim: “Among the things Billy Pilgrim couldn’t change were the past, the present and the future” (Vonnegut, *Slaughter* 60). Many critics see this acceptance as a psychological

device for dealing with a reality Billy cannot control (the postmodern chaos of Vonnegut's canvas and the character's witnessing of the destruction of Dresden in WWII); his wounded psyche creates the Tralfamadorians who teach him how to accept his fate meekly, and his life becomes bearable. He believes the comforting Tralfamadorian narrative. Critic Josh Simpson, for instance, notes, "[Billy] created Tralfamadore as a way of escaping his troubled past. In that light, his Tralfamadorian existence must be approached as an escape mechanism grounded in mental instability but . . . [w]ar psychologically wounds Billy Pilgrim" (Simpson 267). Stanley Schatt writes, "*Slaughterhouse-Five* is built around the irreconcilable conflict between free will and determinism" (Schatt 91). Schatt sees no resolution to this conflict. Rather he sees Vonnegut's message of one of smiling "through tears" and, unable to alter political situations, being compassionate. Schatt writes that, it is important that, "no matter whether there is free will or not . . . [we] love whomever is around to be loved" (Schatt 96).

While Schatt is right about the need for compassion, he and other critics miss the resolution, in part because they assume the only valid agency is an effective one, one that accomplishes its goal, and the metanarrative of postmodernity reaffirms this position. As with the earlier novels, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, overwhelms the reader mimetically, making it seem as if nothing can possibly resist or affect the powerful machinery of militarism that drives reality at the end of the 20th century. Then, presenting characters that actually act in the face of such a powerful metanarrative, Vonnegut explores more deeply the concept of transformation and meaningful agency. Despite the narrative that nothing can be done to stop war, Vonnegut writes his World War II novel in the midst of the Vietnam

conflict and presents himself as Lot's Wife—bearing witness to tragedy and choosing to speak about it and thus, creating a self that resists the received assumptions of powerlessness. *Slaughterhouse-Five* demands agency rather than denies it.

Slaughterhouse-Five, published in 1969, is Vonnegut's "war book," the book he claims he had been working on since his experience as a POW in World War II. This novel has taken him some twenty-three years to finish. Of course, central to the novel is Vonnegut's (and protagonist Billy Pilgrim's) witnessing of the massacre of Dresden. The disjointed, postmodern style and non-chronological story telling suggest that Pilgrim's mental state reflects Vonnegut's own attempts to face Dresden and the writing of the novel. Jerome Klinkowitz explains, "In *Slaughterhouse-Five* the correlation to Billy's time travel and adventures on Tralfamadore is Vonnegut's own experience in wishing to write about his Dresden experience, being frustrated in trying to do so the conventional way and finally breaking those conventions in order to get the job done" (Klinkowitz, *Effect*, 88). The Tralfamadorians, who can see all of time set out before them, laugh at Pilgrim when he mentions free will. One notes, "I've visited thirty-one inhabited planets in the universe, and I have studied reports on one hundred more. Only on Earth is there any talk of free will" (86).

Tralfamadorians, reflecting the received cultural assumptions of Americans in the mid 1960s, know they cannot stop war so they turn a blind eye. "There isn't anything we can do about [wars]," one notes, "so we simply don't look at them. We ignore them. We spend eternity looking at pleasant moments—like today at the zoo" (117). This view gives them a comforting perspective on death as well. "When a Tralfamadorian sees a corpse, all he thinks is that the dead person is in bad condition in that particular moment,

but that the same person is just fine in plenty of other moments” (27). Therefore, when a Tralfamadorian sees death, he responds with “So it goes.”⁶⁶ Pilgrim and Vonnegut take up this phrase throughout the novel (the phrase appears over a hundred times); both the narrator and Pilgrim *seem* to accept and be comforted by the Tralfamadorian philosophy.

Some critics, like Philip Rubens, see Pilgrim’s view of time as a worthwhile deconstruction of chronological time that Vonnegut offers as a more optimistic way of reading history. In this reading, Billy Pilgrim is heroic, offering a new way of seeing the world to the novel’s readers that will, like the Tralfamadorians, ignore the bad and focus on the good. The “view of . . . punctual time, is exactly the concept that Billy Pilgrim, the novel’s hero, rejects; he escapes into the incredibly optimistic world of . . . pure inner duration” (Rubens 68). Billy Pilgrim certainly seems comforted by this concept of time and, as an optometrist, he tries to make his patients “see” this new and comforting reality. In much the same way, Vonnegut may be trying to help his readers understand and accept the Tralfamadorian view.

After all, as many critics, including Schatt, have noted, Vonnegut has written a Tralfamadorian novel, one which jumps around, apparently randomly, rather than follows a chronological narrative; the novel itself seems to reject chronological time. Rubens writes, “Working back through real time, real history to pure inner duration, Vonnegut finds, in the ashes of his psychic Dresden, an image of hope for man. History is not once and for all, but a multiple and ever-present now composed of good moments—those which make men ‘brave and kind and healthy and happy’” (Rubens 70). The

⁶⁶ This quote seems to offer a rather inhuman response to people seeing body bags from Vietnam on TV.

Tralfamadorian philosophy helps veteran characters deal with the horrors they have faced in the war. Robert Uphaus makes a similar contention, arguing that Vonnegut's insistence on Pilgrim using his imagination is an attempt to find meaning (or space) in the face of overwhelming death. He draws the conclusion that Billy Pilgrim in *Slaughterhouse-Five* actually creates a new space for action by inventing a new narrative—but that that narrative (and his action) will do little but offer solace to himself. “[Billy] can only imaginatively reconstitute his life in human history by creating an alternate history in inner space—the history of man as seen in Tralfamadorian terms” (Uphaus 169). Given space to exercise his imagination, Billy can find a sort of happiness but cannot alter reality outside of his own psyche. As noted earlier, “the novel’s one word conclusion—“Poo-tee-weet?”—preserves the terrible dilemma of human imagination trapped within the historical context of death [and] . . . reinforces the pattern of imagined happiness projected against the backdrop of slaughter” (Uphaus 170).

However, according to critic Daniel Cordle, Pilgrim is actually offered space to alter his philosophy through Vonnegut's time-traveling literary technique. The only time, in the midst of the war and the senseless destruction of Dresden, that Billy Pilgrim cries is when he is shown how his mistreatment of two horses has hurt the animals. Many critics note that Pilgrim cries because, unlike the firebombing of Dresden or the Holocaust, overwhelming situations over which Pilgrim has no control, he *did* have the ability to control his own treatment of the horses. In a scene that references Nietzsche's supposed collapse as he protected a horse from being beaten by the animal's coach-driver, Pilgrim is given the chance to act as Nietzsche did, to be an advocate of kindness for the horses. The novel, while it ends with the bird's 'poo-tee-weet' also ends, due to

Vonnegut's deconstruction of chronological time, just before the moment that Pilgrim finds the horses he will mistreat. The apparently random novel actually presents the war story of Billy Pilgrim in chronological order—except for this ending. Thus, Pilgrim is given the space to make a different decision as the novel ends. “By taking us back to the moments just before [the horse and wagon] episode, Vonnegut . . . leaves Billy with a moment of choice” (Cordle 175). Billy has a chance for transformation; whether he takes it, of course, depends on whether or not he rejects the Tralfamadorian view that teaches we have no free will. With this clever formulation, the novel rejects the Tralfamadorian philosophy.

While it is true that the Tralfamadorian philosophy is comforting to Billy, it is hard to accept, after reading *Slaughterhouse-Five*, that any philosophy, much less the Tralfamadorian, has made anyone “brave and kind and healthy.” Pilgrim is certainly kind; an argument can be made that he is also brave. But, as with Eliot Rosewater before him, he is clearly not healthy. Martin Coleman writes, “In denying the reality of time, [Billy] is trying to find a way to carry on in the face of the incapacitating loss and pain produced by the war. His response is rational and sane; unfortunately his particular method puts [his] reason and sanity at great risk” (Coleman 688). The upshot is that Pilgrim loses his very humanity in believing the Tralfamadorians; this loss of humanity will take on added significance when we examine the character of Lot's Wife. Coleman writes,

Billy's view . . . is understandable if not actually appealing . . . as Billy demonstrates, once adopted, the attitude deadens discriminatory ability so that it becomes increasingly difficult to determine what is overwhelming and what is not. One gains a sense of peace in the world but loses his or her soul. Indeed, Billy Pilgrim succumbs and loses time, sanity and individuality. He becomes a

cosmic plaything. (Coleman 691)

Pilgrim has become, essentially, a postmodern zombie; as Coleman sees it, he will continue mistreating the horses, even given second and third chances, because he is unable to recognize when he *does* have control.

Conflating Pilgrim's acceptance of the Tralfamadorian perspective with Vonnegut's is a mistake. After all, how seriously are we supposed to take the Tralfamadorian view? The aliens are described as "two feet high, and green, and shaped like plumber's friends. And their shafts, which were extremely flexible, usually pointed at the sky. At the top of each shaft was a little hand with a green eye in its palm" (26). This is a creature to be laughed at, not taken seriously. Also, apparently able to choose any moment of their lives to relive, many of the Tralfamadorians, in an attempt to avoid seeing war and death, choose to constantly relive a day at the zoo watching Pilgrim and his cell mate Montana Wildhack fornicate and urinate. Surely there would be better days to relive! Schatt also notes the line in the novel, "[e]very so often, for no apparent reason, Billy Pilgrim would find himself weeping" (Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse* 61) as an example that shows that Pilgrim ". . . accepts [the Tralfamadorian] view intellectually but not emotionally. Billy is crying in despair for the plight of mankind even though his intellect refuses to recognize this fact" (Schatt, 86-7). Pilgrim's belief in Tralfamadorian predestination seems comforting, but he also accepts that nothing can be done to alter the powerful forces that control him. That acceptance reflects Jonah's and Eliot Rosewater's liberation without freedom.

When people "ignore" war or death they become Tralfamadorian; they become desensitized and dehumanized. Although never noted in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the

Tralfamadorians also appear in an earlier Vonnegut novel—*Sirens of Titan*—in which they are described as robots. So, to become a Tralfamadorian—to accept their narrative of time and reality—is to become a machine. Vonnegut and Pilgrim are very different people; one of them has accepted narrative that denies him meaningful agency, and the other has rejected all such assumptions that claim to be truth. Coleman writes,

Vonnegut's novel is a road map . . . about the pain of [the war experiences] and the novel itself is an attempt to find a way meaningfully to go on while acknowledging that pain. The strange conceit of time travel [as a stylistic device] is not a gimmick; it is a way to express deep conflicts in experience. . . . [Vonnegut] declares no doctrine; he invites the reader to glean what insights he or she can from the immediate experiences of the work. (Coleman 693)

“So it goes,” appearing constantly in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, has the same effect.

The first few times a character dies and Vonnegut intones the phrase is shocking or novel. Eventually, it becomes annoying. Finally the phrase passes unnoticed. Reading the phrase constantly, the reader becomes desensitized to the massive amount of death in the novel and he experiences the Tralfamadorian philosophy mimetically. At first the line “so it goes” is only to describe the deaths of characters we know something about. As the book goes on, the phrase follows the deaths of faceless people in cities being bombed, for instance, and the phrase becomes less shocking or meaningful. Eventually, Pilgrim's dog dies, “so it goes” (62). Vonnegut equates the death of a dog with the death of humans. Later Vonnegut takes the phrase to the point of absurdity. “The champagne was dead. So it goes” (72); “Body lice and bacteria and fleas were dying by the billions. So it goes” (84); “The water was dead. So it goes” (101). Over the first nine chapters of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the phrase overwhelms the prose and becomes essentially meaningless. All characters seem, in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, overwhelmed as well—there

is no escape and no apparent way to change this metanarrative of powerlessness. The constant repetition of “so it goes” allows that same feeling of apparent powerlessness to be transferred to the reader.

However, Billy Pilgrim's story in *Slaughterhouse-Five* is bracketed by Vonnegut's own description of writing that story. In the first and last chapters, Vonnegut speaks directly to the reader. In that first chapter, he tries to explain why he took so long to finish the novel. Among his anecdotes, he writes of telling people he was working on a novel about the war and about the massacre of Dresden, and the people he tells reflect the cultural assumptions of powerlessness. When Vonnegut tells Harrison Starr, the moviemaker, that he is writing an anti-war book, Starr replies, “Why don't you write an anti-glacier book instead?” There is no point in writing an anti-war book, no point in protesting massacres, because, “there will always be wars. . . . [T]hey were as easy to stop as glaciers.” Starr, like Pilgrim and his belief in Tralfamadorians, has accepted a narrative that denies agency. And Vonnegut implies that he himself has accepted this assumption when he adds, “I believe that too” (3). However, Vonnegut still writes the (anti-war) book. He adds later, “I have told my sons that they are not under any circumstances to take part in massacres and that the news of massacres of enemies is not to fill them with satisfaction or glee. I have also told them not to work for companies which make massacre machinery, and to express contempt for people who think we need machinery like that” (19). As Davis points out, “[s]uch words are not the words of a fatalist” (Davis 80). Perhaps we are taught to believe that nothing can be done to stop war, but Vonnegut still demands of his children and himself that they try.

In the final chapter, Vonnegut, again speaking directly to the reader, accomplishes

two goals. First he forcibly reminds us of our desensitization. “Robert Kennedy . . . was shot two nights ago. He died last night. So it goes. Martin Luther King was shot a month ago. He died, too. So it goes” (210). To an audience in 1969—and even today-- conflating Kennedy and King with lice and dogs and bacteria is shocking, even after nine chapters of desensitizing death. These lines contradict the idea of ignoring death as a coping mechanism. They wake the reader from the Billy Pilgrim dream into the reality of 1969. Coleman notes,

When used by the Tralfamadorians or Billy Pilgrim the phrase does indeed have the fatalistic aspect that Vonnegut’s critics want to attribute to the author. But the novelist is not his characters, and it is incorrect to read “So it goes” as fatalistic when employed by Vonnegut himself in the narration of the novel. (Coleman 693)

Here, “so it goes,” rather than simply act mimetically to desensitize the reader, actually elicits anger or disbelief.

Second, like Ambassador Minton in *Cat’s Cradle*, Vonnegut urges us to make pro-active choices to prevent massacres like Dresden. He writes, “And every day my government [the same government that was part of the massacre of Dresden] gives me a count of corpses created by military science in Vietnam. So it goes” (210). As Davis has contended, these lines read like a demand to reject any narratives of passivity like those deployed by Tralfamadorians or Harrison Starr or Billy Pilgrim, and, rather, to take a stand.

Vonnegut’s use of fiction becomes activist in nature; it is his hope that he may shock his readers into a moment of comprehension, a moment in which they may recognize the irrationality of our political or religious practices, our industrial or legal abuses, and move on toward a world that follows more closely the ideals of his youth. (Davis 13)

As used throughout most of the novel, the phrase “so it goes” bludgeons the reader with

resignation. As used by Vonnegut when he directly addresses the reader, the phrase is transformed into a call for action. Dresden is past; there is nothing we can do about it now, Vonnegut seems to suggest. But we *can* take a stand on Vietnam. Vonnegut adds, “[m]y father died many years ago now—of natural causes. So it goes. He was a sweet man. He was a gun nut, too. He left me his guns. They rust” (210). Vonnegut has inherited the machinery of war, but he chooses not to use it. He has also inherited the received cultural assumption that war is unavoidable and he ignores that assumption as well. Coleman writes that *Slaughterhouse-Five*, “may tell the story of what happens when one gives up time, but the novel itself does not follow the Tralfamadorian view” (Coleman 694). Whether the pro-active ethical decisions we make are effective or not, however, is not the point.

Vonnegut, like historiographic fiction writers Coover and Doctorow, recognizes the end of historical teleology in his post-apocalypse, and he also deconstructs the narrative of cause and effect in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Cordle uses the term “contingency” to demonstrate Vonnegut’s view of ethical cause and effect, comparing it to scientist Stephen Jay Gould’s view of evolution. In both cases, people often mistake contingency with either randomness or with teleology. Gould argues that most people mistakenly see evolution as leading to humans, a view that gives apparent meaning to evolution and to humanity.⁶⁷ Cordle compares this idea to Vonnegut’s story telling, particularly with *Slaughterhouse-Five*’s (apparently random) Tralfamadorian style:

⁶⁷ In truth, humans are just one branch on an evolutionary tree that does not “lead” to us, but has, through mutation and natural selection, created a diverse multitude of different species, including humans.

Significantly, in rejecting the idea that life is like a story the narrator [Vonnegut] . . . also rejects the idea that teleological development—a beginning, a middle, and an end—is anything more than an illusion in either stories or life. . . . When beginning, middle, and end are strung together in one story, a causal and teleological development is implied, and the identification of the cause driving events is what gives meaning to the story. (Cordle 166)

Unlike most authors, Vonnegut does not offer meaning teleologically; cause and effect are not necessarily related. Vonnegut does not deconstruct chronology so that his characters may find solace as Rubens suggests, but rather, so they may find contingency. Gould uses the term “contingency” as the accretion of many various elements involved with natural selection that create the possibility of a new species. Cordle notes that Gould suggests that, if we were to “rewind” history, and then run it forward again, contingency at various moments would mean that evolution would not unfold as it had before; it would be vastly different (Cordle 171).⁶⁸ Natural selection is not simply random. Gould straddles the line between determinism and randomness; contingency is neither. Cordle then applies this concept to Vonnegut’s style and his deconstruction of chronological time.

This perspective on the drives that shape human lives, a series of determining accidents, rather than a consistent, meaningful purpose, not only dominates the content of Vonnegut’s work but also explains some of the innovative narrative devices apparent in his fiction. The sense that beginning/middle/end chronology invests the lives of characters with a meaning that is entirely inappropriate is reflected in the forms Vonnegut adopts in order to subvert traditional narrative models. (Cordle 174)

The story telling in *Slaughterhouse-Five* is not traditionally chronological, but nor is it random.

⁶⁸ This explanation is eerily similar to the scene in *Slaughterhouse-Five* in which Billy Pilgrim watches a war movie on television backwards; bombs fly from the ground, into the safety of planes flying overhead, then are eventually returned to bases and buried in the Earth.

Vonnegut's deconstruction of time suggests that we can find meaningful agency within the contingency of the moment. Regardless of any future effect resistance to prevailing systems will have (telos), Vonnegut suggests that direct action is necessary. Vonnegut has not, strictly, written a Tralfamadorian novel. A Tralfamadorian novel is static; *Slaughterhouse-Five*, ending as it does just before Billy Pilgrim will mistreat the horses, allows for contingency. Billy is offered the space, the contingency, to change succeeding moments. When Vonnegut inserts himself into the novel to accept the assumption that anti-war books are useless, he does so also on the basis of contingency. Pilgrim, apparently told that he cannot change anything, accepts this assumption. Vonnegut however, writes the anti-war novel despite the assumption of its uselessness. Coleman writes, "Vonnegut takes up materials provided by Billy Pilgrim, but he transforms them in an attempt to show the possibility of a life different from Billy's" (Coleman 694-5). Clearly, Pilgrim's view is not Vonnegut's. Coleman adds,

[T]o follow the Tralfamadorians in confronting the problems of change, ambiguity, and subjectivity is to *deny* change, ambiguity and subjectivity. This is the strategy of Billy Pilgrim, not Vonnegut. . . . Vonnegut is not advocating Billy's way of life; he is presenting it as an option among others. Billy sees no other options. . . . Vonnegut's novel is not so dogmatic . . . [offering] the reader a temporal or serial experience. The actual novel rejects the method of Billy Pilgrim, while always remaining sympathetic to him, as it must. (Coleman 695-6, italics in original)

Vonnegut is not the only character in *Slaughterhouse-Five* who acts despite an apparent mandate of powerlessness. Lot's Wife also does so, and her action and transformation inspires Vonnegut to write the novel in the first place. In the introductory chapter, Vonnegut writes about reading the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. He reads of the apocalyptic destruction of the cities—eerily foreshadowing the destruction of Dresden

that is at the heart of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. He writes that, God tells us that “[t]hose were vile people in both those cities, as is well known. The world was better off without them” (21).⁶⁹ Then he notes that Lot’s Wife—marginalized by the Biblical narrative, existing only in relation to Lot and not even having a name of her own—inexplicably exercises her free will, and resists God’s narrative. “And Lot’s wife, of course, was told not to look back [by God] where all those people and their homes had been. But she *did* look back, and I love her for that, because it was so human. So she was turned into a pillar of salt. So it goes” (22, italics in original). Vonnegut uses the word “human” here in the context of Billy Pilgrim’s fantasies to draw a contrast with Tralfamadorians, machines, creatures without feeling. Lot’s wife feels for those “vile people,” and she acts. She makes a contingent, spontaneous and apparently ineffectual decision to resist, and bear witness, to the destruction and so she becomes “human.” She is transformed.

Still, the dead of Sodom and Gomorrah are still dead, and Lot’s Wife has apparently accomplished nothing but adding herself to the list of victims. The same is true with other characters in Vonnegut’s novels. Edgar Derby, for instance, gives a rousing speech about freedom and democracy while a POW in *Slaughterhouse-Five*; the moment is transformative for him. “There are almost no characters in this story,” writes Vonnegut, “And almost no dramatic confrontations, because most of the people in it are so sick and so much the listless playthings of enormous forces . . . [b]ut old Derby was a

⁶⁹ Here, like the inhumane character of Colonel Rumfoord, God thinks in a “military manner: that . . . inconvenient [people] . . . whose death he wished for very much, for practical reasons, [were] suffering from a repulsive disease” (192). As the government would have us believe about Dresden (or for that matter, Vietnam, or any number of other massacres), God paints the people of Sodom and Gomorrah as evil or diseased. He is the master propagandist.

character now. . . . [He] spoke movingly of . . . freedom and justice and opportunities and fair play for all” (164). Unfortunately, no one follows his lead and, in fact, the reader knows from the first chapter that the character will die at the end of the novel, ironically, in the midst of the massacre of Dresden, for stealing a teapot. Derby’s moment of transformation is comical and satirical, but it also highlights the reason for Vonnegut’s deconstruction of teleological narrative. He reminds us that efficacy, as epitomized by cause and effect, is not necessarily the most important reason for one’s actions. While the reader may see satire in this scene, there is also real respect for the character, as established by Vonnegut’s own comment that Derby becomes a “character.” He becomes a “character” in contrast to people who are “listless playthings of enormous forces.” Unlike Billy Pilgrim, Edgar Derby becomes a character because he acts as if he has agency regardless of the cultural assumption that denies that agency. In a novel full of metaphorical post-apocalyptic zombies, Derby, Lot’s Wife, and Vonnegut himself act and are, each, rehumanized. Acting in contingent moments when narratives suggest such action is futile is transforming.

Demonstration of Transformation in *Breakfast of Champions*

Critics who see Vonnegut as a fatalist also point to *Breakfast of Champions*, Vonnegut's most overtly postmodern⁷⁰ and post-apocalyptic⁷¹ novel echoing the robotic

⁷⁰ Characters exist only at the whim of the author; there is equal billing for advertisements and pornography (the book begins with a disclaimer about the title and *Wheaties*, and features juvenile line drawings by the author of, among other things, underpants); there is equal billing as well for scientific “facts” and authorial asides; and

attitude of Pilgrim and *Slaughterhouse-Five*. The world Vonnegut paints in *Breakfast of Champions* is one that is both Lyotardian and Jamesonian. Vonnegut himself says that, he is writing, “about life. Every person would be exactly as important as any other. All facts would also be given equal weightiness. Nothing would be left out. Let others bring order to chaos. I would bring chaos to order instead” (Vonnegut, *Breakfast* 215). In the midst of this post-apocalyptic chaos, however, *Breakfast of Champions* demonstrates more fully Hannah Arendt’s concept of transformation. Again Vonnegut overwhelms his reader with the apparent meaningless postmodern existence, mimetically representing the hopelessness of the chaotic reality in which we live. Then the character Rabo Karabekian is transformed at the end of the novel, acting against the metanarrative that the author himself has written. This transformation leads to Vonnegut’s own rebirth. *Breakfast of Champions* demonstrates the concept of transformation as this character acts on his own, specifically resisting the author’s intention. In what might seem to be his most despondent of novels, Vonnegut shows that action again creates meaningful agency through individual transformation and hints at social transformation.

The apparent plot of *Breakfast of Champions* follows Dwayne Hoover and the returning Kilgore Trout as they both, separately, make their way to the Midland City Arts Festival. Due to a Trout short story, “Now It Can Be Told,” a mentally ill Hoover convinces himself that he is the only creature with free will, and that his existence is an experiment by the creator of the universe to see how this one free-willed creation will act.

there is little (if any) character development. These can all be read as examples of postmodern stylings.

⁷¹ Pollution and military devastation has turned this America into a post-apocalyptic landscape.

Thus liberated by this “realization,” Hoover reacts violently and harms eleven innocent people, convinced they are really “unfeeling machines,” before being dragged off to prison (266).⁷² Hoover accepts the narrative presented to him by Trout just as Billy Pilgrim accepted the narrative presented to him by the Tralfamadorians. Todd Davis calls the Trout story “mechanistic and fatalistic” (Davis 85), adjectives easily applied to Tralfamadorian philosophy. As with the Tralfamadorian philosophy, Hoover’s new view of life culled from the Trout story is comforting to him in the face of terrible forces seemingly beyond his control. For instance, Dwayne says, “I used to think that [racism] was such a shame,” and adds “I used to think the electric chair [the death penalty] was such a shame. I used to think war was such a shame—and automobile accidents and cancer.” But now his new philosophy has changed his attitude and comforts him: “He didn’t think they were shames anymore. ‘Why should I care what happens to machines?’ he said” (270). Dwayne’s new view of life reduces other humans to machines or to mindless zombies.

These zombie-like characters in *Breakfast of Champions* go through life automatically, not deliberately, or as philosopher Hannah Arendt might say, they act as they have been habituated to act. A truck driver, giving a lift to Trout, for instance, stops to eat when he sees a sign that says “Eat” (91). Characters are described as machines that do not make any real choices; rather they make selections as if from a menu. “Everyone had a clearly defined part to play—as a black person, a female high school drop-out, a Pontiac dealer, a gynecologist, a gas-conversion burner installer” (146). Women give up

⁷² In a way, Hoover’s view of people as machines echoes Rumfoord’s “thinking in a military manner.” He is able to attack and injure them in part because they have become inhuman to him.

their free will freely: For the sake of “comfort and safety,” women “trained themselves to be agreeing machines instead of thinking machines” (140). When a character sneezes, someone responds with a “God bless you,” a phrase suffused in meaning in a former religious metanarrative but now simply “a fully automatic response many Americans had to hearing a person sneeze” (75). Prostitutes allow a pimp to take “their free will away from them, which was perfectly alright. They didn’t want it anyway” (74).

This postmodern post-apocalyptic America is Jamesonian, driven only by the narrative of late capitalism. As with Cormac McCarthy’s names in *The Road*, words or phrases that once represented something sacred or important, are now meaningless, shorn of their meaning, due to a capitalist postmodernity. When Trout wonders why someone would name a trucking company “Pyramid,” noting that he has never seen “anything that was less like a pyramid than this truck,” he is told that such a name helps with sales because it has “a very nice sound” (112-13). When historical language becomes signifiers without referents, history itself is lost in Jameson’s permanent present. The character Beatrice Keedsler notes, “The past has been rendered harmless [and] . . . home . . . [is] just a motel” (201). To represent Jameson’s view of the postmodern breakdown between high and low culture, the Midland City Opera House became first a movie theater and then a warehouse for the Empire Furniture Company, “even though there were still busts of Shakespeare and Mozart and so on gazing down from the niches in the walls inside” (188). The Sacred Miracle Cave is ironically named, as it is neither sacred nor a miracle. The Cave, like Disneyland does in Doctorow’s *The Book of Daniel*, demonstrates Baudrillard’s procession of simulacra: The Cave features an attraction called “Moby Dick,” just a boulder painted white and which, due to pollution, had faded so that, “[h]e

ain't even got eyes anymore" (120). What was once a literary masterpiece based on a real whale has become a faded tourist attraction, which no longer even represents a fictional whale or even its representation.

Vonnegut makes it clear that none of the characters really *do* have free will, (if one believes the narrator) if only because Vonnegut constantly inserts himself into the novel to manipulate them, a move that echoes *Slaughterhouse-Five*. *Breakfast of Champions* is fiercely personal, and Vonnegut has noted that, "suicide is the heart of the book" (Vonnegut, *Wampeters*, 281). Of course, suicide is the ultimate act succumbing to a metanarrative of powerlessness, of despair. The characters in this post-apocalyptic landscape that Vonnegut describes live lives of quiet desperation, acting mechanically or habitually, often, as with Billy Pilgrim, for the sake of solace. Dwayne Hoover's insanity is blamed on "bad chemicals" in his brain, something over which he has no control (14). The recently paroled Wayne Hoobler follows a prison schedule on the outside, unable to secure a job, and longs to go back to prison where life made sense.

For Hannah Arendt, freedom is not inner or contemplative but rather active. Thus, characters like Hoobler, while liberated, are not truly free. This contrast is demonstrated when Kilgore Trout sets his parakeet, Bill, free from his cage. After Trout opens the window as well, the bird flies back into his cage, a move that Trout describes as "intelligent" (35). Bill is liberated but without action he is not free. Liberation does not necessarily lead to meaningful agency. Vonnegut's characters are like Trout's parakeet. The author inserts himself into the text to constantly remind the reader that, even when characters do something they themselves might not expect, it is only because Vonnegut has made them do it. When Hoover does something apparently extraordinary, it is only

because, as Vonnegut says, “I wanted him to” (258). Even though he has free will he cannot act on it, just as Jonah’s “free will” in *Cat’s Cradle* is ironic. This malaise of habituated action seems to affect the author as much as his characters. Even Vonnegut himself seems to have accepted the overwhelming powerlessness within postmodernity. When Kazak, the guard dog, barks at the author near the end of the novel, Vonnegut describes, in a long passage, how the chemicals in his brain force his automatic response. “Everything my body had done . . . fell within the normal operating procedures for a human machine” (297). Vonnegut, like Dwayne and Jonah and Billy Pilgrim before him, does not initiate action; rather his “actions” are a result of chemicals in his body. When Trout is “released” by Vonnegut at the end of the novel, the character responds like his parakeet. He wants the author to take control of his life again: “Make me young, make me young, make me young” (302)!

Due to people's automatic responses to advertising, the America of *Breakfast of Champions* is a polluted mess. The fish in the Sacred Miracle Cave had become extinct and “industrial waste” had ruined the tourist site (119); West Virginia was “demolished by men and machinery and explosives to make it yield up its coal” (123); the Walt Whitman Bridge is “veiled in smoke” (105). In a line reminiscent of Bokkonon, Trout explains one reason why pollution is so prevalent—that it's the way God obviously wants it. ““I realized,” said Trout, “that God wasn't any conservationist, so for anybody else to be one was sacrilegious and a waste of time”” (87). Characters *want* to be zombies or robots. Francine Pefco, for instance, becomes a sort of slave for Hoover—a sick man—because of her romantic notions of love: “This meant she was willing to agree about anything with Dwayne, to do anything for him . . . ” (164). Bill the parakeet *chooses* to

go back in the cage. Hoobler wishes he were still in prison: “He missed the clash of steel doors. He missed the bread and the stew and the pitchers of milk and coffee” (194). This habituated resignation works, as did the Tralfamadorian model for Billy Pilgrim, as a coping device. In a world this polluted, this racist, this sexist, this dark, the choices made by society make sense only if there is no agency or free will. As with Billy Pilgrim’s response to the hopelessness of war, these characters choose to accept the received cultural assumption of powerlessness to explain their psychological situation and find comfort. Vonnegut even writes of himself:

As for myself, I had come to the conclusion that there was nothing sacred about myself or about any human being, that we were all machines, doomed to collide and collide and collide. For want of anything better to do, we became fans of collisions. Sometimes I wrote well about collisions, which meant I was a writing machine in good repair. I held no more sacredness than did a Pontiac, a mousetrap or a South Bend Lathe. (224)

Suicide may, in fact, be the center of *Breakfast of Champions*, but in what Vonnegut himself calls the “spiritual climax of this book” (224), once again a character acts deliberately and authentically. This time it is Rabo Karabekian, a postmodern artist, who resists the narrative that denies agency and becomes the agent of spiritual regeneration. As Vonnegut is manipulating his characters left and right, including Karabekian, the painter suddenly acts on his own. This scene is where Vonnegut himself is “born again” (224) and it demonstrates the power of transformation. Vonnegut writes, “I did not expect Rabo Karabekian to rescue me. I had created him, and he was in my opinion a vain and weak and trashy man, no artist at all” (225). Vonnegut, like God with Lot’s Wife, sees a character that he created, that he controls, do something that *he does not expect*. A character, seemingly without agency, demonstrates agency. Interestingly, in

light of Davis's contention that Vonnegut is a postmodernist (although, as he notes, a “humanist” one), what Karabekian does is rant about postmodern art. In the midst of that rant, he explains why his painting, apparently meaningless stripes of orange on a canvas, is a masterpiece—because it is a painting that “shows everything about life which truly matters, with nothing left out. . . . Our awareness is all that is alive and maybe sacred about any of us. Everything else about us is dead machinery” (226). Karabekian claims that humans are machines without meaningful agency, much as received cultural assumptions and even government propaganda might suggest. However this machinery is not important. “Awareness” makes us human. The character never explains what he means by “awareness,” but it certainly can be tied to another character that gives an unexpected speech in a Vonnegut novel—Ambassador Minton in *Cat’s Cradle*, who urges us to, “*consciously* reduce the stupidity and viciousness of ourselves and of all mankind” (Vonnegut, *Cat’s* 255, italics added). Awareness and consciousness are needed to resist and question cultural assumptions.

Critics tend to focus on Karabekian’s words here and see them as, for better or worse, the heart of the novel. Davis, for instance, suggests that this explication by Karabekian is “one more narrative that Vonnegut may use to preach his postmodern humanism” (Davis 90). Peter Messent is disappointed by what he sees as a Vonnegutian cop-out:

To me, however, this celebration of ‘awareness’ seems just one more of Vonnegut’s clichés. Is it, after all, enough to rely on this one word, deftly introduced and explained, in the face of the whole chart of universal pain, stupidity and loneliness which the novel has previously catalogued? It seems, rather, merely a word into which Vonnegut can conveniently retreat, just as his tendency has been to do exactly the same thing in his previous novels: to retreat from the fact of that real pain which he presents into clichéd phrases that solve

nothing. (Messent 109)

Others, like Uphaus, see this scene as something in between—a cop-out, yes, but one with possible hope for the future: “For reader and author alike *Breakfast of Champions* is at once a dead-end and a possible prelude to liberation” (Uphaus 173).

Vonnegut however, sees the moment as redemptive, but not necessarily because of Karabekian’s claims about awareness. The speech itself is not the most important thing here—and the words, while important, are not the “spiritual climax of the book.” This speech alone is not, as Uphaus suggests, a possible prelude to liberation. It is itself liberation. Awareness is not explained; it is demonstrated. It is acting *without* or *against* a narrative—any narrative—that dictates his actions that makes Karabekian's response authentic, unexpected, rising above mere machinery or “new.”

The new always happens against the overwhelming odds of statistical laws and their probability [thus, against the overwhelming metanarrative], which for all practical, everyday purposes amount to certainty. . . . The fact that man is capable of action means that the unexpected can be expected from him, and he is able to perform what is infinitely improbable. (Arendt, *Human* 158)

Even Vonnegut says of his character, “he certainly surprised me” (226). Karabekian’s action itself is transformative and allows Vonnegut to be “born again.” Despite a narrative that denies liberty, Karabekian (and, in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Lot’s Wife) are truly free, not simply liberated in Arendt’s formulation. To be free and to act are the same. To act is to give oneself something lost in postmodernity, a voice or, as Jameson would call it, a “unique subject” (Jameson 6). Such action must be, “without expectation and compelled without previous inclination” to be transformative (Arendt, *Revolution*, quoting John Adams, 24). “It is the nature of beginning that something new is started

which cannot be expected from whatever happened before” (Arendt, *Human* 157).

Karabekian, like Lot’s Wife, does something even his creator (Vonnegut) does not expect by utilizing his agency, an agency apparently denied him by that creator and his post-apocalyptic landscape.

With Karabekian’s moment of transformation and Arendt in mind, we can re-examine the story of Lot’s Wife in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the story that drives Vonnegut to write that former novel. Her looking back to witness the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is the ultimate human act, transforming her, giving her meaningful agency, a unique subject, and a voice despite a metanarrative that denies them. Without that transformation, her actions do not matter. “Action without a name, a ‘who’ attached to it, is meaningless” (Arendt, *Human* 161). Lot’s Wife, through her action, is, made “human” and becomes a monument for the souls of the two cities and makes her action meaningful. When writing of World War I, Arendt notes,

The monuments to the “Unknown Soldier” after World War I bear testimony to the . . . need for . . . finding a “who,” an identifiable somebody whom four years of mass slaughter should have revealed. The frustration of this wish and the brutal fact that the agent of the war was actually nobody inspired the erection of monuments to the “unknown,” to all those whom the war had failed to make known and had robbed thereby, not of their achievement, but of their human dignity. (Arendt, *Human* 161)

Lot’s Wife, in her bearing silent witness and becoming herself a pillar of salt, a “monument to the unknown,” achieves much the same purpose for the dead of Sodom and Gomorrah, restoring to them their human dignity. Vonnegut’s retelling of her tale and his calling her action “human” does much the same for her and paints her silence as, in fact, a statement. And, in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut’s bearing witness and presenting a literary monument to the dead of Dresden also restores their human dignity.

The actions of these characters are improvisational, unconditioned by what has come before. Karabekian has no speech planned for this event. Lot's Wife does not intend to break God's law. Pena only becomes a fisherman when he is told he must work outside. Ambassador Minton speaks extemporaneously. None of them *expects* their actions to change anything. Lot's Wife's witnessing of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, for instance, changes nothing physical for the sufferers. She does not look so as to effect change; she simply looks, bears witness, because it is the *human* thing to do. These characters' actions are not ethical because of what may (or may not) be accomplished but rather because the characters act at all. Vonnegut's various deconstructions of time work to negate the teleological narrative of cause and effect. The actions of these characters are neither dependent on the past nor the future.

For Vonnegut, ethical action and resistance to powerful forces are not simply reducible to the pragmatic. He walks a fine line between pragmatic action (which might be considered from Arendt's point of view, liberated, but not truly free action) and action that expresses human potentiality, creating agency and inspiration for others to act within or against the postmodern mandate of powerlessness. Vonnegut, then, hints that *social* transformation is also possible due to individual transformation in a postmodern landscape. Hannah Arendt notes that, according to her formulation of freedom, free activities could "be real only when others saw them, judged them, remembered them. The life of a free man [needs] the presence of others" (Arendt, *Revolution* 23). The reason for this public freedom is to create social transformation (or revolution.)⁷³ There is no doubt

⁷³ Of course, Arendt is writing about revolution in a modernist (not postmodernist) context. As Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri write in *Multitude*, "Arendt's conception

that Vonnegut was interested in such a revolution; in fact, his first (rejected) master's thesis⁷⁴ topic was, according to Klinkowitz, about resistance and revolution: "The topic on which Vonnegut wished to improvise was an interesting one: just what did it take, he wondered, to produce a truly revolutionary movement in human affairs? Was there a constant, a key number, a critical mass of individuals and ideas that had to be in place for a revolution in values to happen?" (Klinkowitz, *Effect*, 16). Davis, in his book *Kurt Vonnegut's Crusade*, goes a long way to show that Vonnegut is an author working for (or, at least, hoping for) social change. He writes, "Vonnegut adamantly asserts that artists are agents of change, agents with the ability to do good or harm" (Davis 4). Vonnegut, when asked why he writes, has said, "My motives are political. . . . Mainly I think [writers] should be—and biologically *have* to be—agents of change. For the better, we hope" (Vonnegut, *Wampeters* 237).

Vonnegut's witnessing of Karabekian's free action inspires the novelist to be "born again." The possibility of freedom, expressed in public, can lead to revolution. Vonnegut's witnessing of Lot's Wife's revolutionary act (in the form of reading her story in the Gideon's Bible) allows for himself to resist cultural assumptions about powerlessness and write the anti-war novel *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Vonnegut demonstrates for his readers the possibility of transformation and freedom in these two novels, thus allowing space for action. That demonstration is designed to humanize the actors and inspire the readers, just as Lot's Wife and Karabekian did for Vonnegut. Whether the

[of revolution] tends to separate the drive for political liberation and democracy from the demands of social justice and class conflict. Even for eighteenth-century revolutions, however, and increasingly as modernity progresses, this distinction is difficult to maintain" (Hardt, 78).

⁷⁴ Eventually, the novel *Cat's Cradle* was accepted as Vonnegut's master's thesis.

characters succeed or fail in whatever they try to accomplish is moot. As Arendt argues, individual transformation, witnessed by others, can lead to social transformation and, perhaps, even to revolution. This focus on changing society is Vonnegut's main theme, but it is not expressed in a trite way; he recognizes the difficulties of living in a postmodern post-apocalyptic universe and he works to change that universe anyway. The fact that he faces that truth, however, can lead to some critics seeing his books as "despondent" when they are anything but.

Conclusion

A Fleeting Glimpse

When Fredric Jameson first wrote about postmodernism, he saw it as a cultural turn, an end to the old world. Richard Matheson, in inventing the modern zombie, successfully prophesied such a world metaphorically. In many ways, Jameson's predictions and dire warnings have come true: we are now consumers of a globalized marketplace driven by corporate capitalism. The Cold War is over and capitalism won through attrition. The loss of the subject and the loss of any transcendent meaning imply that we live a life on the surface. Cormac McCarthy, too, paints that world in *The Road*. However, the individual subject can be revived (or created). In their historiographic fiction, E. L. Doctorow and Robert Coover show that history need not be read as a transcendent metanarrative nor as simply a series of random events that offer no meaning. Rather, history can be seen as contingent, giving limited power to those involved in contingent moments. The multitudes in Tahrir Square during the Arab Spring are examples of individual subjects affecting a contingent moment in history. Furthermore, Kurt Vonnegut shows that acting in contingent moments, regardless of the efficacy of that action, transforms the actor, creating the "subject" that Jameson says has been lost. Hannah Arendt's concept of individual transformation and freedom is demonstrated in Vonnegut's novels. These writers show how meaningful agency may be found from within the postmodern condition.

Furthermore, the postmodern trope of zombie films and literature is omnipresent and worthy of more study. Books like Max Brooks' *World War Z*⁷⁵ actually use Matheson's and George Romero's zombies not just to critique the social structure, but also to offer suggestions for how our new postmodern world might look. What zombies have done in Brooks' novel is re-ignite the concept of the individual subject. Zombies, Brooks seems to argue, are not just society's way of facing the fear of postmodernity; they are also a way for us to overcome those fears, to graduate from masses to multitudes. Some zombie films seem to suggest similar formulations. Romero's *Diary of the Dead* certainly expresses his fear of new media, but in the scope of that film, that new media itself is used in contingent moments, to create individuality. Self-referencing films like *Zombieland*, parodies of Romero's movies, may also have much to show. Of course, every week *The Walking Dead* offers one more example of how to survive as an individual in a world of hopeless masses.

That the zombie has become the monster of choice in the twenty-first century is not surprising. As I continue to work on this piece, a study of the evolution of zombie films from those that express the fear of change to those that embrace it, might well show the same evolution described in the novels of Matheson, McCarthy, Doctorow, Coover and Vonnegut. These films, too, seem to now suggest the concepts of contingency and transformation. Along with zombie films of all types, the rise in apocalyptic tales in the popular culture in the last few years suggests both a fear of change and a new hope. Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games*, in addition to being a critique of capitalism, is also a novel about resistance to received cultural assumptions. Whether the critiques the novel

⁷⁵ The film version, however, is not so nuanced.

raises are complicitous critiques remains to be seen. The postmodern world that Jameson envisioned may have come to pass, yes, but with it came new ways of resisting and new ways of being. I hope to continue ask these questions and take this study to a broader level.

Most importantly, however, demonstrating such possibilities in literature is not the same as making them happen in reality. The next step is to study social revolutionary moments in the postmodern era and see how well the concepts work. Vonnegut's demonstration of transformation creates space for action for his characters. That action may or may not lead to Arab Springs or Occupy Movements or actual social revolutions, and those movements may well be marginalized by the grand narrative of Jamesonian postmodernity, turned into a "pillar of salt" if you will. But the action also creates individual subjects in the multitudes in those movements, for those who choose to act. As Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (who call this agency a subjectivity) see it, this individual transformation is necessary for resistance or action in postmodernity, creating a multitude. A multitude is different from masses in the same way that a group of free thinking humans is distinct from waves of zombies in post-apocalyptic films. Multitudes can effect change. With this subjectivity comes individual and social power because "economic, social, and political questions are inextricably intertwined. Any theoretical effort in this context to pose the autonomy of the political, separate from the social and the economic, no longer make any sense" (Hardt 78). Whether these seemingly anarchic movements accomplish some stated goal is simply not the point of transformation or of the action itself.

So, using Hardt and Negri's *Multitude* as a starting point and applying the

concepts of contingency, transformation, and the re-awakening of the individual subject, we may better learn how to resist the hegemonic cultural assumptions given to us. I suspect that the hyperreal world of the Internet and social media will be part of a coming revolution, perhaps an engine of it. This revolution will be a revolution of epistemology, one that embraces many of the postmodern traits that Jameson disdains. While it may seem easier, in postmodernity, for hegemonic institutions to control masses by convincing them that they have no real power to change the world, the very fact of postmodernity makes the concept of Hardt and Negri's multitude both possible and powerful. Activists like Carne Ross, as noted in his book *The Leaderless Revolution*, have already begun to apply these ideas to real world action. Ross argues that new revolutionary movements will be interconnected, as, through social media, individual subjects can have a great effect; that action, as opposed to words, is necessary to effect change; and that individuals must be engaged with each other in the multitude. Ross writes, "We are encouraged to believe that no one has the power to change [the system]. Thus paralyzed, we are frozen into inaction. This paralysis of thought is the greatest obstacle to overcome. Defeat it, and everything is possible" (Ross xxiv). Individualized action can have contingent effects and the tools of the Millennials (Internet, Twitter, Facebook) make the hyperreal an empowering concept rather than a debilitating one. This is the direction I plan to take this study in the future.

Works Cited

- Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. New York: Doubleday/Anchor, 1958. Print.
- Arendt, Hannah. *On Revolution*. Penguin Books, New York. 1963. Print.
- Andrews, William. "Review of *The Return of Nat Turner: History, Literature and Cultural politics in Sixties America* by Albert E. Stone." *American Literature*. 65.3 (1993): 608-609. JSTOR. Web. 13 March 2013.
- Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2008. Print.
- Bertens, Hans. *The Idea of the Postmodern*. London: Routledge, 1995.
- Cacicedo, Alberto. "Review of Todd F. Davis's *Kurt Vonnegut's Crusade; Or, How a Postmodern Harlequin Preached a New Kind of Humanism*." *Studies in the Novel*. 39.1 (2007). JSTOR. Web. 3 May 2011.
- Carnes, Mark C, ed. *Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1995. Print.
- Christie, Deborah. "And the Dead Shall Walk." *Better Off Dead*. Ed. Deborah Christie and Sarah Juliet Lauro. New York: Fordham University Press, 2011. 61-67. Print.
- Christie, Deborah. "A Dead New World: Richard Matheson and the Modern Zombie." *Better Off Dead*. Ed. Deborah Christie and Sarah Juliet Lauro. New York: Fordham University Press, 2011. 67-81. Print.
- Coleman, Martin. "The Meaninglessness of Coming Unstuck in Time." *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*. 44.4 (2008): 681 – 698. JSTOR. Web. 3 May 2011.
- Coover, Robert. *The Public Burning*. New York: Grove Press, 1976. Print.

- Cordle, Daniel. "Changing of the Old Guard: Time Travel and Literary Technique in the Work of Kurt Vonnegut." *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 30 (2000): 166-176. JSTOR. Web. 8 June 2011.
- Davis, Edmund Wade. *Passage of Darkness: The Ethnobiology of the Haitian Zombie*. New York: Simon and Shuster, 1985. Print.
- Davis, Edmund Wade. *The Serpent and the Rainbow*. New York: Simon and Shuster, 1988. Print.
- Davis, Todd F. *Kurt Vonnegut's Crusade Or, How a Postmodern Harlequin Preached a New Kind of Humanism*. New York: SUNY Press, 2006. Print.
- Dawn of the Dead*. Dir. George Romero. Anchor Bay Entertainment, 1978. DVD.
- Doctorow, E.L. *The Book of Daniel*. New York: Bantam Books, 1971. Print.
- Greer, Creed. "Kurt Vonnegut and the Character of Words." *The Journal of Narrative Technique* 19.3 (1989): 312-330. JSTOR. Web. 15 March 2011.
- Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: Norton (reprint), 2001 (1963). Print.
- Greenberg, Kenneth S, ed. *The Confessions of Nat Turner and Related Documents*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's Press, 1996. Print.
- Gross, Seymour L and Eileen Bender. "History, Politics and Literature: The Myth of Nat Turner." *American Quarterly* 23.4 (1971): 487-518. JSTOR. Web. 4 April, 2013.
- Haraway, Donna. *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*. New York: Routledge, 1991. Print
- Hardt, Michael and Antonio Negri. *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*. New York: Penguin, 2004. Print.

- Heffernan, Teresa. "Can the Apocalypse Be Post?" *Postmodern Apocalypse*. Ed. Richard Dellamora. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995. 171-181. Print.
- Hillstrom, Kevin and Laurie Collier Hillstrom. *The Vietnam Experience*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998. Print.
- Hite, Molly. "A Parody of Martyrdom: The Rosenbergs, Cold War Theology, and Robert Coover's *The Public Burning*." *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 27.1 (1993): 85-101. JSTOR. Web. 25 June 2013.
- Hume, Kathryn. "Vonnegut's Self-Projections: Symbolic Characters and Symbolic Fiction." *The Journal of Narrative Technique*. 12.3 (1982): 177-190. JSTOR. Web. 13 March 2011.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. New York: Routledge, 1988. Print.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *The Politics of Postmodernism*. London: Routledge, 1989. Print.
- I Am Legend*. Dir. Francis Lawrence. Warner Bros, 2007. DVD.
- Jameson, Fredric. *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern*. London: Verso Press, 1998. Print.
- Kee, Chera. "'They Are Not Men . . . They Are Dead Bodies': From Cannibal to Zombie and Back Again." *Better Off Dead*. Ed. Deborah Christie and Sarah Juliet Lauro. New York: Fordham University Press, 2011. 9-24. Print.
- Kirsch, Jonathan. *A History of the End of the World*. HarperCollins, New York: 2006. Print.
- Klinkowitz, Jerome. *Structuring the Void: The Struggle for Subject in Contemporary*

- American Fiction*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1992. Print.
- Klinkowitz, Jerome. *The Vonnegut Effect*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2004. Print.
- Last Man on Earth, The*. Dir. Sidney Salkow. MGM/20th Century Fox, 1964. DVD.
- Lyotard, Jean-Francois. *The Postmodern Condition*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979. Print.
- Mailer, Norman. *The Armies of the Night*. New York: Plume/Penguin Books, 1968. Print.
- Marcus, Greil. *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century*. Cambridge MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1989. Print.
- Matheson, Richard. *I Am Legend*. New York: Orb, 1954/1995. Print.
- May, John R. "Vonnegut's Humor and the Limits of Hope. *Twentieth Century Literature*. 18.1 (1972): 25-36. JSTOR. Web. 23 March 2011.
- McCarthy, Cormac. *The Road*. New York: Random House, 2006. Print.
- McHale, Brian. *Constructing Postmodernism*. London: Routledge, 1992. Print.
- Messent, Peter B. "Breakfast of Champions: The Direction of Kurt Vonnegut's Fiction." *Journal of American Studies*. 8.1. (1974): 101-114. JSTOR. Web. 13 July 2011.
- Miller, Arthur. *The Crucible*. New York: Penguin, 1952. Print.
- Miller, Walter M. *A Canticle for Liebowitz*. New York: HarperCollins, 1959. Print.
- Muntean, Nick. "Nuclear Death and Radical Hope in *Dawn of the Dead* and *On the Beach*." *Better Off Dead*. Ed. Deborah Christie and Sarah Juliet Lauro. New York: Fordham University Press, 2011. 81-97. Print.

Murphy, Bernice. "Imitations of Life: Zombies and the Suburban Gothic." *Better Off Dead*. Ed. Deborah Christie and Sarah Juliet Lauro. New York: Fordham University Press, 2011. 116-138. Print.

Night of the Living Dead. Dir. George Romero. Elite Entertainment, 1968. DVD.

Omega Man, The. Dir. Boris Sagal. Warner Bros, 1971. DVD.

Pepperell, Robert. *The Post-Human Condition*. Bristol UK: Intellect, 1995. Print.

Plato. *The Republic*. New York: Penguin Classics, 1955. 316-326. Print.

"Port Huron Statement, The." *Takin' It to the Streets: A Sixties Reader*. Ed. Alexander Bloom and Wini Breines. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. 50-60. Print.

Prasch, Thomas. "Platoon and the Mythology of Realism" *Search and Clear: Critical Responses to Selected Literature & Films of the Vietnam War*. Ed. William J. Searle. Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State UP, 1988. 195-215. Print.

Reilly, Charlie and Kurt Vonnegut. "Two Conversations with Kurt Vonnegut." *College Literature*. 7.1 (1980): 1-29. JSTOR. Web 14 September 2011.

Riesman, David. *The Lonely Crowd*. New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1963. Print.

Ross, Carne. *The Leaderless Revolution*. New York: Penguin, 2011. Print.

Rubens, Philip M. "'Nothing's Ever Final': Vonnegut's Concept of Time." *College Literature*. 6.1 (1979): 4-72. JSTOR. Web 15 July 2011.

Sagan, Carl. *The Demon Haunted World*. New York: Random House, 1995. Print.

Schatt, Stanley. *Kurt Vonnegut Jr.* Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1976. Print.

Shapiro, Herbert. "The Confessions of Nat Turner: William Styron and his Critics." *Negro American Literature Forum* 9.4. (1975): 99-104. JSTOR. Web. 13 March

2013.

Schulberg, Budd. *What Makes Sammy Run?* New York: Random House, 1952. Print.

Shermer, Michael. *How We Believe*. New York: W. H. Freeman and Company, 2000. Print.

Simpson, Josh. "‘This Promising of Great Secrets’: Literature, Ideas, and the (Re)Invention of Reality in Kurt Vonnegut’s *God Bless You Mr. Rosewater*, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and *Breakfast of Champions* Or ‘Fantasies of an Impossibly Hospitable World’: Science Fiction and Madness in Vonnegut’s Troutean Trilogy." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*. 45.3 (2004): 261-272. JSTOR. Web. 13 September 2011.

Stone, Oliver. "A Conversation between Mark Carnes and Oliver Stone." *Convergences*. Ed. Robert Atwan. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2002, 259-263. Print

Styron, William. *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. New York: Random House, 1966. Print.

Uphaus, Robert W. *Review: Expected Meaning in Vonnegut's Dead-End Fiction*. *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*. 8.2 (1975): 164-174. JSTOR. Web 17 September 2011.

Vonnegut, Kurt. *Breakfast of Champions*. New York: Dell Publishing, 1973. Print.

Vonnegut, Kurt. *Cat's Cradle*. New York: Dell Publishing, 1963. Print.

Vonnegut, Kurt. *God Bless You Mr. Rosewater*. New York: Dell Publishing, 1963. Print.

Vonnegut, Kurt. *Slaughterhouse Five*. New York: Dell Publishing, 1969. Print.

Vonnegut, Kurt. *Mother Night*. New York: Dell Publishing, 1966. Print.

- Vonnegut, Kurt. *Wampeters, Foma, and Granfalloon*s. New York: Dell Publishing, 1975. Print.
- White, Hayden. *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973. Print.
- Wilson, Sloan. *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*. Philadelphia: Perseus Books, 1955. Print.
- Winfrey, Oprah. "Oprah's Exclusive Interview with Cormac McCarthy Video". *Oprah Winfrey Show*. Harpo Productions, Inc. Retrieved April 10, 2014.
- Zani, Steven and Kevin Meaux. "Lucio Fulci and the Decaying Definition of Zombie Narratives. *Better Off Dead*. Ed. Deborah Christie and Sarah Juliet Lauro. New York: Fordham University Press, 2011. 98-115. Print.

Vita / About the Author

Jim Speese earned his PhD in English from Lehigh University in May 2014, with a specialization in Post World War II American Literature. His secondary field of study was Vietnam War Literature. He also earned his MA at Lehigh in May of 2008, having written a Master's Thesis on the lyrics of Roger Waters. While at Lehigh, Jim taught composition classes as well as literature classes, including classes on Apocalyptic Literature & Film and Monsters in Literature & Film. In 2013, he was named Graduate Student Teacher of the Year, an award voted on by undergraduate students. From 2009 – 2012, Jim also worked as the English Teaching Fellow assigned to Lehigh's South Mountain College program, providing assessment and instruction for student writing, critical reading and thinking in a non-traditional classroom structure, and helped to plan and create that structure. Among his conference presentations was "The Paradox of Transformation in the Fiction of Kurt Vonnegut" at the International Conference of Human Rights in 2011.

Jim has also taught at Albright College, Reading Area Community College, and other institutions, where he has taught such classes as The Literature of Kurt Vonnegut; African American Women Writers; Postmodern Literature; Music Criticism; Countercultures in History and Literature; The History and Literature of the Vietnam War; Banned Books (Education and Literature); Literature of the Harlem Renaissance, Creative Writing, and others.

Jim earned his BA from Albright College in 2001. He once hiked the Appalachian Trail for three months, and lived and worked in Yellowstone National Park for three years.