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**Depictions of Time in Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*  
and Jorge Luis Borges' *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius***

**Abstract:**

Do the ideas about time in the novel *Slaughterhouse-Five*, by Kurt Vonnegut, and the short story *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*, by Jorge Luis Borges, conflict, coincide, or both? Are these views presented as positive, negative, or both? This paper aims to show that Vonnegut's and Borges' ideas about time in these works coincide, and that they present these ideas negatively. Both texts show how time contributes to or constructs one's understanding of reality, including one's emotional responses to that reality. Billy Pilgrim and the Tralfamadorians in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and the characters promoting Tlön in Borges' story, are all trying to utilize their views on time to create a positive emotional affect in themselves and others, but for different reasons.

There is a growing tradition of non-linear narratives in literature, but usually this non-linearity is not caused by actual physical time traveling. However, in the novel *Slaughterhouse-Five*, by Kurt Vonnegut, the narrative jumps back and forth in time through the protagonist Billy Pilgrim's time traveling. Form and content are intermingled in this novel: a principle of narrative, time, becomes a principle of the story, time travel. The manner of telling the story is part of the story:

Decades of movies or television mean that audiences are accustomed to devices that render time, like flashback or even flash-forward, and are accustomed to seeing epic scale presented as a historical saga. Vonnegut's readers, therefore, are already familiar with some of the ways in which he manipulates time. Other popular forms, like the comic, also deal with long-term narrative that may skip through time in a nonlinear fashion . . . Common strategies to negotiate time are apparent in many types of popular fictions, then; yet, Vonnegut also consciously applies himself to developing narrative styles that use content to interrogate form or, perhaps, to developing a new form capable of fully exploring the content and of joining personal to public experience (Jowett 134-135).

Time travel gives "the impression of mobility and simultaneity, the goals of the modern novelist: 'the simultaneous existence of a variety of spatial realities – each infused with its own dimension of time'" (Beard 114). This problematizes the reader's concept of the usual methods used to depict time in narrative, as the short story *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*, by Jorge Luis Borges, also problematizes time and history by creating a fictional world with a fictional history and its own ideas about time.

Do the ideas about time in *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius* conflict, coincide, or both? Are these views presented as positive, negative, or both? This paper aims to show that Vonnegut's and Borges' ideas about time in these works

coincide, and that they present these ideas negatively. Both texts show how time contributes to or constructs one's understanding of reality, including one's emotional responses to that reality. Billy Pilgrim, the Tralfamadorians, and the characters promoting Tlön in Borges' story are all trying to utilize their views on time to create a positive emotional affect, but for different reasons. Billy Pilgrim and Tralfamadorians are trying to do this simply so that they do not have to deal with negative emotions, while the characters promoting Tlön in Borges' story are attempting this in order to get people to believe what they want them to believe about Tlön.

These emotional responses are meant to make people question and reconsider their understanding of time and reality. The people who begin to believe in Tlön react to this "imaginary" world with a kind of amazement or wonder, as if this world is something sublime, and this amazement causes them to reject the rational way they had previously viewed reality and time in favor of the new view espoused by the Tlönians, because this view does not require thinking for oneself: "Almost immediately, reality gave ground on more than one point. The truth is that it hankered to give ground. Ten years ago, any symmetrical system whatsoever which gave the appearance of order—dialectical materialism, anti-Semitism, Nazism—was enough to fascinate men. Why not fall under the spell of Tlön and submit to the minute and vast evidence of an ordered planet?" (Borges 34).

. . . in what he called the bad times that touch all of us, Borges describes a similar kind of history reading and writing in his story "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius." In this story a group of playboy idealists get together and decide to invent a country, which leads to the invention of an entire planet. Their idealist schemes gradually begin to take over the real world, an eventuality that Borges compares to all conceptual schemes that try to reduce the

world to a single order . . . The seduction of idealism threatens to take over the entire world . . . In the face of this idealist imperialism, in which a metaphoric army is on the verge of corralling the world into the heads of a few men, what does Borges's character decide to do? He says he is resolved to continue "revising in the quiet days of a hotel in Adrogué an indecisive translation . . . [which I don't plan on sending to press] of Browne's *Urne Buriall*". This reaction is not, as it might seem at first, an escapist reaction to a world in crisis. Moreiras describes this turn toward translation as a form of mourning whereby the character of Borges resists the burial of the world into a single metaphor or idealist order (*Tercer espacio* 76). He also observes that the act of writing stories such as "Tlön" is itself a kind of translation that emphasizes the disjunction between our world and Tlön (Jenckes, "Reading, Writing, Mourning History," 136-137).

However, Billy Pilgrim *should* feel amazed like the Tralfamadorians and Tlönians do, but amazement usually engenders some kind of emotional affect or response, and Billy Pilgrim seems emotionless, as if he is repressing this amazement along with all of his other emotions about the trauma of World War II and the firebombing of Dresden, and he is unable to live in the linear time of the real world. Billy Pilgrim is repressing his emotions because they would force him to confront his trauma and respond with some kind of action instead of his passivity, and also just simply because the emotions are negative, disturbing, and upsetting.

Both works seem to present their characters' ideas about time in a negative light, and show that the characters can be both transcendent of and entrapped by time at the same time, because one's understanding of time and reality contributes to the extent to which one feels that he does or does not have free will or control over that reality. By subscribing to these paradigms, one relinquishes free will and a sense of the linearity of time and of cause and effect, and therefore does not have to feel responsibility or accountability for one's actions. Billy Pilgrim blindly accepts the Tralfamadorians'

views and stops questioning them, just as the characters who believe in Tlön blindly accept its ideas and do not question them. Instead, they question their traditional understanding of *reality*. This shows how time itself constructs or creates particular realities.

The simple dialogue shows how characters' situations challenge their beliefs. Whenever somebody dies in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the main character Billy Pilgrim simply says, "So it goes." In this way, Vonnegut shows that time, history, and reality are changeable and subjective constructions. Billy Pilgrim can only cope (and not in a very healthy manner) with trauma after he changes his outlook on reality, stops questioning the Tralfamadorians, and begins to believe that everything is predetermined.

Similarly, Vonnegut, writing about his own real experience of the firebombing of Dresden, is only able to write about the realistic details of this traumatic experience of war after twenty-five years of *time* have passed, and through the perspective of science fiction/fantasy, which is somewhat disconnected from reality. According to Pauline Beard, "Billy Pilgrim's story of Dresden, his time traveling, his belief in Tralfamadore and determinism, become Vonnegut's way of distancing himself from memories that hurt but must be unearthed to enable him to dispel the feeling of non-being in the present (20)" (Beard 113). Billy Pilgrim's beliefs about the preordained nature of all time, and his feeling that something else is controlling him when he involuntarily becomes unstuck in time, reflect this determinism.

Vonnegut "breaks all traditions of novel writing by telling immediately on page one the middle climax, Edgar Derby being shot for stealing a teapot, and then the

beginning, ‘Listen. Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time’ (22), and the end, ‘Poo-tee-tweet’ (22)” (Beard 119). By telling the reader what is going to happen before it even happens, the future, retrospective viewpoint of *Slaughterhouse-Five* challenges the usual form of a novel:

Billy Pilgrim says that the Universe does not look like a lot of bright little dots to the creatures from Tralfamadore. The creatures can see where each star has been and where it is going, so that the heavens are filled with rarefied, luminous spaghetti. And Tralfamadorians don’t see human beings as two-legged creatures, either. They see them as great millipedes—“with babies’ legs at one end and old people’s legs at the other,” says Billy Pilgrim (Vonnegut 87).

This passage shows that the Tralfamadorians know everything that is going to happen before it happens. Billy Pilgrim comes to know all of this too, and the narrator even tells the reader about occurrences that have not happened yet.

Another way that both *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius* deal with time is through the related concept of memory. Both works utilize iterative, repeating memory, which is the kind of memory that Marcel Proust describes in many of his works including “Recapturing Time,” as opposed to singulative memory, as another way of depicting non-linear time. Iterative memory is circular memory that builds upon itself. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Billy Pilgrim constantly repeats and relives his memories, which creates the non-linear narrative. This nontraditional time causes Billy Pilgrim to increasingly question reality.

In *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*, the repetition of evidence of Tlön in different places and through different people throughout the story also cause people to increasingly question whether it is actually imaginary, or in fact real. This puts all of their

preconceived notions about reality, time, and history in doubt. Thus in both works, the characters' perceptions of reality are destabilized. Uqbar and Tlön are part of "Some small fading memory of one Herbert Ashe" (Borges 20), just as the past events that Billy Pilgrim describes in *Slaughterhouse-Five* are part of his memory. In Tlön, ". . . ideal objects abound, invoked and dissolved momentarily . . . Sometimes, the faintest simultaneousness brings them about" (Borges 24). This is similar to how Billy Pilgrim literally invokes and relives his own memories, which then dissolve back into the present and then back into more memories. Selective personal memory and selective cultural history, both forms of selective amnesia or selective blindness, figure prominently in both works, as the Tralfamadorians and the characters spreading the ideas about Tlön in the Borges story all willfully ignore anything that they don't like and focus only on what is positive, useful, or convenient for them, as shown in this passage:

"'We know how the Universe ends—' said the guide, 'and Earth has nothing to do with it, except that it gets wiped out, too.' 'How—how *does* the Universe end?' said Billy. 'We blow it up, experimenting with new fuels for our flying saucers. A Tralfamadorian test pilot presses a starter button, and the whole Universe disappears.' So it goes. 'If you know this,' said Billy, 'isn't there some way you can prevent it? Can't you keep the pilot from *pressing* the button?' 'He has *always* pressed it, and he always *will*. We *always* let him and we always *will* let him. The moment is *structured* that way. . . . We spend eternity looking at pleasant moments—like today at the zoo. Isn't this a nice moment? . . . That's one thing Earthlings might learn to do, if they tried hard enough: Ignore the awful times, and concentrate on the good ones.' 'Um,' said Billy Pilgrim" (Vonnegut 116-117).

Similarly, the tombstone in chapter 5 of *Slaughterhouse-Five* reads, "Everything was beautiful, and nothing hurt" (Vonnegut 122). This represents Billy Pilgrim's emotional numbness to the reality of life. The banality of evil and of war make his own

life banal as well. Billy Pilgrim's name and his hallucinations can be seen as representations of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Kilgore Trout, the science fiction writer in the novel, could represent the author Vonnegut's own doppelganger. Billy Pilgrim's profession of optometry is a metaphor for how he attempts to "improve" other people's perceptions of the world and of life. His time travel symbolizes his lack of control, or his perceived lack of control, over his life, manifested through an imagined reality of leaving the present. Billy feels no agency in his life, and his belief that he has no choice *but* to have no agency removes all moral, ethical, and social responsibility from his shoulders. Perhaps the reader is supposed to suspend his disbelief and believe that this time travel is really occurring in the novel, or perhaps the reader is simply supposed to think of Billy Pilgrim as an unreliable narrator with a disturbed imagination and the pathology of post-traumatic stress disorder.

Both texts *seem* to encourage passive acceptance of history and removing oneself from the rest of human reality and human, linear time. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Billy Pilgrim's passive dialogue, constantly simply saying "So it goes" whenever somebody dies, reflects how this passive acceptance has affected him. This phrase becomes a motif that recurs throughout the novel. In chapter two, Billy Pilgrim describes the Tralfamadorians' views on time that he has come to believe:

"The most important thing I learned on Tralfamadore was that when a person dies he only appears to die. He is still very much alive in the past, so it is very silly for people to cry at his funeral. All moments, past, present, and future, always have existed, always will exist . . . It is just an illusion we have here on Earth that one moment follows another one, like beads on a string, and that once a moment is gone it is gone forever. 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. Now, when I myself hear that somebody is dead, I simply shrug and say what the Tralfamadorians say about dead people, which is ‘So it goes’” (Vonnegut 27).

All of the repetition in *Slaughterhouse-Five* – of the phrases “So it goes,” “somewhere a big dog barked,” “blue and ivory,” and the Three Musketeers – is a way for the reader to hold onto some constancy in the midst of the non-linearity of the narrative, while the narrative still maintains its circular nature by constantly returning to these same motifs. It is also a way for Billy Pilgrim himself to hold onto some constancy in spite of his passivity.

Time is very spatial and visual in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and this is not usually how people think about time. This spatial view of time can be seen in the Tralfamadorians’ Rocky Mountains analogy: “I am a Tralfamadorian, seeing all time as you might see a stretch of the Rocky Mountains” (Vonnegut 86). But for the inhabitants of Tlön, “. . . the world is not a concurrence of objects in space, but a heterogeneous series of independent acts. It is serial and *temporal*, but not spatial . . . the men of that planet conceive of the universe as a series of mental processes, whose unfolding is to be understood only as a *time* sequence . . . they do not conceive of the spatial as everlasting in time” (Borges 23-24). This seems to contradict the Tralfamadorians’ ideas about time, *but* “The metaphysicians of Tlön are not looking for truth, nor even for an approximation of it; they are after a kind of amazement” (Borges 25). This passage is similar to when the Tralfamadorians say:

“‘There are no telegrams on Tralfamadore. But you’re right: each clump of symbols is a brief, urgent message—describing a situation, a scene. We

Tralfamadorians read them all at once, not one after the other. There isn't any particular relationship between all the messages, except that the author has chosen them carefully, so that, when seen all at once, they produce an image of life that is beautiful and surprising and deep. *There is no beginning, no middle, no end, no suspense, no moral, no causes, no effects. What we love in our books are the depths of many marvelous moments seen all at one time*" (Vonnegut 88) [emphasis mine].

The Tralfamadorians want to feel amazed by marvelous moments, but Billy Pilgrim doesn't seem to feel any kind of emotion, let alone amazement. However, according to Pauline Beard in *A Riddling Thing: A Study of Time in Five Twentieth-Century Novels*, Vonnegut shows that "We must learn to care for fellow human beings and to *feel emotion* for such events as Dresden, to prevent such tragedies from happening again" (Beard 111) [emphasis mine].

The new-world philosophy of Tralfamadore helps Billy with his life on earth. Ironically he is in a prison again, a prison which frees him to live. Determinism is as safe a prison as Slaughterhouse Five had been. It is so easy to say, "It's fate," and passively accept whatever life offers. If all moments in the future are "structured" as the Tralfamadorians claim, then there is no point in exercising human will to change them. To be human means to know that the past cannot be changed, but it also means that there is the potential, through the human will, to change the future (Beard 130).

For example, when the Tralfamadorians place Billy Pilgrim in a zoo, he is both transcendent of time, because he is not bound by human linear time, and trapped by time, because he has no choice but to see the time that the Tralfamadorians' clocks show him. This is akin to how the creators of Tlön seem to want to see how the world reacts to their new ideas about time from a new place.

Vonnegut himself also seems to sometimes be repressing the trauma of his emotions about his own experiences in World War II. There is a relationship between time and emotion and the creation of different realities: Vonnegut uses the jumps back

and forth in time, and the sections that take place on Tralfamadore, to give a distanced, science fictional, and sometimes humorous perspective on what would otherwise simply be a serious historical story. “Time gives distance and healing, and the right perspective to see multi-truths about human existence in general, and his own in particular” (Beard 135). When one looks back from the future at the event in one’s life, just as Billy Pilgrim and the Tralfamadorians are always able to do, one can see “the truth.”

Borges writes in *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*, “Bioy Casares had dined with me that night and talked to us at length about a great scheme for writing a novel in the first person, using a narrator who omitted or corrupted what happened and who ran into various contradictions, so that only a handful of readers, a very small handful, would be able to decipher the horrible or banal reality behind the novel” (Borges 17). This theoretical novel is very similar to *Slaughterhouse-Five* in that *Slaughterhouse-Five* also has a first-person narrator, albeit one who interjects only sporadically. In a way, the non-linear time of the narrative corrupts what happens in it by jumping from the past into the future while omitting large chunks of time in between, only going back to explain them later. Also, the novel is about the horrible or banal reality of war, and while the time travel may in some ways disguise this, it ultimately serves to highlight it even more by showing how the trauma of the war has altered Billy Pilgrim’s entire perception of reality.

Billy Pilgrim and the Tlönians both seem disconnected from reality. Herbert Ashe “suffered from a sense of unreality” (Borges 20), just as Billy Pilgrim supposedly did, as shown in his imaginary creation of the planet Tralfamadore and its inhabitants.

Each of these characters is living in another reality, which shows that reality is a changeable, subjective, and unstable construction. In *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*, in the language and literature section of the encyclopedia article about Uqbar, “There was one notable characteristic: it remarked that the literature of Uqbar was fantastic in character, and that its epics and legends never referred to reality, but to the two imaginary regions of Mlejnas and Tlön . . .” (Borges 19). This is reminiscent of the fantastic nature of *Slaughterhouse-Five* and Billy Pilgrim’s imaginary planet of Tralfamadore. But in both works, the reader is left wondering, are these imaginary realities actually imaginary after all, or are they in fact reality? Again, wonder and amazement come in, causing the characters and possibly even the readers to question rationality, reality, and, if these worlds have existed all along, history as they know it.

Borges writes, “. . . I knew that it [Johann Valentin Andrea] was the name of a German theologian who, at the beginning of the seventeenth century, described the imaginary community of Rosae Crucis—the community which was later founded by others in imitation of the one he had preconceived” (Borges 19-20). This foreshadows the eventual quasi-founding of the (formerly) imaginary world of Tlön, which the narrator decries.

I began to leaf through it [a book] and felt a sudden curious lightheadedness, which I will not go into, since this is the story, not of my particular emotions, but of Uqbar and Tlön and Orbis Tertius. In the Islamic world, there is one night, called the Night of Nights, on which the secret gates of the sky open wide and the water in the water jugs tastes sweeter; if those gates were to open, I would not feel what I felt that afternoon . . . On the yellow leather spine, and again on the title page, I read these words: *A First Encyclopedia of Tlön* . . . I had in my hands a substantial fragment of the complete history of an unknown planet (Borges 21).

The feeling that he describes is similar to the feeling that Marcel Proust describes in connection with his sudden memory in “Recapturing Time.”

Borges continues, “Tlön was thought to be nothing more than a chaos, a free and irresponsible work of the imagination; now it was clear that it is a complete cosmos, and that the strict laws which govern it have been carefully formulated . . .” (Borges 22).

Billy Pilgrim’s daughter thinks his mind is a chaos too because of his imaginary planet, but the Tralfamadorians actually have definite ideas about aspects of the cosmos, such as time. “Nobody had ever been in Uqbar. Neither did the general index of Bioy’s encyclopedia show the name” (Borges 20). Billy Pilgrim is one of the only humans to have ever “been on Tralfamadore,” and he may have only been there in his own mind. In addition, the authors are both present in their works and “constantly undercut the reader’s expectations of the novel. Just when Slaughterhouse readers think they are reading fiction after all, the real narrator intrudes” (Beard 120). All of this forces the reader to *wonder* what is “real” in these works and the time/history they represent.

There are objects made up of two sense elements, one visual, the other auditory—the color of a sunrise and the distant call of a bird. Other objects are made up of many elements—the sun, the water against the swimmer’s chest, the vague quivering pink which one sees when the eyes are closed, the feeling of being swept away by a river or by sleep. These second degree objects can be combined with others . . . the process is practically an infinite one. There are famous poems made up of one enormous word, a word which in truth forms a poetic *object*, the creation of the writer (Borges 24).

This concept of many elements that combine to form one powerful emotion recurs at other points in the story, including when Borges writes that the Tlönians “are not looking for truth; they are looking for a kind of amazement.” It is also similar to when the

Tralfamadorians in *Slaughterhouse-Five* say that their books are about “the depth of many marvelous moments seen all at one time,” and it is reminiscent of Marcel Proust description of his memory in “Recapturing Time.”

Borges explains that cause-and-effect relationships do not exist in Tlön: “To explain or to judge an event is to identify or unite it with another one. In Tlön, such connection is a later stage in the mind of the observer, which can in no way affect or illuminate the earlier stage. Each state of mind is irreducible . . . From all this, it would be possible to deduce that there is no science in Tlön, let alone rational thought” (Borges 24-25). As can be seen in this passage, the Tlönians, like the Tralfamadorians, seem to favor emotion over reason or science. They do not mentally connect events with each other in any kind of cause-and-effect relationship, instead viewing each individual moment as its own separate entity.

The Tlönians’ relationship, or non-relationship, with time is expressed here: “One of the schools in Tlön has reached the point of denying time. It reasons that the present is undefined, that the future has no reality other than as present hope, that the past is no more than present memory” (Borges 25). Borges himself seems to agree with this in his “Refutation of Time,” but he disagrees with the Tlönians’ idealism. Therefore the fact that the characters in these works have certain ideas about time and history does not necessarily mean that the authors of these works agree with these ideas. Although the Tralfamadorians want Billy Pilgrim to ignore the negative moments like the fire-bombing of Dresden, Vonnegut shows that “there exists a very real danger in ignoring such moments: time has a habit of repeating itself, as Vonnegut suggests in the opening frame

chapter of the novel where he sets patterns of repetition—‘And so on to infinity’ (3)” (Beard 119).

Similarly, Borges, if the reader is supposed to understand him as the first-person narrator of *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*, seems to disagree with the Tlönians’ idealism. He writes, “Contact with Tlön and the ways of Tlön has disintegrated this world. Captivated by its discipline, humanity forgets and goes on forgetting . . . Now, the teaching of its harmonious history, full of stirring episodes, has obliterated the history which dominated my childhood. Now, in all memories, a fictitious past occupies the place of any other . . . The world will be Tlön” (Borges 34). This disagreement is also shown in another one of his works, his “Nueva refutación del tiempo” [“New Refutation of Time”]. In “Refuting Time” in *Reading Borges After Benjamin: Allegory, Afterlife, and the Writing of History*, Kate Jenckes writes that Borges’ “Nueva refutación del tiempo” “is also a refutation of idealism, or the idea that the world can be apprehended in ideas or concepts” (Jenckes 117). This concept of idealism is what the Tlönians believe in in Borges’ story *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*, and in “Nueva refutación del tiempo,” Borges is refuting this idea. Jenckes also writes about Borges’ assertion that “If the present . . . is divisible, it is infinitely so—that is, there will always be a part that just was and a part that is not yet—and therefore does not exist. This means furthermore, that time itself cannot exist: ‘Therefore the present does not exist, but since neither the past or the future exist, time does not exist’” (Jenckes 123). This is another way of questioning and problematizing time.

Borges also seems to disagree with the Tlönians' and the Tralfamadorians' ideas about time and history. Jenckes writes about the end of the "New Refutation":

Borges makes it clear that a denunciation of a single history of the world [the kind of history that both the Tlönians in *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius* and the alien Tralfamadorians in *Slaughterhouse-Five* believe in] or essentially, of *time*, "includes two negations: that of the succession of the terms of a series, and that of a synchronicity of the terms of two [different] series." That is to say, it is to deny not only the successive and linear structure of time, but also the idea that there is a single time within which different occurrences can be lined up and located within the concept of contemporaneity, as though spatially, on a map (Jenckes 121).

This refutes the Tralfamadorians' idea expressed on page 27 and elsewhere in *Slaughterhouse-Five*: "The Tralfamadorians can look at all the different moments just the way we can look at a stretch of the Rocky Mountains, for instance. They can see how permanent all the moments are, and they can look at any moment that interests them" (Vonnegut 27).

The Tralfamadorians may be able to look at any moment that interests them, but they believe that they cannot change any of those moments, whether in the past, the present, or the future. On pages 85-86 of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, a Tralfamadorian again says, "We're trapped in another blob of amber, Mr. Pilgrim. We are where we have to be just now" (Vonnegut 85). Not only is he saying that they can only be here at this moment, but that they *have to* only be here at this moment. This view of time deprives them of any kind of free will:

"I am a Tralfamadorian, seeing all time as you might see a stretch of the Rocky Mountains. All time is all time. It does not change. It does not lend itself to warnings or explanations. It simply is. Take it moment by moment, and you will find that we are all, as I've said before, bugs in amber.' 'You sound to me as though you don't believe in free will,' said Billy Pilgrim. 'If I hadn't spent so much time studying Earthlings,' said

the Tralfamadorian, ‘I wouldn’t have any idea what was meant by ‘free will’” (Vonnegut 86-87).

But this lack of free will is presented in a negative light. In fact, both authors seem to present their characters’ views about time negatively: “Jaime Alazraki claims that Tlön, created by a secret society, is a metaphor for our own world, which is also a social construction created by a society of chemists, geographers, artists, and algebraists. Moreover, since the Tlönians do not have access to reality itself but to the representation of it, they run the risk of being trapped within the prison house of language. This aspect is emphasized by Arturo Echavarría, who claims that in Borges’s story there is no way out of the conceptualization of language (186-87)” (Dapía 95). This shows that the characters in Borges’ story are vulnerable to entrapment by language, just as Billy Pilgrim in *Slaughterhouse-Five* is vulnerable to entrapment by time.

Billy Pilgrim does indeed seem to feel trapped by time and out of control of it and his life. On pages 76-77 of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, when he asks the Tralfamadorians “Why me?” they respond, “That is a very *Earthling* question to ask, Mr. Pilgrim. Why *you*? Why *us* for that matter? Why *anything*? Because this moment simply *is*. Have you ever seen bugs trapped in amber? . . . Well, here we are, Mr. Pilgrim, trapped in the amber of this moment. There is no *why*” (Vonnegut 76-77). This again illustrates how Billy Pilgrim comes to feel that he has no control over his life after he espouses these ideas.

Billy Pilgrim is already out of control of his life because of his involuntary and uncontrollable bouts of time travel. In the article “Temporality in Science-Fiction

Narrative,” Boris Eizykman writes about “SF novels and short stories published in the 20<sup>th</sup> century whose plots reach across the intangible boundaries of the present to unfold in indeterminate areas of the future,” which are “characterized at the most fundamental level by a distortion of staggering scope whereby the narrator . . . recounts past events (though these at their outer limit may impinge on the present of this . . . fictitious narrator) which, whatever the circumstances, have not yet really ‘taken place’—at least not for the reader” (Eizykman 66). This applies particularly well to *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

But Vonnegut is not in favor of this lack of control. According to Martin Coleman, “A typical reading of Vonnegut’s novel *Slaughterhouse-Five* holds that the author *advocates* [emphasis mine] a passive acceptance of overwhelming circumstances that do unspeakable—unnarratable and unaccountable—harm to human beings” (Coleman 681). Coleman calls Billy Pilgrim’s “So it goes” phrase “pithy and plaintive” and says that it illustrates this passivity. “Typically Vonnegut has been characterized as a cynic, fatalist, quietist, or nihilist . . .” (Coleman 681). However, Coleman goes on to say that he believes the novel merits a more complicated reading, and that Vonnegut is writing about this passivity not to advocate it, but possibly even to refute it. Pauline Beard goes further and writes, “Vonnegut shows us *how not to live* in the deterministic, passively accepting world of a modern-day pilgrim” (Beard 111) [emphasis mine].

Beard explains Vonnegut’s negative view of Billy Pilgrim’s loss of free will: “Vonnegut pursues this desolate view of men at war even further when he suggests that men have as insignificant an effect on history as a glob of spit on the snow (49). They

are manipulated by an ‘unseen hand’ like the one turning on and off the prisoner’s showers . . . (84, 90). They no longer count as individuals . . . (164)” (Beard 125).

Gradually Vonnegut reveals how free will and time become inextricably bound in the loss of freedom in war . . . Public outer time dominates and steals the all-important inner time of an individual, the time that in Bergson’s view allows the ego to change and grow. To stress the importance of men owning their inner time, Vonnegut frequently portrays men stealing clocks during their war-time, as if to steal back the time lost to them . . . For men like Vonnegut, survivors of the war, time will never regain its continuum. In Bergsonian terms, the disruption of his inner time by one momentous occasion in the past which can never be overcome in the memory, restricts the ego from letting itself live (Beard 126).

Beard directly references Henri Bergson’s ideas about time, which are addressed later in this paper.

Beard writes, “When Vonnegut tries to recapture the past by returning to Germany, the time will not pass. He submits to outer time. He has to ‘believe whatever clocks said—and calendars’ (20) . . . In such a desensitized, emotionless state, men lose themselves within inner private time. They no longer perceive any connection between cause and effect. There was no cause for Dresden; it was an open city with no strategic value, but the effect was devastating.” There was nothing to bomb in Dresden except for history, art, and architecture. In a way, it was the most senseless bombing of World War II. It was the forgotten bombing, overshadowed by Hiroshima. This novel is a critique of war.

It is the irrationality of this bombing and war in general that causes Billy Pilgrim to question whether his own life can be understood rationally: “When disasters like that cannot be explained rationally, how can men explain their lives? The sheer arbitrariness

of Billy's survival makes him question 'Why me?' . . . the sequential filing order along the personal time-line has become lost. The facts are not lost so much as their order along that line. In such cases men eventually reject their public time and 'reinvent' themselves within a new inner time. Billy Pilgrim reinvents himself through science fiction, specifically time travel (101). The critic Ziolkowski sees time travel as 'the reified metaphor' for our resistance to public time: 'our retreat into the inner world of private duration is spatialized as a physical flight into the past or future'" (Beard 127-129).

Beard explains the ambiguity concerning Vonnegut's agreement or disagreement with Billy Pilgrim and the Tralfamadorians:

Vonnegut's lie confuses our moral standards because we take the flatly descriptive voice of the narrator to be the author's voice. It seems as if Vonnegut is adopting and admiring the "So it goes" attitude to life. Vonnegut of course adds to the moral confusing by using the same formula in his factual framing chapters, and by bobbing in and out of the main narration with authorial comments. However, within this narration, various warnings filter through to stress that Billy's way of coping is not to be emulated . . . Instead of dreaming, Vonnegut wants us to confront the reality of human life with all it entails because only then can we find identity or wholeness . . . The wonderful things Billy believes about time promote the lie that mankind is infinite, not doomed. By denying the human will, Billy reaches stasis as a human being, a stasis that simulates death in life. The colonel and Edgar Derby foretell Billy's state in the P.O.W. hospital where Billy lies comatose: 'Dead to the world. But not actually dead. No. How nice – to feel nothing and still get full credit for being alive' (105). The English prisoner's lecture on hygiene warns about reaching such stasis. The prisoners who let their human appearance slide soon die. They become animals: cease to stand up straight, shave or wash, get out of bed or talk. "It is evidently a very easy and painless way to go" (145) (Beard 132).

Beard shows how Billy Pilgrim places importance on how one views time and life, but not on whether this view is actually accurate: "Vonnegut's eye imagery concentrates on

the means we use to see what we want to see. Billy's profession as optometrist should enable him to help human eyesight but Billy's firm promotes the frames for spectacles, 'Frames are where the money is' (24)" (Beard 133).

While the repetition of the patterns in this non-linear narrative show that there is some constancy in time and memory no matter how it is structured, it also paradoxically provides the sense of moving forward in time, because Billy Pilgrim is remembering these things as if they are from the past, whether or not they actually are, in relation to where he is located (note the spatial connotation of the word "located") in time at any particular moment:

*Slaughterhouse-Five* succeeds as a work of art, where Vonnegut's earlier novels did not, because the novel is an integral whole in which structure and theme become one. Time is the major theme that leads to questions of fantasy and reality, death and free will . . . Peter Reed summarizes Vonnegut's intent to forge theme and structure: "Time, space and event coexist and coalesce in this novel, and that is what the structure attempts to convey." The associative process works on a large scale to join fragments together but the entire novel is criss-crossed by patterns that the reader reads reflexively, in Joseph Frank's terms, to rewrite the novel with forward momentum. Thus the images of the owl and spooning, the "big dog barking somewhere", the Three Musketeers, the "blue and ivory feet", the little bird's call, and many more patterns repeated throughout the novel give the impression of time's multiplicity. Yet at the same time they unite the structure's fragments to give the impression of the forward motion of time—the movements of inner and outer time respectively (Beard 135-136).

In "Duration," Henri Bergson seems to agree with the Tralfamadorians' non-linear concept of time: "The truth is that we change without ceasing, and that the state itself is nothing but change. This amounts to saying there is no essential difference between passing from one state to another and persisting in the same state . . . It imagines, therefore, a formless ego, indifferent and unchangeable, on which it threads the

psychic states which it has set up as independent entities” (Bergson 724). He does not see a cause and effect relationship between a person’s various states, instead viewing them as autonomous and independent of each other. But later he writes, “What we actually obtain in this way is an artificial imitation of the internal life, a static equivalent . . . because we have eliminated from it the element of real time” (Bergson 725). His tone as he refers to this concept as “artificial” and “static” seems to show that he is not in favor of getting rid of real time.

He writes, “Duration is the continuous progress of the past which gnaws into the future and which swells as it advances. And as the past grows without ceasing, so also there is no limit to its preservation” (Bergson 725). In other words, there is no limit to memory. “Memory . . . is not a faculty of putting away recollections in a drawer, or of inscribing them in a register . . . In reality, the past is preserved by itself, automatically. In its entirety, probably, it follows us at every instant; all that we have felt, thought and willed from our earliest infancy is there, leaning over the present which is about to join it, pressing against the portals of consciousness that would fain leave it outside” (Bergson 725). This is akin to the Tralfamadorians’ idea that all moments past, present, and future can be perceived at any time as if one is looking at a chain of mountains.

Pauline Beard describes Billy Pilgrim’s philosophy of time through a different lens, that of Marcel Proust’s favorite topic, memory: “Memory demonstrates that man is a time-bound creature. The past will always exist as long as memory recalls it and holds it fast like a ‘bug in amber’ (77) . . . as much as Billy thinks he has escaped time through

Tralfamadorian philosophy, the constancy of memory reminds him that for an Earthling, time is past, present and future. It is Billy's splintered time sense that blurs all three, even providing him with a memory of the future (105)" (Beard 116).

Beard goes on to quote the character George Bowling in George Orwell's *Coming up for Air*, who "ruminates: 'The past is a curious thing. It's with you all the time, I suppose an hour never passes without your thinking of things that happened ten or twenty years ago, and yet most of the time it's got no reality, it's just a set of facts that you've learned, like a lot of stuff in a history book. Then some chance sight or sound or smell, especially smell, sets you going, and the past doesn't merely come back to you, you're actually in the past'" (Beard 118-119). This is an evocation of Proust.

In "Recapturing Time," Marcel Proust writes, "The past is hidden somewhere outside the realm, beyond the reach of intellect, in some material object (in the sensation which that material object will give us) which we do not suspect . . . I compared these various happy impressions with one another and found that they had this in common, namely, that I felt them as if they were occurring simultaneously in the present moment and in some distant past . . ." (Proust 730, 736). This should remind the reader of the Tralfamadorians' "marvelous moments" and the Tlönians' "amazement."

Yet another evocation of time and memory's instant-by-instant effect occurs when Proust writes, "But when from a long-distant past nothing subsists, after the people are dead, after the things are broken and scattered, still, alone, more fragile, but with more vitality, more unsubstantial, more persistent, more faithful, the smell and taste of things remain poised a long time, like souls, ready to remind us, waiting and hoping for

their moment, amid the ruins of all the rest; and bear unfaltering, in the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence, the vast structure of recollection . . . Merely a moment from the past? Much more than that, perhaps; something which, common to both past and present, is far more essential than either” (Proust 736). This seems akin to one of the Tralfamadorians’ “marvelous moments” and the Tlönians’ “amazement.”

Billy Pilgrim’s ability to physically, instantaneously move from one moment in his life to another echoes man’s simultaneous touching of different times in their lives: “My head swam to see so many years below me, and yet within me, as if I were thousands of leagues in height . . . I would therein describe men . . . as occupying in Time a place far more considerable than the so restricted one allotted them in space, a place, on the contrary, extending boundlessly since, giant-like, reaching far back into the years, they touch simultaneously epochs of their lives—with countless intervening days between—so widely separated from one another in Time” (Proust 737).

Another evocation of the compression of multiple ideas and emotions into a single moment of time occurs in Joseph Frank’s “Spatial Form in Modern Literature,” in which he quotes Ezra Pound: “‘An ‘Image,’” Pound wrote, ‘is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time.’ The implications of this definition should be noted: an image is defined not as a pictorial reproduction but as a unification of disparate ideas and emotions into a complex presented spatially in an instant of time. Such a complex . . . strikes the reader’s sensibility with an instantaneous impact . . . Joyce composed his novel [*Ulysses*] of a vast number of references and cross references that relate to each other independently of the time sequence of the narrative.

These references must be connected by the reader and viewed as a whole before the book fits together into any meaningful pattern” (Frank 787, 791).

By this juxtaposition of past and present, as Allen Tate realized, history becomes ahistorical. Time is no longer felt as an objective, causal progression with clearly marked-out differences between periods; now it has become a continuum in which distinctions between past and present are wiped out. And here we have a striking parallel with the plastic arts. Just as the dimension of depth has vanished from the sphere of visual creation, so the dimension of historical depth has vanished from the content of the major works of modern literature. Past and present are apprehended spatially, locked in a timeless unity that, while it may accentuate surface differences, eliminates any feeling of sequence by the very act of juxtaposition. Ever since the Renaissance, modern man has cultivated both the objective visual imagination (the ability to portray space) and the objective historical imagination (the ability to locate events in chronological time); both have now been abandoned (Frank 801).

*Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius* both take a similarly modernist approach to time. *Slaughterhouse-Five* is a perfect example of this non-linear, non-chronological time. The Tralfamadorians’ “depths of many marvelous moments seen all at one time” resonates with the many versions of a single plot in the Tlönians’ books: “The books themselves are also odd. Works of fiction are based on a single plot, which runs through any imaginable permutation” (Borges 28).

Borges seems to agree with Billy Pilgrim’s and the Tralfamadorians’ non-linear concept of time. He believes that history is not static, immortal, or universal. It is not linear or progressive; the past does not cause the present nor does the present have anything to do with the past. Borges draws a comparison between the past and a translated work, and the present and a translation: like the translated work, the past exists in time just like its translation. “It is both vital and mortal; it can change based on who is regarding it; it can be rewritten in the present but it can also shatter attempts to represent

it . . . Borges considers life as well as literature to be irremediably temporal, and he viewed time as neither a linear development nor a passive setting, but as an uncertain materiality that both takes us away from ourselves and constitutes our sense of who we are ('Time is a river that takes me away, but I am that river,' *Otras inquisiciones* 187) . . . The anguish that his [Borges's] melancholic mind perceives in the pieces of the past is not a sense of grief that the past cannot be recuperated, or at least it is not just that. It is also, as he says, an 'act of life,' an acceptance of a temporal existence that does not fit neatly into names, numbers, and a progressivist concept of life . . . We saw how in these [early] poems, where he is allegedly most 'obsessed' with his origins, the past is represented as neither linear nor solid . . ." (Jenckes xii, 34, 37).

However, he does not agree with their resulting passivity, or that of the people who blindly accept the ideas of Tlön in *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*:

The places in Borges's writing that refute temporal linearity and a stable sense of identity demand that we learn to look for what has been left out of these constructions, both at a level of individual life history and larger narratives, such as national, imperial, or universal history. Paul de Man's distinction that "temporality" denotes a passive unfolding, whereas "history" introduces the possibility of interrupting such unfolding, allows us to understand what is most historical about Borges's writing on time, life, and history (*Aesthetic Ideology* 133). For Borges, as for Benjamin, the past is never dead, but can irrupt in the present and change the way we see the world. Lives and times that are left out of dominant narratives have the ability to interrupt those narratives, forcing us to acknowledge the structures of exclusion on which they are based (Jenckes xii).

Many people accused Borges of being a writer of unreality who thought with his back to history (Jenckes xiv) but, like Vonnegut and unlike Billy Pilgrim, the Tralfamadorians, and the people who blindly accept Tlön, Borges ultimately accepts the temporality and reality of life, despite his initial reluctance to: "Borges often acknowledges a wish to

escape temporal uncertainty and find refuge in atemporal forms of representation. He repeatedly portrays himself seeking a ground of identity—an enduring sense of self, city, or nation, a solid sense of the past or the present—only to recognize that he is ‘unfortunately’ a temporal being . . . In spite of his apparent reluctance to accept life’s temporal nature, Borges returns to it compulsively, never allowed himself to fall completely for the timeless metaphors that he turns over and over in his hands” (Jenckes xiv-xv).

Critics have argued that Borges was obsessed with the past and was trying to escape time. But instead of trying to escape it, he actually just wanted to rethink the way it is normally represented, in literature in particular:

His texts have been understood as attempts to escape history, or, especially in the first decade of his career, to impose a mythic ahistoricism on the present. However, a careful examination of Borges’s books . . . suggests that Borges was not interested in rejecting history, but in developing a sense of history that would not be based on linear and progressivist claims. Representations of a nonlinear time, a familiar conceit in his later fictions, appear in the first volumes in the form of a history that does not remain neatly in the past, but which intervenes in the figure of a progressive present . . . This attention to history by way of an irrecoverable past . . . opens the possibility for a relationship between history, identity, and writing that is radically distinct from a linear and successive (whether progressive or regressive) understanding of history . . . The assertion that history does not exist only ‘in our heads’ is an important assertion, considering that Borges is commonly considered to close himself off from reality (Jenckes 120).

Borges believes that his life does not justify the kind of amazing moment that the Tralfamadorians, the Tlönians, and Marcel Proust describe: “‘It occurred to me that my life would never justify a full or absolute instant, one that would contain all the rest, that they would all be provisory stages, annihilating of the past and facing the future, and that beyond the episodic, the present, the circumstantial, we weren’t anyone. And I abhorred

all mysticism” (“La naderia de la personalidad” [“The Nothingness of Personality”] 99) (Jenckes 4). Not only does Borges not believe that his own life justifies such an instant, but here he does not seem to believe that such an instant is even possible, for any human being: “It is just that there is nothing stable in the past that we can return to, nothing that can be preserved (‘adobado’), no instant, past or present, that can be ‘full, absolute, containing of all the rest’” (Jenckes 5).

Borges suggests that, like Kurt Vonnegut and unlike Billy Pilgrim, one must confront one’s loss and trauma in order to be able to relate to time and life in a reasonable and realistic manner:

Language cannot securely represent the past, present, or a sense of belonging against the annihilating nature of time. If Borges wishes for an identity or a temporal space that would be “full, absolute, containing of all the rest” (that is, an origin), the poems show how he disabuses himself of such a wish. They seem to suggest that it is only by acknowledging loss and our own incomplete nature that we can have any experience with time itself, as historical subjects that can relate to a past, present, and future (Jenckes 6).

“The arduous algebras of language will never recuperate anything (‘lo que sabremos nunca’), but it can and should be employed to think both life and loss” (Jenckes 21).

Walter Benjamin provides an interesting counterpoint: “Life or lived experience is ordered into a linear, ‘empty’ concept of time, which functions as an additional defense for the psyche. Past experience is kept in the past, safely contained for indexing by what Benjamin, following Proust, calls ‘discursive, volitional memory’ (186) . . . As I have mentioned, ‘Erinnerung’ describes a form of memory that internalizes the past . . . Benjamin writes that one of the special characteristics of consciousness is to situate each remembered component of lived experience ‘in a precise point in time,’ as though on a

time line (I 163)” (Jenckes 17). Again note the spatialization of time and the word “situate.” Benjamin believes that time *is* ordered linearly, and that *this* is what provides one with a way to cope with traumatic memory.

In the poem “Final de año,” Borges writes that “The enigma of Time” is not just the idea that we are all just drops of water in Heraclitus’s river, “that time flows on and subjects us to ‘infinitos azares’ (‘infinite chances’), but that in spite of this, we have a relationship with the past: the startling miracle that ‘perdure algo en nosotros’ (‘something remain[s] in us,’ 35)” (Jenckes 18). This “something” is memory. In “La Vuelta” (“The Return”), he writes “‘he repetido antiguos caminos / como si recobrara un verso olvidado’ (‘I have repeated ancient paths / as though I were recovering a forgotten verse’)” (Jenckes 21). This resonates with Proust. In “Jactancia de quietud” (“Boast of Tranquility”), “he proclaims the inevitability of temporal existence: ‘El tiempo está viviéndome’ (‘Time is living me,’ OP 72). But he does not try to escape it, nor order it into a progressive or accumulative narrative” (Jenckes 23).

In “Sala vacía,” he says: “‘The daguerreotypes / misrepresent their false closeness / of time detained in a mirror / and before our examination they are lost / like useless dates / of blurry anniversaries’” (Jenckes 25). This is yet another evocation of Proust. Another example of iterative, repeating memory that builds on itself is when Borges writes: “‘I don’t pass by the Recoleta without remembering that my father, my grandparents and great-grandparents are buried there, like I will be; then I remember having already remembered that same thing, innumerable times . . . A brief minute of full possession of forms, it presents itself like a quick happiness’” (Jenckes 111, 115). In

addition to Proust, Jenckes evokes Bergson: “Master of the universe, and armed with a solid sense of who he is, man is also master of time, a concept that he uses to order the world according to a structure based on ‘succession and duration’” (Jenckes 105).

Walter Benjamin writes about the kind of memory that Proust refers to in his “Recapturing Time”: “‘The image of the past that flashes up in the now of recognizability is, regarding its latter determination, an image of memory. It resembles images of the past that appear in an instant . . . These images come, as we know, involuntarily. History strictly speaking is an image that rises up out of involuntary memory, an image that suddenly appears to the subject in an instant . . .’ (Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 1.3.1231, 1.3.1243)” (Jenckes 110). This passage emphasizes the instantaneous, involuntary nature of these types of memories.

Benjamin also resonates with Proust in another of his works: “‘The dialectical image is a lightning flash. That which was must be held fast as it flashes up as an image in the now of recognizability. The rescue which is thus, and only thus, effected, can only take place for that which, in the next moment, is already irretrievably lost’ (“Konvolut N, 7)” (Jenckes 111). He directly refers to Proust when he writes, “‘ . . . The eternity which Proust opens to view is convoluted time, not boundless time. His true interest is in the passage of time in its most real—that is, space-bound—form’ (*Illuminations* 210-11)” (Jenckes 145).

Borges echoes Proust in ways similar to Benjamin, but Borges also refutes the ideas of Schopenhauer, which are similar to the Tralfamadorians’ ideas about time in

*Slaughterhouse-Five*: “The nonhomogeneity of time contradicts Schopenhauer’s assertion that each fraction of time simultaneously fills the entirety of space. ‘Contrary to what Schopenhauer declared in his table of fundamental truths (*The World as Will and Representation*, vol. II, 4), each fraction of time does not simultaneously fill all of space; time is not ubiquitous. (Of course, at this point in the argument, space no longer exists.) As in Borges’s discussion of Kant, there can be no spatial mapping out of time or perception. We cannot map out in a single time or a single space what happened where . . .” (Jenckes 122). But he agrees with Schopenhauer to a certain extent:

Schopenhauer is held up here as an “almost, but not quite” example. Borges quotes: “The form in which the will appears is only the present, not the past or future; these exist only conceptually or for the enchainment of consciousness, submitted to the principle of reason. No one has lived in the past, no one will live in the future: the present is the form of all life; it is a possession which no evil can snatch away from it . . . Time is like an endlessly turning circle: the side that descends is the past, the side that rises is the future; at the top there is an indivisible point that touch the tangent, and that is the now . . .” Schopenhauer’s intention is clearly to reject conventional conceptions of time as a linear and successive phenomenon. Time is not linear but circular, and the past and the future are nothing more than conceptual imprisonment. They are presented here chained and turning infinitely around an indivisible point, which is the present (Jenckes 123-124).

Both the Tralfamadorians and the Tlönians are idealists, and Jenckes writes about how Althusser describes idealism: “Coming from a different theoretical tradition, Althusser writes of the distinction between idealism and materialism ‘that an idealist philosopher is like a man who knows in advance *both* where the train he is climbing into is coming from *and* where it is going: what is its station of departure and its station of destination . . . The materialist, on the contrary, is a man who takes the train in motion . . . but without knowing where the train is coming from or where it is going’ (12)” (Jenckes

149-150). Idealism is part of the philosophy of both the Tralfamadorians and the Tlönians, and Vonnegut and Borges both view this philosophy negatively, because it is not possible to know one's future in reality, so idealism is merely idealistic escapism.

Vonnegut's novels talk about history by dealing with time in science fictional ways: "His 'most crucial imaginative habit is to gaze down at humanity as if from another world,' notes Martin Amis (*Morse* 28) . . . Vonnegut uses time to offer this estranged perspective . . . Early in *Slaughterhouse-Five* Vonnegut recounts how he mapped out its narrative many times, once with colored crayons on a roll of wallpaper. Lundquist develops this motif in an apt metaphor for Vonnegut's form: 'It is as if he rolls the wallpaper into a tube so all of the characters and incidents are closely layered, so they are in effect one unit, and the reader must look at them from the side' (49). In other words, the story (in most Vonnegut novels, not just *Slaughterhouse-Five*) does not unfold as a linear chronology; instead, it is folded together so that different times and events meet. Such folded narratives do not reach neat conclusions" (Jowett 135, 137-138). *Slaughterhouse-Five* does not reach a neat conclusion because we already know, before the actual physical end of the novel, how it ends chronologically – with Billy Pilgrim's death – but this does not seem to provide the reader any kind of closure. The novel physically ends much further back in time, at the end of World War II, simply with a bird saying to Billy Pilgrim, "Poo-tee-weet?" This does not seem to provide any kind of closure either.

Jowett tries to explain a possible reason why Vonnegut wrote about time the way he did:

Attebery points to connections between the development of narrative away from traditional form and the developments in science: “The shift to nonlinear mathematics or chaos theory . . . could not have taken place without a major reshuffling of basic concepts such as closure, predictability, and otherness” (161). Along the same lines, if from a slightly different angle, Lundquist suggests that Vonnegut’s “method accords well with the major changes in the conception of reality that have come out of contemporary science” (45). It is certainly evident that Vonnegut wrote during decades when perceptions of time, history, and subjectivity changed. Science lost its innocence and objectivity, and so did history. Perhaps Vonnegut’s persistent interest in writing about time and history stems from his own long career. Vonnegut is able to challenge the ideologies and founding myths of U.S. society through rewriting U.S. history from a future perspective, drawing on how these myths have already been challenged in recent history (Jowett 138).

Jowett connects Vonnegut’s writing and temporal ideas to his life, which explains Slaughterhouse-Five’s framing chapters and Vonnegut’s decision to insert himself into the novel at a few points. His own life seems to correspond with his protagonist Billy Pilgrim’s in many ways, including his experiences in World War II and his witnessing the firebombing of Dresden.

Vonnegut disagrees with the Tralfamadorians and the Tlönians by preferring a subjective view of history: “Bill Mistichelli notes that opposing notions of history present it as either subjective or impersonal; he judges that Vonnegut prefers the subjective (317). Others have attempted to convey the subjectivity of experience (history) and time through narrative point of view in popular forms like cinema, as films from Akira Kurosawa’s *Rashomon* (1950) to Christopher Nolan’s *Memento* (2000) demonstrate. But Vonnegut’s subjective narratives of history do not just take a historiographic approach or an individual point of view; they also debate the ways we construct identity by re-viewing our lives. Vonnegut reiterates throughout his novels that life is not structured like a story, despite the ways various foma might persuade us that it

can be” (Jowett 139). Vonnegut questions the way some people falsely construct time, history, and their own lives by making the Tralfamadorians stand-ins for these people, and questioning the way the *Tralfamadorians* create these constructs.

Critics are divided on whether this means that Vonnegut also espouses these ideas, but since the book is about the process of looking back to the fire bombing of Dresden, it is clear that he does not. Both Vonnegut and many of his characters (who may appear in more than one novel) continue to timeshift, they “compulsively return, moving back and forth on their own lines,” as Lundquist would have it, referring again to the wallpaper diagram (49). Just as people may fold back and forth in time, linking events with their lives, so the narrative also folds separate historical events together. The subtitle, “The Children’s Crusade,” links World War II to previous history, like Billy’s story links it forward to contemporaneous wars, assassinations, and riots. The personal comments in the framing chapters (1 and 10) explain, not only the difficulty of looking back to such traumatic events, but also the necessity or “humanity” of doing so. Vonnegut uses the story of Lot’s wife to make this point: “But she *did* look back, and I love her for that, because it was so human” (23) (Jowett 141).

Vonnegut seems to argue that one should not just passively dismiss history as something that was always predetermined, but that one should actively look back at it and learn from it, like Lot’s wife.

Vonnegut, like Borges and unlike the Tralfamadorians and the Tlönians, *encourages* us to confront traumatic moments and negative emotions: “Vonnegut uses future history and time travel to bring us to the present, as science fiction often does, and his personal approach encourages us to confront that present in the same way his fiction allows us to confront the traumatic and brutal past of the United States and nations like it” (Jowett 144). As Jowett says, “We cannot sit back, as if devoid of free will, while history marches on” (Jowett 145). *Slaughterhouse-Five* does not seem to provide any kind of closure, because Billy Pilgrim’s life without death just leaves him endlessly

circling back through his life, just as *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius* merely ends with Borges endlessly translating, with no endpoint or final moment of clarity in sight, suggesting that the views of time espoused in these works are not to be emulated.

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