Slaughterhouse-Five, or the Children's Crusade by Kurt Vonnegut, Review by: Keith McKean
The North American Review, Vol. 254, No. 3 (Fall, 1969), pp. 70-71
Published by: University of Northern Iowa
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/25117008
Accessed: 15/06/2014 19:11

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the speaker can bear: “Satyr and chick . . . two frayed-winged dragonflies, clinging to a thistle, too clean to mate.”

Lowell likes image appositives like that one which end in pronounization. Also movements like this one from personal object and its own history to present event, myth, and then self seen as myth.

This typing paper pulped in Bucksport, Maine, onion skin, only merchandised in Maine, creased when I pulled the last sheet, and seemed to scream,
as if Fortuna bled in the white wood, first felt the bloody gash that brought my life. (“Five Dreams, Onion Skin”)

Notebook is the kind of book every poet would like to write once— if only to reach out for a new way of going while synthesizing where he’s been. I can say, true to reviewer’s cliche, “everyone interested in modern poetry will want to read this” and mean it. But how it will hold up is questionable. Read it now while it’s current.

Lowell’s Notebook seems a provisional book written in a provisional time. Wright’s book may be just as much so, though less obvious, if one sees it, as I do, built upon The Branch Will Not Break. Until very recently the contemporary American poet has been struggling to find a language for immediate personal experience. Increasing awareness among writers of the external conditions of life in America and America’s relation to other countries has forced poetry to come to new grips with such material. Both Wright and Lowell are trying to mediate the struggle. Both have produced better books of poetry in the past, but neither poet is over yet. What they do next may show these present books to be significant directions.

Slaughterhouse-Five, or The Children’s Crusade, by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. Delacorte. $3.95

In the opening chapter of Slaughterhouse-Five, Kurt Vonnegut tells us that the idea for this book came from World War II. He was a prisoner in Dresden, Germany, toward the close of the conflict, at the time when that relatively defenseless and militarily insignificant city was fire bombed so successfully (and senselessly) that 135,000 civilians were destroyed in the violent fire storm. Vonnegut decided to write about the massacre. Over the intervening years, he tried to form the story (throwing away thousands of pages in the process), and in this slim book, only one hundred and eighty-six pages, he has finally done it.

His next book, he promises, will be “fun.” This isn’t just as we have Anti-Utopian novels, so this is a Pilgrim’s Progress turned around, in which the anti-hero, Billy Pilgrim, does not move toward heaven. Instead, Billy loses his soul, his innocence, his psychic balance. He is a victim of the giant slaughterhouse: civilization.

As Vonnegut says, this is his “war book,” but not one for a John Wayne movie. It is, rather, one to evoke somber reflection. An excellent thing, but acrid.

Fans of Vonnegut’s will find his marvelous eye for incongruities, but he lingers, throughout, on the darkest dislocations. Probably the basic paradox is the ugly disparity between our benign generalizations and the continuing carnage in places like Dresden, Viet Nam, Watts.

Don’t get me (or Vonnegut) wrong. He doesn’t rage. He doesn’t preach. He’s beyond that. When you realize that you can no more stop the slaughter than you can stop the movement of a glacier, then it is folly to rail against misery. One can only weep, quietly and compulsively, like Billy Pilgrim, or write a humorous account of a dreadful fire storm, or, even better, just shrug your verbal shoulders, like Billy Pilgrim and Vonnegut, with the curious phrase: “So it goes.”

Indeed, this is not an ordinary anti-war book nor an ordinary book in any sense. For instance, Vonnegut tries to escape the linear progression of fiction by giving us, as nearly as he can, all the moments of Billy Pilgrim’s life at once. It is post McLa- hlan, a now novel. He tries to achieve freedom from ordinary restrictions of time and place, by having Billy become “unstuck in time.” As a con-

sequence, Billy moves instantly anywhere, anytime. He can be at war and back in Ilion, New York, at the same instant and in the same paragraph. He can be, at the same moment, a bewildered war prisoner and an unhappy middle-aged optometrist in post-war America.

Thus, we encounter any phase of Billy’s life that serves Vonnegut’s purpose. We may weep at the horror of Dresden, Hiroshima, and Viet Nam at the same time; they are all one. We may even travel with Billy to Trafalgar, an imaginary planet, and stay for an indeterminate time, because the visit, in ordinary time, is only a flash, a micro-second.

But a more significant aspect of the book is that it so closely parallels, in several ways, Mark Twain’s blacker moods. Consider, for instance, how much the novel is like Twain’s The Mysterious Stranger—that editor’s cut-and-paste performance which, nonetheless, reveals Twain’s later ideas about the human condition. Twain and Vonnegut both toy with the miraculous, with “science” fiction. Twain calls his visitor from outer space Satan, and his Satan is just as free wheeling, in space and time, as Vonnegut’s Trafalgarians.

Twain’s super-spaceman shocks his earthly friends by expressing some-

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thing of the same indifference to disaster as Billy Pilgrim. When Satan sees souls in the “fire storm” of hell, he is unmoved. When Satan calmly crushes hundreds of humans, he observes that it is of no matter, that people have no value. “So it goes.”

In both Twain’s and Vonnegut’s stories, moreover, moments are inexorably pre-ordained, so structured that we are simply forced to do whatever the chain of events dictates. In fact, human beings are so completely subject to incalculable forces over which they have no control, that one should not fret about the inevitable disaster.

Both stories dwell on man’s devotion to torturing his fellow man. In Slaughterhouse-Five are lurid details about the ancient Iron Maiden and the rack, as well as considerable discussion of more modern instruments for pain. In The Mysterious Stranger we have similar accounts of various forms of torture.

There are really no villains in either story. In Slaughterhouse-Five our vaunted equality of man amounts to little more than an equal share in villainy. Thus, we can not blame particular men—like the sordid little car thief, Paul Lazzaro—for he is only one among many. In The Mysterious Stranger, Satan also shies away from condemning. After all, if people are forced by circumstances into devilment, then life is already little more than a series of nightmares.

Happily, in both stories there is relief from bitterness. Satan’s young earthly friends sympathize with others; Twain also gives us a young lawyer, Wilhelm, who quite genuinely loves his Marget and stands beside her when it is dangerous. Billy, too, is endowed with compassion and the capacity for love.

And, most importantly, as Satan reminds us, we can laugh at the pitiable and absurd. In much the same way, Vonnegut’s darkly funny book suggests that we can counter the gloom with silent laughter.

There are other occasions in Slaughterhouse-Five when human beings are truly admirable. When the American prisoners were on their way to the Dresden camp, in a closed boxcar, they “were quiet and trusting and beautiful. They shared.”

And the English prisoners of war were “clean and enthusiastic,” “decent and strong.” They sang “blooming well.” They had been “singing together every night for years.”

There is even beauty, because Billy’s first view of Dresden was “intricate and voluptuous, enchanted and absurd. It looked like a Sunday School picture of heaven . . .”

And the Tralfamadorians give Billy some good advice. They teach him to “ignore the awful times,” to “concentrate on the good ones.” They urge him to “stare only at pretty things.” While Billy can’t be so admirably selective all the time, he does concentrate on such things as a sun-filled day and his love for a generous movie queen on the planet Tralfamadore.

The truth is, however, that such moments are few, and Billy spends most of his days in painful indignity. “So it goes,” perhaps for us all.

—Keith McKea

Hue and Cry, by James Alan McPherson. Atlantic-Little, Brown. $3.95

Hue and Cry is a collection of ten short stories written by James Alan McPherson. The stories are written in varying length and dramatic intensity: no story in the group falls below a level of mastery of fiction. McPherson is currently teaching English and Afro-American literature at the University of Iowa. Born in Savannah in 1943, and a graduate of the Harvard Law School (1968), he brings a wealthy fund of knowledge and perception to his short stories.

In reading these stories, one is reminded of the high professionalism and technical expertise of Somerset Maugham. Most of McPherson’s narratives are cast in the framework of the storyteller’s voice. This parallel is only partially suggestive because while it may define the technical competence of the tales, it does not do justice to the compassion and pity inherent in the themes.

McPherson declares he has tried to see “humanity: the good, the bad, the predictable things and some things not so easily understandable or predictable.” In essence, he has tried to explore some of the paradoxes of human feeling and the failures of each of us to understand the finer motives of other people. One deplores that inane cliche of “the failure of communication” because it suggests too strongly that if we verbalize sufficiently, some understanding will emerge. Verbal failures are not the stuff of McPherson’s fiction, as they are not the essential stuff of man’s failures. All of these stories are concerned with the dim and dying capacity of intuitive feeling of one human for another—the touch of one heart for another. E. M. Forster’s theme of “only connect” is invoked again by McPherson, and the haunting ending of Passage to India pervades these stories. That is what the hue and cry is about.

The epigraph of this collection is taken from Pollock and Maitland’s, History of English Law. “When a felony is committed, the hue and cry (hutesium et clamor) should be raised. If, for example, a man comes upon a dead body and omits to raise the hue, he commits an amerciable offense, besides laying himself open to ugly suspicions. Possibly the proper cry is ‘Out! Out!’” In this collection McPherson explores the seemingly ineradicable cruelty inherent in man. The protagonists of the stories are not the victims of open and visible cruelty; the “amerciable offenses” stem from a blindness of the heart, a psychological and spiritual devaluation of people. The pain is more acute, because the crime is more devious and subtle. The blindness and shame is often self-inflicted—failures to understand one’s own deepest motives or to reach out with honest love to another. Frequently, the “hue and cry” is for a personal misery, an impotence which is either not understood or for which no alleviation seems possible.

Two stories in the collection are superb renditions of this state of human misery. Previously printed in the Atlantic, the first story, “A Matter of Vocabulary,” depicts the plight of