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Kurt Vonnegut

The first word of something new came from outside, well beyond the English major curriculum that had me fully occupied as a student. At Marquette I'd completed all my undergraduate work and had begun an M.A. as a teaching assistant. Having graduated in January, a semester early, I found myself in the odd circumstance of teaching quiz sections of the literature course some of my classmates in other majors had put off until the end, in a few cases making them my students, while among my colleagues were grad students as far along as their doctoral dissertations.

Thus empowered, I felt like quite an authority and was ready to field all questions. In class and out, literature in English was something I felt I could command. Yet one of the first collegial queries, from a TA in philosophy, had me stumped, even as I'd plunged halfway into a brashly confident answer.

"Who are some good contemporary writers?" my friend had asked, and as I began running down the list my training had provided I suddenly felt superannuated at the age of twenty-two.

"F. Scott Fitzgerald" was the first name I'd suggested, followed by Hemingway and Faulkner and a few words about T. S. Eliot's poetry. It was 1966, and Eliot had been dead less than a year, while Hemingway and Faulkner were still alive when I'd read them in high school. But the works I had in mind were from the 1920s—hardly contemporary, more than forty years later—and I could see my friend's face falling as I ticked off *The Sound and the Fury*, *In Our Time*, and other works I suddenly realized were the most recent books I knew.

Today I know that Fitzgerald, Hemingway, and Faulkner were the era's great canonical writers, those whose reputations were so soundly made that there could be no doubt but that *The Great Gatsby*, *The Sun Also Rises*, and *Absalom, Absalom!* would not be out of place in the same student bookcase as works by Dickens

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and Hardy or even Shakespeare and Milton. Yet to leave no room for literature in progress, for works created in and out of our own day, suddenly seemed a disappointment, if only because of the embarrassment felt at being unable to recommend a current book. But at least the reason why was clear.

That well-ordered bookcase from which I'd drawn my sadly outdated examples owed its existence not to any effort at dealing with our present moment but to having the bookcase itself neatly filled. Leaving room for contemporary authors would mess things up, with acknowledged classics falling out of line as they tumbled into the gaps left for newer works. This would devalue the system itself, a system meant to guarantee authenticity rather than spark speculation. Its beauty fit right into the mannered world of Marquette's English department, from chairman Jerome Archer, who dressed in Harris tweeds and walked a matched pair of Borzoi hounds across campus, to the distinguished scholar John Pick, appointed even more debonairly, changing his watchband each day to match his bow tie. Each month there would be a department meeting to which we TAs were invited; after a perfunctory half hour of business the faculty would adjourn to the lounge, where several bottles of sherry set the tone for a most civilized social gathering. Like the canonical bookcase, all was orderly and fine, a rewardingly livable system into which one could buy at the cost of letting one's interest close with a generation of writers flourishing nearly half a century before.

Thus the news of current fiction was from another quarter altogether, outside the English department and beyond the style of careerist respectability that characterized the university at large. The news was "Kurt Vonnegut," and word came from a philosophy TA: Bob Tatalovich, who was presently distinguishing himself from the modes of acceptable behavior by satirically deriding everything about his graduate student's life.

"Fools and incompetents!" he would rage, in easy earshot of the professors who controlled his fate. "Utterly ridiculous!" he'd exclaim when reviewing some new requirement. Needless to say, his status in the graduate program was uncertain, while any future in the profession would depend more upon luck and his own talents than any blessing he'd be taking with him from Marquette. Yet unlike his colleagues in English, Bob was up on current writers, and when he recommended Vonnegut as the best of them it was hard not to listen.

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Would this new writer's attitude be like Bob's own? He promised that I'd find Kurt Vonnegut funny—also irreverent and disarmingly brash. He ran some scenes from *The Sirens of Titan* past me, such as the series of messages the Tralfamadorians spell out on Earth so that their stranded flying saucer pilot looking on from a moon of Saturn will know help is coming. The first message this pilot reads is that a replacement part is on its way; the text itself is conveyed in the form of Stonehenge. Four subsequent communiqués are eventually written out: that the pilot should be patient, he hasn't been forgotten (the Great Wall of China); that the supply depot is doing the best it can (the Golden House of the Emperor Nero); that he will be on his way before he knows it (the first walls of the Moscow Kremlin); and the advice to pack up and be ready to leave on a moment's notice (the Palace of the League of Nations). Bob's roisterous laughter at these lines was in the manner of what he presumed to be their sick humor. For him, Vonnegut was a kindred soul to be deriding the foolishness and incompetency of human effort, and was uncommonly successful at deflating all pretentions to both authority and seriousness. Consider the canonical importance of those weighty human artifacts, their monumental stature in the history of our civilization—and then see how those pitifully banal statements that follow not only destroy their seriousness but deconstruct their purpose. Take Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address" and read it in the speaking voice of Donald Duck, or give the job of announcing the most solemn pronouncements from Moses or Zarathustra to Laurel and Hardy. Bob Tatalovich would laugh just as hard, making apparent what type of canon he had in mind for the enshrinement of Kurt Vonnegut's work.

As I followed Bob's advice and sought out Vonnegut on the paperback racks, the writing I found confirmed my suspicions that here would be found healthy doses of irony and irreverence. The first novel I read was *Mother Night* in the library's new hardcover edition, prefaced by Vonnegut from the University of Iowa, and it took great delight in spoofing canonical texts, much as I had imagined. Here "The Gettysburg Address" is read not by Donald Duck but by Adolf Hitler, another cartoon character from our storehouse of anxieties, who is brought to tears by Lincoln's sentiments. Are those sentiments then to be mistrusted? No more than Hitler is to be trusted for loving them. Rather, both are now seen in a new light, from a fresh angle that by its startling defamiliarity sharpens our attention all the more.

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But what an angle to be coming from, an angle sufficiently oblique to make for great comic interest by itself. It was in this spirit that I read all the Vonnegut I could find, including the dark sarcasm of *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* and the teleological slapstick of *Cat's Cradle*. Both were relatively recent works. It was still early in 1966, and there was as yet no *Slaughterhouse-Five* to anchor all these sentiments and techniques. Nor was there the overwhelming cultural disruption and transformation that was to characterize the much hotter years with which the decade made its explosive conclusion, years that would find *Slaughterhouse-Five* such a necessary work but also cast its author as a more serious figure.

What made Kurt Vonnegut so appealing in 1966 was his brilliance at surviving and even flourishing at the margins—at making that marginality the substance of his work and the essence of his vision. Unlike the professor-poets and philosopher-novelists my teachers at Marquette espoused, Vonnegut was not part of the academic crowd. We'd recently hosted readings by W. H. Auden and Saul Bellow, but here was an author who, if he had to list influences, would not count off generations of writers but the great radio and film comedians of the 1930s. And unlike Bellow, who'd published fiction in *Partisan Review*, Vonnegut's short stories were placed no higher than in such popular family magazines as *Collier's* and *The Saturday Evening Post*.

Which was fitting, as his fiction was made from just such materials. Looking back on those years, Vonnegut now recalls that his role as a short-story writer for these journals had much in common with that of the cartoonists whose work also appeared there: he was constantly on the lookout for generative ideas, and those ideas would come from the same popular culture these magazines served. In the 1950s it seemed an ideal system, a perpetual motion machine that alternately fed on material from its own pop context and codified that culture in return. For my part, I loved it, because it was the world in which I'd grown up, seeing these magazines on my parents' coffee table and watching the whole style unfold around me on television and in the daily adventures that formed our middle-class lifestyle, all of which seemed a planet apart from the concerns of the English department at Marquette.

Vonnegut's career made for a virtual checklist of noncanonicity. He'd been a science student, learning how to write not from his English teachers but by being managing editor of both his high-

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school and college newspapers while working part time writing ad copy for prep clothing at the local department store. Afterwards, he'd put off university teaching until age forty-four, having written his first five novels and almost all his short stories while living as a fellow citizen among the business- and tradespersons of small town Massachusetts. Several of these novels had been paperback originals and were marketed within the decidedly nonacademic subgenres of science fiction and intrigue, while Vonnegut's magazine sales were to that equally lowbrow market called "the slicks." Even when he did resort to teaching—after the family weeklies died and the monthlies had ceased publishing much fiction—it was teaching on the margins: not in the English department but on that fringe known as creative writing, where the degree involved was not the standard M.A. or Ph.D. but the still questionable Master of Fine Arts, the M.F.A. diploma that found its only recognition back on the same margins of university life, for teaching creative writing to future M.F.A. graduates. Plus Vonnegut's writing lacked the ponderous probity of canonical literature, its wisecracks and irreverencies shaped within the minimalistic abruptness of pop humor.

At Marquette, the only person likely to appreciate Kurt Vonnegut's work was Bob Tatalovich, and in Bob's case it was because of Vonnegut's superficially black humor and wickedly funny iconoclasm. But the farther away from school I carried these novels, the more receptive I found people to be towards them. At the time, I was earning extra cash playing baritone sax in a rhythm and blues band. Junior & the Classics was a group of young but solid professionals who'd chosen work over college, though all the guys were thoughtful and intelligent. From his keyboard where he also sang and directed the band, Junior Brantley would call out our parts in proper musical terminology, instantly transposing keys for Kent Ivey's tenor sax and my bari. Kent was an Army vet with some junior college, while drummer Victor Pitts was the son of a prominent black businessman who owned a chain of car washes around town. Because I'd bring along books to read during breaks, Junior and the other musicians would be asking me about them. Over the year they found T. S. Eliot "obscure" and Ezra Pound "crazy," but a chapter from *Cat's Cradle* would have them in stitches.

The realization that Vonnegut's appeal might well be universal came during a break when one of our employers paused to sample my reading. Most of our gigs were at downtown clubs owned

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by a reputed gangster who had his henchman "Little Frankie" ride herd on us. I'd suffered silently through his patriotic speech about avoiding appeasement in Vietnam after he'd seen me reading A. J. P. Taylor's *The Origins of the Second World War*, but was able to laugh happily along as he chuckled through Vonnegut's description of the weasel-like attorney Norman Mushari in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*. Little Frankie kept remarking what a bitterly accurate characterization it was of the profession, and when he got to Vonnegut's admission that Mushari "had an enormous ass, which was luminous when bare," Frankie laughed so hard as to dislodge the revolver from his shoulder holster which thankfully didn't fire as it clattered to the floor.

At school I was making my way dutifully through seminars on Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Milton, with other courses on Victorian prose writers, modern British poets, and the like. Not until my last semester did I add a couple classes in American literature, and then turned back to British poetry for an M.A. paper on Wilfred Owen. The twentieth-century novel course I took ended with Hemingway from the 1920s and works by Faulkner and Fitzgerald from the 1930s. That I stayed with Vonnegut through all this showed both that I could read out of class and that novels like *Player Piano*, *The Sirens of Titan*, and *Cat's Cradle*, which I bought as they came back into print, were a world apart from what Marquette taught me was the tradition.

At Wisconsin, where I began doctoral work in 1967, Vonnegut was even more out of the question. The department did venture much farther into the contemporary than Marquette ever dared, but in a direction I found decidedly unappealing. In my undergraduate and master's courses on the modernists I'd been dismayed at their willful obscurantism; and now, in the current writers the profs at Madison favored, I was even more put off by the eggheaded density and humorless pedantry of those for whom one needed specialized training to appreciate. Taking a look at John Barth, in print and in person, I could not share the delight in his fabulative mythology; and reading Thomas Pynchon, the other great Wisconsin favorite, left me soundly resentful. And so, while the English department and its journal, *Contemporary Literature*, pursued a style of literature consonant with the heady theorism of Pound, I read a few more books by writers I guessed to be in Vonnegut's style: Terry Southern, Bruce Jay Friedman, and Hughes

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Rudd. In the meantime, Southern had turned to the movies while Rudd became a newsman and raconteur for CBS Television, and it was in this popular realm, rather than in the ethereal atmosphere of the university, that I continued to place Vonnegut.

Yet by the time I finished my doctorate—in record time, just two years later—Vonnegut and the others had been almost forgotten. I do recall seeing the hardcover of *Welcome to the Monkey House* in a bookstore and felt happy that Vonnegut might be making his way back into commercial respectability (after all those brilliantly written but shabbily packaged paperbacks), but in the meantime I'd been seduced by the classic beauty of nineteenth-century American literature, especially by the writers of that golden age known as the American Renaissance. Here was order and clarity with no need for philosophic intricacies and intellectual pyrotechnics. Hawthorne could be dark and even ambiguous, but never obscure. And as taught by Harry Hayden Clark, that kindly and elegant gentleman who had helped found the field over forty years ago, works like *The House of the Seven Gables* and *Twice-Told Tales* stayed ripe for analysis and appreciation even in the disturbed new world of 1968 and 1969.

With a dissertation on the problematic ending to *The House of the Seven Gables* I took a job as assistant professor at Northern Illinois University, where a rapidly expanding program in English on all three degree levels put no less than two dozen of us freshly hired Ph.D.'s to work in advanced courses. I taught two sections of a course on realism and naturalism that fall, and was anticipating a spring seminar on Hawthorne and Melville when an enrollment crush in the twentieth-century American novel course caused me, as the most junior Americanist on the faculty, to be drafted into teaching it, even though it fell outside my specialization and was the area I'd failed first time on my doctoral comprehensives.

Putting together the first three-quarters of the course was no problem, but in resolving not to replicate Marquette's practice at closing off consideration at nearly half a century, I found myself in a dilemma: the only current academically serious novelists I knew were those so highly touted at Wisconsin, those geniuses of obfuscation and soul-killing technicalism that I swore I'd never force upon students as representing the literature of their time. That last summer in Madison I'd audited John Lyons's course on contemporary fiction and had filled a big gap by reading Updike, Bellow, and

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Malamud—a book or two by them would take me a couple decades beyond Fitzgerald, Hemingway, and Faulkner (with whom I would begin rather than end). But what of the 1960s? What were the students themselves reading?

Less than six months ago *I'd* been a student, and only a few years before had been enjoying Kurt Vonnegut's novels. His work was still current, for I'd seen *Welcome to the Monkey House* on the shelves back in Madison. But imagine my surprise when I asked around and learned that his string of paperback reprints, the beginning of which I'd navigated back in 1966, had now swelled to include all his novels and a book of short stories as well, and that both college students and the counterculture at large had claimed him as their own. Plus Vonnegut's fame was advancing on a second front, among the middle-class readers whose purchases made their mark on the national bestseller lists. Here his latest novel, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, had made its impact last spring (when I'd been failing my comps!). Vonnegut himself was everywhere, as a lead news item in *Time* for his campus speeches, as an outspoken essayist in magazines from *Life* to *Esquire*, and as the most frequently and extensively interviewed novelist since Hemingway. Here was the author to conclude my course on just the level of currency and pertinence I found so lacking at both Marquette and Wisconsin. Plus there was the added benefit that I'd loved reading him myself and could, with quick and happy trips through *Welcome to the Monkey House* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, know that I'd covered his full range of work so far.

But, beyond all of this, what a time to be teaching Vonnegut! Getting the assignment in fall of 1969 and fulfilling it in spring 1970 made for unique intersections with both literary and social history. True, Vonnegut was now a world-famous author; but I had known his work beforehand, and was one of a relatively few other critics who'd been able to read *Mother Night*, *Cat's Cradle*, and the other early novels completely innocent of knowledge of what *Slaughterhouse-Five* would bring to the structure of his career. It is now a critical commonplace that Vonnegut's writing of this novel was the culmination of previous themes and techniques, specifically the destruction of Dresden and the ability to articulate it in print, which in this case meant talking candidly about his own difficulties with the project and how it eclipsed the limits of both memory and voice. Thus all his other novels could now be read—could not

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really escape being read—as thematic feints at the topic of unimaginable destruction, with subthemes regarding technique as well as experimentation with different modes of narrative expression. Little by little he'd been incorporating himself as a factor in the text, from the tombstone meant to bear his own family name in *Cat's Cradle* and the abundance of back-home Indiana lore in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* to the personally implicating preface to *Mother Night* signed from Iowa City. Now with *Slaughterhouse-Five* Vonnegut had finally perfected each stream, finding a repetitive, cross-narrational device to handle the temporal and spatial difficulties in acknowledging overwhelmingly rampant death, plus making himself and his act of writing part of the narrative action in those remarkable opening and closing chapters. From here his art would grow in scope and technical daring, as with successive works the real Kurt Vonnegut would take on increasing prominence both in his fictive narratives and public commentaries on issues of the day. Thus as a critic I was in just the right place at the right time, renewing my acquaintance with Vonnegut's works to see how they had grown to this key point and to appreciate the technical logic in all that would follow.

Yet there was even more, for as a college teacher at the end of the American 1960s, when the protest of a war half a world away brought military violence and eventually death to the campuses themselves, I could see Vonnegut's special readership facing not just the fulfillment of his vision in *Slaughterhouse-Five* but the confirmation of their own view in both his account of Dresden and their experience of Kent State. We would read Vonnegut's Dresden story with the knowledge of what he'd said about the bombing in the preface to the second edition of *Mother Night* written on a university campus not that far from ours, and which was now experiencing its own violence. Will his texts ever be studied again while soldiers in battle gear occupy schools and fight a style of antiguerrilla warfare with tear gas and bullets? One hopes not, just as Vonnegut hoped never to see another firebombing. That "only" four died in Ohio is not the issue, any more than the Dresden story depends on casualty counts of 250,000 (the highest estimate) as opposed to 75,000 (the lowest figure considered). Nor is the issue simply death. Rather, what's shocking is death where it is least expected.

Despite having this focus, I still found myself in Vonnegut's own position when poised to explain the meaning of Dresden:

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speechless. *Mother Night* just didn't conform to the patterns established in the novels we'd studied previously. There was always something in Updike's work, for example, that I could relate back to Fitzgerald's, such as their common mannerist techniques, and philosophically Bellow could be talked about in some of the terms we'd used for Faulkner. But what was there to say of the vision and technique of *Mother Night*? I could see now why Marquette had closed things down as early as they did, and why the profs at Wisconsin welcomed only writers conversant in the lofty tones of high modernism.

Because Vonnegut's works followed none of these models, not even to revolt against them, a new style of discourse would be needed on the critical side of this dialogue as well. Late into the night before class I still could not find a handle on the book other than such aleatory expedients as having each student pick a line from the novel and read it in unison, hoping that some order might be fortuitously revealed.

It was this thought that made me suspect Vonnegut was doing something of the same in *Mother Night*: giving up on rational explanations for the world Dresden had provided and taking random, seemingly unconnected little shots at it instead. By allowing them to be apparently diverse, however, he was giving his shots a chance to hit targets beyond the range of reason's inhibitions. Now that they had been taken, however, was there a new structure to be revealed? There was, and to my great delight it was a pattern not indicative of a hidden rationality but of something new altogether, something that deconstructed naturalized assumptions in order to create a radically new understanding of what our age had become.

Consider the conventional approach to what *Mother Night*'s preface calls "the Nazi monkey business." It follows neither the weighty seriousness of William L. Shirer's *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* or the cartoonlike reductionism of so many popular accounts of German atrocities, but rather pictures Hitler and his colleagues in a way we've never seen them, yet in a way they most surely were: at work and at play in the normal business of quotidian life. In a day when the Adolf Eichmann trial was exposing the banality of evil, Vonnegut went much farther capturing such top Nazis as Goebbels and Heydrich at humdrum pursuits including theatergoing and an intramural ping-pong tournament. Even in the aftermath of evil, Eichmann turns his own banality into a revealing

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style of commentary, finding his prisonmate deficient in murdering enough of the six million and offering to lend him "a few hundred thousand" to enhance his stature.

Throughout the novel are other such surprising touches: Goebbels admiring the propaganda artistry of Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address," a former colleague turning up in Ireland as a gardener, and an Israeli prison guard boasting "what a fine Nazi" he made as a spy. Yet as wickedly funny as these jokes were, they served as more than one-liners peppered through the narrative for shock effect. That was the style of Terry Southern and others whose effect was more strictly limited to "black humor," a category once thought to contain Kurt Vonnegut. What made the little twists and turns in *Mother Night* significant was that they formed a pattern—not a glaringly obvious one, and even working subliminally at times—that subtly dismantled our previous assumptions about everyone's role in World War II.

Consider the joke about "The Gettysburg Address." It is ironic that Goebbels admires its genius as propaganda. But it is disconcerting when it makes a second appearance as the speech whose emotive powers bring Adolf Hitler to tears. Yet even here Vonnegut is not done, for only half of our most trusted assumptions—those about the Nazis—have been deconstructed. What about the American side, the home of Lincoln's hallowed sentiments? Here we find Franklin D. Roosevelt, Lincoln's successor and the spokesman of morally enabling sentiments himself, laughing with glee over Howard Campbell's grossly anti-Semitic broadcasts—indeed, qualifying as their greatest fan, just as Lincoln's greatest fan is Hitler. There is a reversal at work here, of course. But beyond the conventional structure of comedy is the fact that Vonnegut has set the tension for these punchlines with a third element: Goebbels's first appreciation of the great president's most famous speech, the irony of which has defamiliarized it and roused the reader's attention for the more transformative surprises that follow.

Such disruptions happen frequently enough to provide a structure for the novel, a series of triplets whose 1-2-3 punch keeps the reader continually off balance as anything likely to be taken for granted quickly changes form. Is it cruel that Campbell steals his friend's motorcycle to escape Berlin? No, because the friend escapes the war himself to become a gardener in Ireland. But even here there is a third surprising stage that takes us back to the begin-

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ning for a complete restructuring, for as the action concludes it turns out that the friend has been an anti-German agent all along and is now ready to help indict Campbell for his war crimes. Hardly any person, place, or thing escapes this rebounding confusion of identities and values. Even the judgmental noose with which Campbell is confronted serves secondary and tertiary purposes: discarded, it is taken by a garbageman who hangs himself, despondent not for any usual reason but because his cure for cancer has gone unheeded.

All of this restructuring serves a purpose, convincing both Howard Campbell and the reader that Campbell may well be falsely accused but that he is not ultimately innocent. Thus his death at the novel's conclusion is not at the hands of the Israeli court for crimes against humanity, but by his own hand for crimes against himself. Like the world around him, he has let his own identity—and his integrity—be corrupted by the convenient schizophrenia that lets people do as they please while feeling secure that a very good self remains hidden inside. "We are that we pretend to be," Campbell has learned, and finding a structure for resolving that pretense after systematically deconstructing the assumptions allowing such fakery to pass as fact has been Vonnegut's main achievement in *Mother Night*.

Teaching *Mother Night* in the context of Kent State and our own disruptions was an adventure. Trigger-happy Illinois National Guardsmen were on campus, and each night state police in tactical gear patrolled the streets, inhibiting any student violence but menacing passersby as well. From one class to the next we wondered if any of us might fall to clubs as had happened at Wisconsin or to bullets as in Ohio. Neither happened—there was a sit-in on the bridge where traffic was blocked on US 30, the Lincoln Highway of folksong fame; but the school's president defused tensions on both sides by joining the demonstration, and DeKalb escaped the semester without serious troubles.

Yet students across the country had seen values restructured, and they formed a natural, understanding readership for Kurt Vonnegut's novels. There they found not meaninglessness, and not the nihilism or even bitter self-destructive irony older critics feared. *Mother Night*, *Cat's Cradle*, and his other works did not destroy but rather deconstructed, with an emphasis not on obliteration but on revealing the nature of the structure that was there. And even that

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act of deconstruction was just a phase, a needed preliminary to the reconstruction of a world undertaken this time with a clear view of the artifice and imaginative empowering underway.

Having deconstructed, with my students, some of the assumptions that had built the American literary canon, it seemed appropriate to undertake a similar task with regard to the profession of such works. Thanks to its recent mass hirings of radical young Ph.D.'s and its recruitment of an equally young group of instructors, M.A. graduates from around the country who could teach the huge numbers of general education students while dabbling in Northern Illinois's doctoral program (which hoped to seduce them as eventual grad students and turn them back into TAs), the department was alive with dialogue and debate, especially among this younger crowd who felt so excluded and estranged from the fat-cat professorate that by virtue of their seniority ran the place. As opposed to these elders, whose taste was settled and whose curriculum was virtually petrified, we assistant professors and instructors were not only reading new works but were struggling to incorporate them in both our value system and our teaching. Bookshelves in our offices and at home would be speckled with the same colors, including the blue Dell paperback of Heller's *Catch-22*, the orange of *Cat's Cradle*, and the wild heliotrope of Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. These works were taught as well, which meant taking a chance, for there were few critical resources from which we could draw ideas or to which we could direct students. Therefore, as eager to publish as we were, the idea occurred to leave off from rehashing our dissertations or old seminar papers into submittable essays (with which I'd scored already on Hawthorne, Howells, and Faulkner) and undertake some criticism and scholarship on these new writers for whom the field was almost completely open.

It was this aim that brought me to John Somer, one of the still young but more experienced instructors who'd published four introductory textbooks on fiction, poetry, drama, and composition. John was on his way toward opting for a doctorate, with which he'd return to Emporia State and a professor's career. Now, however, he was exuberantly aswim in the lively currents of freshman lit and the joys of campus life. With his wife and daughter he shared a pleasant house near school, large enough for parties where the instructors, grad students, and new assistant profs could

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band together as a nation apart from the older folks who still seemed like *our* professors back in our undergrad and graduate programs. Any sense of exclusion from the grown-ups' world was more than compensated for by the camaraderie we shared. The most important quality of this kinship was not just that it derived from tastes in literature and styles of teaching but that it extended right in line to values of lifestyle. We not only read and taught Vonnegut but lived him, and what a difference that made! Leaving one of the stuffily awkward receptions hosted by a senior prof, one had the clear impression that the time had been spent among readers of Philip Wylie and Robert Penn Warren. Dropping by John's house, where at midnight the party was just approaching a full tilt that would careen on 'til three or four in the morning, it felt like walking into Vonnegut's text, for here all the rigid pretentions and outdated professorial styles were kept far away by the cheap wine and rock and roll.

It was from this atmosphere that our first idea for publishing something derived. It was just before Christmas break, and everyone was feeling especially loose and free. The senior professors let their liberated fancies take wing in a night of carolling and eggnog at one of their homes where those younger colleagues privileged with an invitation roasted in their mandatory tweed jackets and wool ties and yet were chilled by the fear of placing a drink where it didn't belong (and nobody seemed to be having more than one). My wife and I managed to escape this torture by eleven, and after stopping home to check with the baby sitter and her boyfriend, who'd made the funkier atmosphere of our house a natural place for their evening of candles, incense, and some of our rock music on the stereo—I think it was Paul Butterfield's rendition of "One More Heartache" blasting away while our little son and daughter slept upstairs that made me so grateful for having escaped the phony seasonality of those awkward songs at the reception—we headed over to the friendly ambience at John Somer's. Here similar music was in the air, an air filled with immensely more animation than where we'd been forced to spend the evening's first hours. I poured myself what seemed to be a canning jar of Chianti, and while my wife sought out some friends I fell into talk with the host himself.

At the time, I didn't think much of it, because John and I would get into conversations like this almost anywhere and at any

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time. Our topic was a common, workmanlike one, mere shoptalk between two toilers in the world of innovative fiction: how one of the newest writers we'd happened on, Ronald Sukenick, was more complicated and at times much harder to read than was Vonnegut, but that if one had spent some time playing with Vonnegut's devices in *Mother Night* and *Cat's Cradle* a novel such as Sukenick's *Up* could be seen to follow naturally (if a bit more deeply). If a course could start, rather than end, with Vonnegut, we decided, a writer like Sukenick would become a lot more accessible.

But for there to be a course, I argued, there'd have to be critical materials and a text. With my last words John cracked a smile, and I realized we were in business. As a veteran of the process, he'd lead us through. A student would be teaching a professor, but that fit the style of inversion and disruption we were seeing in everything else regarding this new field. The plan would be a simple one, reflecting our own necessarily inductive method in encountering this strange new literature and exploring our way through it. The easiest and most appealing fiction had been the comic variety—indeed, the initial promptings for fracturing so many old conventions had been for the sake of humor, and John agreed that the most promising way to approach both naive students and skeptical professors would be with a laugh rather than a challenge.

Our own laughter filled the rest of that night, during which I assumed the plans for a critical anthology were being set aside. But next morning at ten John was on the phone, asking if I could pick some stories, assemble some notes for an introduction, and meet him that afternoon to put our thoughts together.

The stories were no problem, and from their range came both the table of contents and a rationale for introducing it. As agreed at the party, we'd begin simply and with humor, and from there proceed to more complex effects. Vonnegut would be at the start, followed by a similar story by Hughes Rudd, "Miss Euayla is the Sweetest *Thang*!" which set the terms for this new style of fiction: vocal, dramatic, and disruptive of both the usual expectations and the conventions that expressed them. Vonnegut's "The Hyannis Port Story" would establish a mode of fabulative critique by means of self-conscious signs, semiotically (we'd learn much later) systematic enough to satisfy the most committed deconstructionist, yet sufficiently obvious to appear as a billboard (an actual billboard, the strobe-lit display of Barry Goldwater's face that glares

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across the property line into the Kennedy compound). Then Hughes Rudd would unleash the comedy of a benighted character living his entire life within just such a self-generated semiosis. From there we'd move on to more complicated effects, but the tone of humorous disruption would underlie it all.

John and I met that afternoon with a pile of books and played with various ways of stacking them until we had a satisfactory structure for our table of contents balanced on his study desk. Then we decided what needed to be said in an introduction and divided it between us, starting from Ronald Sukenick's requiem for traditional fiction that begins, in mock-critical fashion, his aptly titled novella, "The Death of the Novel." That evening we worked separately for a couple hours each, producing a total of twenty pages that after another few hours the next morning melded together quite easily. With the title *Innovative Fiction: Stories for the Seventies,* we sent it off to Sukenick's editor at Dell, who accepted it on what must have been the same day it arrived.

By the time our book appeared, I'd left DeKalb for the University of Northern Iowa in Cedar Falls, but there were still two projects to be done in the interim. Flushed with our luck at selling *Innovative Fiction*, John and I—a few parties later—struck on the idea of doing something on Kurt Vonnegut. Again the book was born of give and take, drawing its power from the exchanges between us and then amplified by the roles we shared with several contributors.

As a critical subject, Vonnegut's work was just too new, too diverse, and too unorganized to allow any single critic's view to function comprehensively. His antecedents and place in the tradition were not yet clear. Indeed, from a political point of view, he was being claimed by both the radical left and the extreme right, as the story "Harrison Bergeron," crafted for the 1950s science fiction movement, became a favorite of the earth-shoes and granola set even as it was reprinted in William F. Buckley's conservative journal, *National Review*. Was the author a sassy black-humorist like Terry Southern, a comic fabulator in the manner of John Hawkes, a cynical commentator along the lines of J. P. Donleavy, or even a SF specialist sharing company with Theodore Sturgeon and Harlan Ellison? With only the slightest critical attention, Vonnegut's reputation could be taken in just about any direction, and the few critics who had treated his work—Conrad Knickerbocker, Robert

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Scholes, C. D. B. Bryan, and Leslie Fiedler—seemed willing to lead Vonnegut down one path only and among the exclusive company of its particular travelers. For the body of work John and I had in mind, we'd need a broader view, studying not just individual facets and dispositions but considering what such features shared in common. Plus there was the background work in bibliography, literary history, and the context of popular culture. And so we divided the work among a dozen contributors, including ourselves and even, by means of an interview done by Bob Scholes, Kurt Vonnegut himself.

We had science-fiction buffs, popular-culture authorities, bibliographers, literary critics adept in everything from mythology to social manners, and folks who'd known Vonnegut as a mentor and colleague. As we wrote, we avoided temptations to overstress our own lines by exchanging views among ourselves. As editors, John and I followed clues in Vonnegut's work itself, finding out about his association with Bob Scholes from the preface to *Welcome to the Monkey House* and learning from his review of *Going All the Way* that novelist Dan Wakefield would be a pretty good source for understanding how important was the Indiana background and all those commercial sales throughout the 1950s, a region and period Dan was treating in his own fiction. Getting Wakefield in the group proved the key to publication, for he suggested his own and Vonnegut's publisher, Seymour Lawrence, who had a line with Delacorte Press. As Ron Sukenick had provided an entry point with Richard Huett at Dell, now Dan's name served as an attention-getting opener in our letter to Seymour Lawrence, who accepted the book as a hardcover and arranged for simultaneous issue as a Delta paperback. Received more as cultural anthropology than as scholarship, *The Vonnegut Statement* won good prepublication reviews in the trade journals and was covered by *Time*, *The New York Review of Books*, and even the *Times Literary Supplement* in London. Extra printings were ordered and the initial royalty check was as good as a half year's assistant-professor salary. But by then I was an associate professor—at the University of Northern Iowa—and enjoying a new style of life, not the least of which would include friendship with the man himself, Kurt Vonnegut.

Cedar Falls, it turned out, was part of Vonnegut's fanciful back yard. His two years in Iowa City had been a happy time, more rewarding than the years immediately previous when he'd strug-

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gled with a deteriorating magazine market and seen his novels virtually ignored. At the University of Iowa he had a steady paycheck for the first time in fifteen years, and was introduced to the company of others as committed to writing as he was. The state's generosity in supporting such arts encouraged and charmed him. His students were eager and bright, and among them he found some friends for life. One of them graduated with her M.F.A. degree and took a job at the University of Northern Iowa, where in 1972 I moved into the office next door.

Loree Rackstraw had taken Kurt's fiction-writing course in 1965–1966. While he remained in Iowa City for a second year, Loree's professorship at the University of Northern Iowa just one hundred miles away let them keep in touch. In spring of 1967 he visited UNI, speaking to a tiny but interested audience in one of the English department's classrooms; ten years later he'd return to address a standing-room-only crowd of two thousand packed into the same building's auditorium. By 1977, of course, he was the world-famous author of *Slaughterhouse-Five* and several other best sellers, but even then he felt a special fondness for this state that had not only made him happy and secure but had served as the turning point in his career—he had rolled into town broke, dejected, and with few prospects of continuing a self-supported writer's career, but had left with a Guggenheim grant and a contract to write *Slaughterhouse-Five.*

As with Bob Tatalovich at Marquette and John Somer at Northern Illinois, Loree Rackstraw confirmed that I was being blessed with a succession of resourceful and generous colleagues. We shared more than just Vonnegut's books in common, for we'd each begun reading them in 1966—years before the fame and notoriety and other distractions. To me, Vonnegut had felt as natural and familiar as a good buddy, so unlike the strict formality of Marquette and its canon. Loree, however, had the man himself as a teacher, mentor, and then friend, and who now—at the height of his fame and presumed inaccessibility, as legions of guru-seekers sought his presence—was one of the few Vonnegut fans who had his number in her pocket and would be hearing from him by phone and letter.

Loree's view of Vonnegut was a unique one. Like the photo she'd taken of Kurt in his office—barely recognizable with short hair, no mustache, wearing the wash pants and v-neck sweater in

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which he'd dressed himself for years as a private writer about the house, and posed in a old chair from which the springs and stuffing were bursting, part of the casual accommodations the Writers Workshop enjoyed in its quonset-hut offices—her vision of Kurt from these years was quite different from the larger-than-life impression he was making in the media those days. Yet beneath it all was an understanding, obvious to her even back in 1966, that his work was something special. His was a special sensibility, liable to turn up in unusual ways. One night, for example, with a group of workshop students Kurt and Loree had found themselves in a bar featuring the unlikely entertainment of female impersonators. While the others mocked the occasion, Loree recalled that Vonnegut was deeply touched by the art these performers brought to their work even as the audience turned their efforts into gross comedy. Another time, while walking to class through the student union, the two found guest-instructor Nelson Algren passed out in the lounge, sleeping through his own scheduled class meeting while he snored off a hangover, oblivious to the bustle around him. Algren had been no great ally in the faculty politics that end up ruining every academic program, yet Kurt was so moved by this great writer's innocent vulnerability that he told Loree in all seriousness that universities should in conscience support and protect such damaged geniuses in recompense for all they'd contributed to art.

Now, in the fall of 1972, as *The Vonnegut Statement* went through production, Loree told me that Vonnegut had been touched by all my efforts and wanted to say thanks. A few days later a letter from him arrived, confessing that my interest in his work had been useful and had cheered him up. As a gift in celebration of my book's coming publication, he promised to send something "only a college professor could love": the original typescripts of three false starts, dating back to 1957, of the novel he'd just finished, *Breakfast of Champions*. A few weeks later the package arrived, and there they were, about forty pages comprising three distinct beginnings, including one in verse, of a novel called *Upstairs and Downstairs*. Set in the Depression, it featured a character who'd have a role in *Breakfast of Champions*, Fred Barry, only here telling the roots of Barry's wealth during those transformative economic times. Meanwhile, Kurt had begun sending the signed and dated typescripts of his current work—mostly essays, prefaces,

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and speeches—to Loree as he finished seeing them through the press. This meant the world's best Vonnegut archive was now taking shape in two offices at UNI's Baker Hall.

As the years passed, I dug deeper into Vonnegut's work, historically and bibliographically. John Somer and I kept in touch, finishing another party project—an anthology of stories from the Vietnam War called *Writing Under Fire*—and drew on our research for a proposed volume of Vonnegut's own essays and uncollected stories. *Welcome to the Monkey House*, it turned out, had gathered only half of Kurt's short fiction from the 1950s and early 1960s. Missing was a rare early attempt to deal with World War II, "Souvenir"; also passed over were such middle-class comedies as "Any Reasonable Offer" and "Poor Little Rich Town," pieces I'd found indicative of Vonnegut's roots in the most quotidian familiarity of American life. True, some of these works were crudely vernacular, but no worse than the already collected "All the King's Horses" with its simplistically propagandistic portrayal of our North Korean and Chinese Communist enemies. But the story's mood spoke directly of popular American feelings of that era as expressed in media from comic books to television dramas. We were just finding out that Kurt had written scripts for *Philco Playhouse* and other such shows; at one point he'd collaborated with a TV writer on the adaptation of his story "D. P." for *General Electric Theater*, where it starred Sammy Davis, Jr. in his first dramatic role, and was introduced by host Ronald Reagan. From 1957 to the present Vonnegut, Davis, and Reagan had emerged into much more significant fame, but the fact that the roots of their work could be found in such common, popular soil might provide a clue for understanding who and what they were now. Plus from 1964 on Vonnegut had begun expressing ideas akin to those of his fiction (and often in a similar manner) in essays and reviews for a wide range of journals. His gentle deflation of the Maharishi for *Esquire*, "Yes, We Have No Nirvanas," was as funny and as insightful as his comic critique of religion in *Cat's Cradle*, and offered a good handle on that at times ambiguous novel. *McCall's* had sent Vonnegut to cover the fall of Biafra, and seeing this veteran of the destruction of Dresden witnessing a postmodern version of inhumane horror made for significant work.

John and I had probed junk shops and rummage sales for copies of the magazines that libraries don't keep—*Argosy, Venture, Worlds of If*—and had tracked down all the fugitive stories. We'd

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