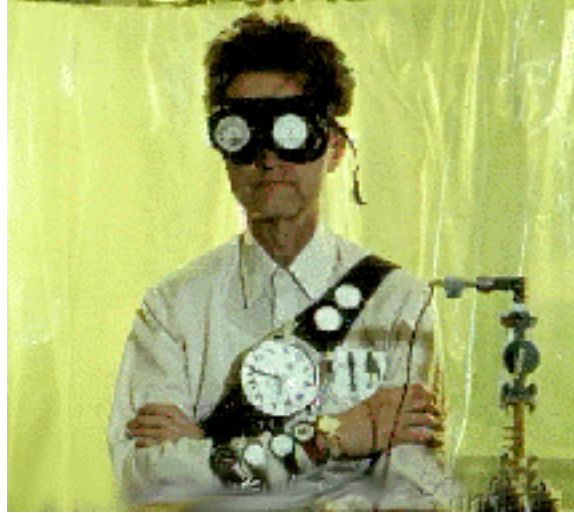


Review

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Somehow Beyond Vertigo and Amnesia: Updike's *Toward the End of Time* and Vonnegut's *Timequake*

Two of our elder statesmen, two of our most renowned novelists, John Updike and Kurt Vonnegut, have published science fiction novels on the notion of time. In their context time can be construed in a number of ways. In a general sense both Updike and Vonnegut are nearing the end of their (biological) time, both having published an enormous amount of enlightening fiction. We are also coming upon the end of the millenium and we appear to be witnessing the decline of the American empire. Both novels, Updike's *Toward the End of Time* and Vonnegut's *Timequake* deal with these existential and social issues and attempt to prod us into doing something about the socio-economic and political changes that are taking place in the late 1990s. In an essay on Vonnegut's critics, John Irving, it seems to me, sums up poetically Vonnegut's and Updike's intentions as novelists:

Catharsis--perhaps it is also an unpopular word today, or at least an old-fashioned one--relies on upsetting readers. You purge fear through evoking it, you purify pain by rendering it, you bathe the heart with tears. Vonnegut can hurt you, and he does; he means to, too. When the sunny dreams and the harmless untruths evaporate--and they always do--a ruined planet is what we look upon; his books make us wish we were better.[1](#)

Timequake is written with irony, humor and sarcasm to wake us from our stupor and apathy and to warn us of what awaits if we do not try to radically transform this society. Likewise *Toward the End of Time* presents us with a future that is so grim and characters that are so repulsive that this very hideous image forces us to either embrace it masochistically or reject it outright and work towards preventing this dystopia.

I. "A marauding deer in a ruined world"

By 2020, the time reference for Updike's recent bleak novel, the social welfare state has completely collapsed, leaving what would be best described as a social darwinist world. After the economic crash of 2000 and the Sino-American war, criminal elements run the economy in a state-less United States, which has now fully declined as an imperial power and lags behind its burgeoning neighbor, Mexico. The war has decimated tens of thousands and thus reduced the overall population; unemployment is rampant; prostitution is on the rise; and mafiosos rule as upper middle class and upper class baby boomers, now in retirement, hold on to the wealth they accumulated during the empire's "golden age" (the 1960s and 70s).² Capitalism, in its most savage attire, has triumphed; it has reduced social relations to barbaric acts of commerce and survival (of the fittest). In Updike's eerily possible future:

The altars are slighted; the temples fall into mossy ruin. And yet an air of irresolution hangs in the emptiness. Public disorder increases. Telephone booths are vandalized; graffiti cover every stone surface consecrated to beauty and visual harmony. Children acquire guns and shoot each other as casually as images are flicked away on television; adults drown their disquiet and despair in alcohol. The world by itself is not enough; there must be another, to give this one meaning (300).

And yet, of course, there is no other world, no solution to the living nightmare homo sapiens have dreamed up. So what, then, is Updike's purpose in this apocalyptic novel? Is it merely a cynically and potentially realistic view of an "old man's sour grapes," as Michiko Kakutani cryptically puts it?³ As I see it Updike writes this novel in the best of the tradition of science fiction by showing us where events will lead us if we continue to hold the present course. For the 66-year-old novelist, who suffered the effects of the Great Depression, the New Deal, the horror of World War II and countless other wars (initiated for the most part by the United States), the McCarthyite era, the boom of the 1960s, then the period of conservative restoration in 1980s and 90s, and the strain and collapse of social democratic and the "socialist" regimes during this same period, the end of the second millenium could not be regarded with optimism. Yet there is hope in a science fiction novel that aims at depicting a dystopian future. Readers can then envision the consequences of life under capitalist conditions and the tragic dehumanization that could await us in this "brave new world". Like Vonnegut, Updike may hope that, though the world he imagines is perhaps too realistic, too palpable, he can jolt readers--via shock effect--into preventing tragic apocalypse.

Updike achieves this shock effect through his excellent development of the characters. No matter how distasteful or vulgar these characters might be, they are still balanced or round; capable of the worst or the best. The protagonist, Ben Turnbull, is a retired investment counselor who benefited from the fruits of the US empire by making his "little pile [of money] only by means of twelve-hour days and claustal conformity to the fully staffed pecking order" (186). Turnbull joins the traditional upper middle class by marrying his second wife, Gloria, and by working on Wall Street. He lives in a large, historic home facing Massachussetts Bay, pays tribute to mafiosos who assure his safety, and spends his days in this world in shambles writing entries in his diary (which we read), observing nature, and indulging obsessively in crude sexual fantasies. By his own admission: "I wanted to get back to nature and my own human basics before saying good-bye to everything" (5). Specifically this leads Turnbull to explore nature's wonders and to return to his physical self (affirmed particularly in his sexuality). As a symbol of power and masculinity sex seems to pervade his entire life: every woman or girl the protagonist encounters elicits fantasies in him. Turnbull's sexual imagination partly fills the enormous void of this society in ruins. It is perhaps one of the few activities that confirms his humanity in a dehumanized context.

But his compulsive sexual interest in the opposite sex and his former life as a ladder-climbing financial counselor are signs of extreme alienation. Like Rabbit in *Rabbit, Run*, Turnbull experiences a "hardness of heart" to "external circumstances," the external situation perforating the heart and then making it toughen.⁴ Consequently, although the protagonist may be distasteful or even despicable because of his obsessive-compulsive and narrow-minded pursuits, as readers we are asked to step beyond the level of the character to analyze the society at large which generally formed this character. In an interview about his work in 1986 Updike upheld that point of view:

A book such as *Couples*, which was taken to be a distressing, ugly view of contemporary sexual behavior, was for me a kind of romantic book in which guy meets gal, guy gets gal--against a background of the nuclear family breaking up. I didn't create the break up; it was in the society around me.⁵

Turnbull, then, is a fleshed-out character who evolves in and has to cope with a society which has practically dispensed with social relations altogether. However, we can empathize with Turnbull as, in his old age, he becomes self-critical. He then becomes a redeemable character with realistic strengths and flaws who has had to act in a world that was not of his own making, a society that made him into what he repudiates. "For primitive Deirdre, something existed, hot, in the knots of nature, that she was ashamed to bow to though I was ashamed, I was also somewhat primitive, and had willingly attended as an extension of my worship of her body" (118). In this humorous account, in which the protagonist discusses his religious background, the real religion is his beloved and the sex ceremony they perform. As Turnbull confesses this, as readers we gain some appreciation for him because he is not as alienated as he appears to be, or better yet, he recognizes his own alienation and thus becomes worthy. Thus when he makes crass statements like the following we can perhaps forgive him later when he regrets it: "I like it when she lies on

top, doing the thrusting, and also is bliss to fuck her from behind, with no thought of her own orgasm" (16). Passages like this one are frequent in the novel, so many in fact that the reader begins to see Turnbull as a pathetic sexagenarian--pardon the pun--who is re-experiencing his youth. Yet this overemphasis on sex casts a light on the society in shambles that surrounds him. What is left of society offers only basic human survival. One is left with the body not the soul, as the protagonist acknowledges:

The sexual parts are fiends, sacrificing everything to that arching point. Society and simple decency keep trying to remind us of everything else--the rest of one body, the whole person, with its soul and intellect and estimable socioeconomic constituents--but in the truth of the night our dismembering needs arise and chop up the figments of our acquaintance like a Mogul swordsman gone beserk, and revolt us with our revealed nature (75).

Turnbull's recognition of his fall, which takes place concomitantly with the fall of human relations under capitalism--or is it fascism?--reminds us that all is not lost yet. Turnbull may be drowning, but he is aware that he is drowning.

So it is with Turnbull's class association. As an individual who has married into the upper-middle class from a working-class background, he accepts and rejects the class of which he has become a part. On the one hand, the protagonist describes his large house, with its former servant's quarters, in infinite detail, he warns intruders that they are on private property whenever they trespass, and, despite the fact that he considers himself a "sardonic alien" among the upper-middle class playing games at the country club, he assimilates into their ranks (172-8). On the other hand, however, Turnbull's biting criticism of the bourgeoisie saves him as a character, it makes him more humane than he lets on. We thus realize that all the blame cannot be placed on him, rather it must lie with the reign of capitalism in its social darwinist variation. As in the case of his fixation with sex, Turnbull vacillates between recognizing and giving in to his alienation. This is due in large part to the fact that his new class is tenuously holding on to power via its economic means and is under siege from the disenfranchised and the criminal capitalist class.

This explains why it is that Turnbull both embraces and criticizes the bourgeoisie. He allies himself with other members of his adopted class because they share similar values and are in comparable predicament. Turnbull recognizes as much when he reflects on his golfing companions:

Give up golf? I love those men. They alone forgive me for my warts and stiffness, my tainted breath and protruding nostril-hairs, my tremors and white-capped skin cancers. My golf companions too are descending into deterioration, and trying to put a good face on it--joking, under the striped tent the club has erected, with a cold Beck's in one hand and an oily clutch of salted peanuts in the cupped other, over their own losses and lapses, life being a mess and a scramble at the best, men put here on Earth with hungers they must satisfy or they will die, and then they die away (177).

What attracts him to members of the idle bourgeoisie is that he too shares in their values and acknowledges the decline of this class. Since for decades he benefited financially from the American boom years (the 1950s and 60s) and since he now sees it vanishing before his eyes he can afford to say cynically, "I don't much care what happens in the world. I've had my years in it..." (121). When Turnbull looks around him he perceives only societal and natural decay, the latter threatening through its evolutionary means to devour everything in sight, including the protagonist. This, in turn, develops the two extremes in his personality: he turns inward and worries only about his private affairs or he aims his arsenal at the disintegrating society around him which he helped to build. So his competitive and overzealous edge becomes part and parcel of his social darwinian (or fascist) side. "Natural selection," he tells Deirdre. "The killers survive, the killed drop out of the genetic pool. Same reason," he adds, "women are masochistic. The submissive ones get fucked and make the babies and the scrappers don't" (53-54). Updike does a wonderful job of showing how bourgeois consciousness can slip into fascist ideology; how the country club idle rich can resort to quasi- or actual fascist ideas.

Despite all his ugly acts and thoughts, Turnbull becomes even more critical of the lifestyle he led, that is, he becomes more of a "class traitor." As baby-boomer Turnbull confesses that he was

showing up on the dot at 8:35 a.m. at Sibbes, Dudley, and Wise, playing honest Iago to the blind and innocent Othello of the filthy rich, trying from the safe distance of State Street to outguess Wall Street in its skittery, dragonish gyrations--chimerical and numerical ephemera, in the backward glance (187).

Turnbull made his small fortune at the service of the capitalist class. He was

off on the train to Beantown every day, working eight, nine hours at the least, eyeball to eyeball with the other sharks. The trick was to get control of some rich widow's millions and then churn the money for the benefit of your broker friends. Or administer a nice juicy trust for point eight percent per annum. Pension funds and retirement plans--they were another boondoggle; the poor fat cats couldn't make head or tail of the quarterly statements (200).

Turnbull then symbolically represents a class which used its worse human attributes against other human beings and which lived a life of excess at the expense of the great majority. Once again he develops into an empathetic character as he criticizes and expresses regret about this way of life.

The laws of scientific evolutionary theory--not its illbegotten offspring social darwinism--form a concentric circle that delimit and impinge upon the social realm in the novel. Homo sapiens is portrayed as an extraordinarily destructive species that will also meet its end due to evolution. This is evident when Turnbull writes that "The erection for a few shaky decades of a desperately greedy ego...tramples through the microcosmic

underbrush like a blinded, lamenting giant" (190). Or when he reflects on the destructiveness of *Homo sapiens* on the earth:

I hate it when our human attempts to inflict order upon the land brings death and pain and mutilation to these innocents, whose ancestors enjoyed the earth for tens of millions of years before the naked ape appeared with his technology and enraging awareness of his own sin (249).

Indeed, throughout *Toward the End of Time* Updike's melodious prose is reserved for descriptions of nature, which is at times radiant in its beauty and at others a devouring machine. Since at this juncture in history, 2020, *Homo sapiens* has proven incapable of redeeming itself by rectifying its relationship to nature and by providing the basic necessities of life to everyone, it, like other species, may face extinction. The impressive depictions of nature underscore the fact that it will continue its evolutionary path regardless of what human beings do:

Now in the suburban streets where some kind of order is still maintained, and even in the yards of those houses which are abandoned and boarded up or else burned-out shells, the vibrant magenta of crabapple outshouts the milder pink of flowering cherry, the dusky tint of redbud, and the diffident, sideways-drifting clouds of floating dogwood petals (159).

Turnbull recognizes this as he devotes his attention to nature, especially when his wife Gloria wants to control nature on their property. A pragmatist, she urges Turnbull to at least shoot over the heads of intruding deer, asks him to cut down a crabapple tree, and encourages him to not be "sentimental" about his property and to look out for its value (161). Although she is a secondary character, Gloria is the epitome of the conservative, bourgeois woman who can concern herself only with her own material well-being. She is implicated indirectly in the destructive and wasteful lifestyle that has led the United States to its ruin. And it is significant that Turnbull imagines that in another world, produced by quantum theory, he kills her, for by doing so he is able to repossess his consciousness about the devastation of nature and society alike. Gloria tacitly approves of the decadent, cut-throat mentality that reigns in US society in 2020, a *modus vivendi* that one of the young property guards/mafiosos, describes this way: "Savages," he snorted. "Everybody carving out their little turf and pulling up the drawbridge. Bingo, and fuck you, Mac" (210).

Gloria will then be replaced after her imagined death by the deer/prostitute, symbolically called Deirdre. Turnbull fulfills his sexual (and occasionally sadomasochistic) fantasies with her as, significantly, he observes nature. As an allegory for nature Deirdre sells her labor power to the next available bidder. Turnbull buys her "services" for a semi-permanent amount of time, so that, for all intense purposes, she replaces Gloria as the woman of the household. As regards nature Deirdre is an unnatural commodity form; as regards society she is an African-American woman from a marginal background. In terms of class and values she is almost the direct antithesis of Gloria. A victim of the extreme form of capitalism which destroys nature for the benefit of the

bourgeoisie, Deirdre has lost her innocence in a dog-eat-dog world. She is the essence of our human tragedy, "the marauding deer in a ruined world" (195). In her farewell letter to Turnbull she confesses that she misses dope too much because it "takes her to another place" and makes her "feel good about herself" (138). Even more so than Turnbull she has reasons to note with dismay and anger: "The World by itself is not enough; there must be another, to give this one meaning" (300).

Updike's intricate character portrayals serve as means by which we experience dystopia in 2020, the contradictory images of class positions that cannot be reconciled during this period of the "manic logic" of capitalism--as William Greider has coined our current moment.⁶ In *Toward the End of Time* capitalism is stripped of its social democratic regalia and revealed in its brutal reality as a species of social darwinism. By intensifying our current socioeconomic reality at the end of the second millenium, Updike's science fiction provides a startling world that should shock readers, or at the very least, make them uneasy. For readers searching for solutions this approach could prove to be dissatisfying because Updike--unlike Vonnegut--does not furnish a way out of this historical labyrinth. However, he does engage in a critical realist analysis of current trends in capitalist societies and hopefully jars the reader enough to allow the latter to work toward solving the system's most egregious inequalities.

II. "While there is a lower class I am in it, while there is a criminal element I am of it; while there is a soul in prison, I am not free"--Eugene Debs

Kurt Vonnegut's latest novel, *Timequake*, also deals, like many of his novels, with a tragic future--only three years from our present date. While it too is science fiction, unlike *2001 A Space Odyssey*, Vonnegut's novel takes a much more critical look at the new millenium. The premise of *Timequake* is that the universe decided for some reason or other not to expand in 2001 and it beamed everybody back to 1991 to repeat every event of the decade once again. Once that was done, free will kicked in again. As in other novels, including *Hocus Pocus*, Vonnegut provides the reader with a rather bleak picture of humanity via sci-fi stories, diary entries and information about the ever-present character Kilgore Trout, who joins Vonnegut at a writers' retreat in 2001. While we read about civilization's attempts at suicide (World Wars I and II), the moving tragedies in Vonnegut's own life, the end of fiction and the victory of television and the inanities of the capitalist system, there is nonetheless a hopeful message that radiates from his prose. Whereas Updike satirized the disappearance of liberal government and of the social net, implying as he did so that a human face to capitalism was possible, Vonnegut assumes from the outset that capitalism is a monstrous creation of humankind that should be replaced by humanist socialism. So the reader confronts the horrors concocted by Homo sapiens in general and capitalism in particular but also radical alternatives to the status quo. This is vintage Vonnegut as regards content and form: through his black humor, sarcasm and irony the radical vanguardist Vonnegut makes us laugh, moves us to tears, and provokes us into changing the current situation.

Timequake, like most of Vonnegut's work, is a novel that refuses to be a novel. It is subdivided into chapters that loosely hold the narrative vignettes together around socio-

political issues, autobiographical themes, the stories of Kilgore Trout, and the predicament of human existence. Trout and Vonnegut (or the first person narrator who happens to sound a lot like Vonnegut) could be seen as the central characters in the novel; Trout because he is the protagonist who suffers through the timequake, and Vonnegut because he writes about his own life and his family's as well as about the act of writing. Trout sums up Vonnegut's intent and method when he remarks: "I don't write literature. Literature is all those la-di-da monkeys next door care about" (62). As even a cursory reading of Vonnegut's works would confirm, this is both true and false. His own love of literature is expressed in the literary names and works he evokes, the literary quotes, and the conviction that literature should be, following Aristotle, both didactic and pleasing. Vonnegut, like Trout, does not hold mainstream prose in high esteem and his own sci-fi novels do not meet the criteria expected of canonical works. But, as Trout puts it, by staying on the margins yet becoming a best-selling novelist Vonnegut has been able to carve his own niche and concentrate on critical social and existential matters:

If I'd wasted my time creating characters (...) I would never have gotten around to calling attention to things that really matter: irresistible forces in nature, and cruel inventions, and cockamamie ideals and governments and economies that make heroes and heroines alike feel like something the cat drug in (63).

14. This explains why it is that despite the references to his alter-ego Kilgore Trout and his unpublished stories, the autobiographical elements and acute social problems stand out in this novel more than in Vonnegut's other works. One feels the urgency of the times in his writing: we are living through a period in which we have sacrificed our free will, let our imaginations run dry and then suffered from "Post-Timequake Apathy" (99). Like Trout, Vonnegut seems to have been given Paul Revere's job to warn the populace: "You were sick, but now you're well, and there's work to do" (167). The novel's direct language and taut form then collaborate with the gravity of the content.

Even Kilgore Trout's sci-fi stories underscore the bitter ironies of this stage in human development. "No Laughing Matter", for instance, deals with the dropping of the atomic bombs on Japan at the end of World War II. After dropping atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as Vonnegut retells the history, the bomber Joy's Pride was "ordered to drop yet another one on Yokohama, on a couple of million 'little yellow bastards'" (8). The pilot begins to have reservations about the horrendous act he is about to commit and thinks his mother could never be proud of her son's dropping the bomb on a civilian population twice the size of Nagasaki and Hiroshima combined (8). But then, as Vonnegut recounts Trout's narration:

Up there in the sky all alone, with the purple motherfucker [the bomb] slung underneath their plane, they felt like the Boss God Himself, who had an option which hadn't been their before, which was to be *merciful* (9).

The pilot then turned the beast around and headed back to Banalulu, frightening the population there. This event produced an uproar of laughter in the courtroom as the pilots

faced court martial, to which the judge responded by saying that this was "no laughing matter." In the Monty Python-like ending, "a huge crack opened in the floor of the Pacific Ocean. It swallowed Banalulu, court-martial, Joy's Pride, unused bomb and all" (10). The "fictional" account here is actually a convenient way of retelling history in order to point to the extreme dehumanization of war even in the glittering package it is wrapped up in during World War II--when war becomes "showbiz"--and the more recent American escapades in, say, Panama and Iraq. This story dovetails with Vonnegut's autobiographical account of the University of Chicago's--his alma mater's--attempt to generate the first chain reaction for the bomb during World War II and his real-life story of Andrei Sakharov, the winner of the Nobel Prize and creator of the hydrogen bomb. In both cases Vonnegut shows how preposterous reality can be and thus suggests that fiction may not be so far removed from it. Vonnegut's macabre humor reinforces the absurdity of reality and obliges the reader, once the humor is past, to distance him- or herself from the historical event and examine it critically. This is the case with the Sakharov story as he talks with his wife:

Anything interesting happen at work today, Honeybunch?

Yes. My bomb is going to work just great. And how are *you* doing with that kid with chicken pox? (5)

Fiction and reality, "No Laughing Matter" and the two real-life tales, speak to the "gruesome and comical" nature of war in the twentieth century.⁷ "The Sisters B-36" links the denunciation of war with destructive aspects of (capitalist) society in general through the submission of science to technological ends and the suppression of the arts. This absurd tale of three sisters, two artistically inclined and one lost in the panacea of technology, leads to the bad sister, Nim-nim, taking charge:

When the bad sister was a young woman, she and the nuts worked up designs for television cameras and transmitters and receivers. Then she got money from her very rich mom to manufacture and market these satanic devices, which made imaginations redundant. They were instantly popular because the shows were so attractive and no thinking was involved (17-18).

Nim-nim also invented "automobiles and computers and barbed wire and flamethrowers and land mines and machine guns and so on" and new generations in Booboo "grew up without imaginations." Lacking imagination the Booboolings then became the "most merciless creatures in the local family of galaxies" (18). The rest of the short stories inserted in *Timequake* address similar issues: Trout's creation story; the "Bunker Bingo Party", which deals with the insanity of Hitler and his cohorts learning and playing bingo in a bunker as bombs fall all around them and the absurdity of Hitler's suicide; the story of the working-class Englishman Albert Hardy, who is born with his head between his legs but who goes to war and as a dead soldier becomes "normal;" "Dog's Breakfast", which focuses on Dr. Fleon Sunoco who believes all people have transmitters in their heads, which lead him to a catch-22. As a whole these stories express real doubts about the Homo sapiens in general and, like *Brave New World*, technology in particular.

Insanity and absurdity turn out to be norms in human social development in the twentieth century.

This idea, of course, is a constant in Vonnegut's other works, from *Player Piano* to *Hocus Pocus*. Vonnegut's aim is to allow the reader to compare real-life stories with fiction in order to confirm for him or herself that a slight difference separates the two and then to move the reader to act. He achieves this by using an economized language that reaches a broad public, short and concise anecdotes, themes that get to the heart of social inequalities and human destructiveness, and humor. However, given what we covered of *Timequake*, one could argue that like Updike's novel, Vonnegut's may only make readers resign themselves to a catastrophic present and future. But Vonnegut steers the reader away from that type of a conclusion, no matter how bleak things may look. In *Timequake*, perhaps more so than in his previous novels, the whole premise of the novel militates against cynical resignation: we have been living as though we did not have free will and then suffered from Post Timequake Apathy. Trout's clarion call, though not always heeded, is: "You were sick, but now you're well and there's work to do" (167). Moreover, the autobiographical anecdotes, Vonnegut's democratic humor, and his commitment to socialism permeate this novel and make it a very compelling call to change the world.

Timequake alternates Trout's stories with Vonnegut's story about Trout with Vonnegut's memoir-like observations and anecdotes. The former two tend to highlight the absurdity of human existence given how destructive Homo sapiens has been, while the latter addresses pressing socio-political matters (Vonnegut's own tragic family history, the effects of World War II on the author, the declining importance of art in the US, the US war machine, the author's pitch for extended families, labor strikes, class conflict, the lost art of conversation and the loss of history.) Perhaps the most salient issue in this novel, in contrast with his previous work, is the autobiographical material. Not only are more pages dedicated to his family and his personal life than in his other novels--his older brother Bernie dies of cancer as he is writing *Timequake* and Vonnegut himself was 74 years old when the novel was published--but also much is revealed about how Vonnegut has overcome personal tragedy. These painful events are intensified by the pleasure we as readers get from Vonnegut's humor: the more endearing he becomes via his jokes about the world and himself, the more empathy we feel as he recounts his family's serious misfortune. And Vonnegut and his family endured more than their share of grave adversities. His mother committed suicide when Vonnegut was 22 years old and was serving in World War II; he was a POW in Dresden (the basis for *Slaughterhouse Five*); his father died when he was 35 years old; his sister Alice died of cancer the day after her husband was killed in a train accident in 1958; after 26 years of marriage to Jane Marie Cox they separated in 1971; he suffered for years from depression and alcoholism; and his older brother Bernie died of cancer in 1997. But these events were balanced by positive developments in his life which allowed him to become the novelist, humorist and social commentator that he is.

In spite of this, Vonnegut's zany humor fills the pages of this novel, especially moments in which he is poking fun at himself. This is the element of his writing that draws readers in: he makes fun of the capitalist system, the destructiveness of human

kind, and those who live in excess and so on, but he does not poke fun at the great majority people. Vonnegut uses direct language, paradox, irony, sarcasm and humor, like his adopted mentor Mark Twain, as arms against the status quo, as a means of creating solidarity with the great majority of readers. As he stated it in an interview in 1982:

One thing that I've just instinctively worked on, and one thing I've instinctively avoided as comforting the reader about his class or his education or whatever, is using jokes that only those that have been to Harvard would truly appreciate.⁸

Humor in Vonnegut's case too is the great equalizer and creator of solidarity. In *Timequake* Vonnegut remarks that when he got home from World War II his uncle Dan slapped him on the back and bellowed, "You're a *man* now!," Vonnegut quips that he "damn near killed [his] first German" (70). In this case he combines political criticism with self-criticism (of his family member and of himself). A clearer example of this comparison between social criticism and self-criticism can be appreciated in Chapter 26:

I myself say atomic energy has made people unhappier than they were before, and that having to live in a two-hemisphere planet has made our aborigines a lot less happy, without making the wheel-and-alphabet people who "discovered" them any fonder of being alive than they were before.

Then again, I am a monopolar depressive descended from monopolar depressives. That's how come I write so good (89).

In the section on his "hero" George Bernard Shaw, Vonnegut sums up the political nature of his humor: "I would have recognized the opportunity for a world-class joke, but would never allow myself to be funny at the cost of making somebody else feel like something the cat drug in" (121). While Vonnegut's black humor attacks the absurdities of the capitalist system, the ecological disasters, the catastrophic nature of war, social inequalities and so on, it criticizes institutions, structures and socially-held values, rather than individuals. Moreover, as a formal and thematic feature in his novels self-ridicule is a reflection of his personal demeanor *and* his political position. As he makes fun of himself--and uses accessible language to do so--Vonnegut places himself on our level and so endears himself to us, assuming we are willing to accept his satire of humanity in general and capitalism in particular. Humorous criticism and self-criticism become necessary tools for upholding his socialist-humanist political stance.

Vonnegut contrasts humorous accounts or jokes with serious political observations in his work, and *Timequake* is no exception. However, in this novel there are more explicit political statements that make it clear that Vonnegut aligns himself with the democratic socialist tradition. The bulk of these commentaries come in the last half of *Timequake*, where he offers criticism of the insanity of the capitalist system, and, afterwards suggests a solution:

So we have in this summer of 1996, rerun or not, and as always, faithless custodians of capital making themselves multimillionaires and

multibillionaires, while playing beanbag with money better spent on creating meaningful jobs and training people to fill them, and raising our young and retiring our old in surroundings of respect and safety (163).

He continues with a socialist solution to class division and the enrichment of the capitalists at the expense of the working class: "Why throw money at problems? That is what money is *for*. Should the nation's wealth be redistributed? It has been and continues to be redistributed to a few people in a manner strikingly unhelpful" (163-64). However, it is in the following chapter (50), that he addresses the issue of socialism and communism more fully. A word, as Vonnegut puts it, that is "just as full of poison [as "fuck"], supposedly, but which could be spoken in polite company, provided the speaker's tone implied fear and loathing, was *Communism*, denoting an activity as commonly and innocently practiced in many primitive societies as fucking" (165). He then responds to the mantras about the death of communism while at the same time recognizing the errors made in the name of socialism:

I of course understand that the widespread revulsion inspired even now, and perhaps forever, by the word *Communism* is a sane response to the cruelties and stupidities of the dictators of the USSR, who called themselves, hey presto, *Communists*, just as Hitler called himself, hey presto, a *Christian*.

To children of the Great Depression, however, it still seems a mild shame to outlaw from polite thought, because of the crimes of tyrants, a word that in the beginning described for us nothing more than a possibly reasonable alternative to the Wall Street crapshoot (166).

And Vonnegut sums up his position in a poetic allusion:

Yes, and the word *Socialist* was the second *S* in *USSR*, so good-bye, *Socialism* along with *Communism*, good-bye to the soul of Eugene Debs of Terre Haute, Indiana, where the moonlight's shining bright along the Wabash. From the fields here comes the breath of new-mown hay. "While there is a soul in prison, I am not free" (166).

The reader is invited to conclude, now that the timequake is over and apathy does not burden him, socialism and communism as we knew them will not be back, but a more egalitarian system, a re-thought version of socialism ("new-mown hay") will be at work. After offering an alternative to the reader, Vonnegut then places the results of apathy before the readers eyes. At the end of Chapter 54, following the trail of Kilgore Trout we discover that martial law has been established in New York City, the former Museum of the American Indian has been converted into military barracks, and the American Academy of Arts and Letters, after having been a morgue becomes an officer's club. Finally, Trout finds Zoltan's smashed, flattened and elongated wheelchair and says it is a "six-foot aluminum-and-leather praying mantis, trying to ride a unicycle" and he titles it: "*The Spirit of the Twentieth Century*" (181). So it is that readers are confronted with what could happen or may likely happen if, as in *Toward the End of Time*, capitalism continues

to stay the course. But Vonnegut does not let things end there. In the Lincoln government he finds a parallel to our current moment. Unless we overcome our apathy and lack of imagination socialism, like democracy, may perish Vonnegut seems to suggest in quoting Lincoln's famous phrase: "We gained democracy, and now there is the question of whether it is fit to survive." And perhaps more significantly:

That is a comforting thought in time of affliction--'And this too shall pass away.' And yet--let us believe that it is not true! Let us live to prove that we can cultivate the natural world that is about us, and the intellectual and moral world that is within us, so that we may secure an individual, social and political prosperity, whose course shall be forward, and which, while the earth endures, shall not pass away...(202).

Notes

- [1](#) John Irving, "Kurt Vonnegut and His Critics: The Aesthetics of Accessibility", in Leonard Mustazza ed., *The Critical Response to Kurt Vonnegut* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994): 217.
- [2](#) See Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914-1991* (New York: Pantheon, 1994): 257-86.
- [3](#) Michiko Kakutani, "On Sex, Death and the Self: An Old Man's Sour Grapes", *New York Times Book Review on the Web* (September 30, 1997).
- [4](#) Granville Hicks, "A Little Good in Evil", in William R. Macnaughton ed., *Critical Essays on John Updike* (Boston: G.K. Hall and Co., 1982): 42-44.
- [5](#) Alvin A. Sanoff, "Writers 'Are Really Servants of Reality'", in James Plath ed., *Conversations With John Updike* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1994): 184.
- [6](#) Greider's *One World Ready or Not: The Manic Logic of Global Capitalism* (New York: Touchstone, 1997) provides a very interesting analysis of the current moment in capitalist development, although he offers a liberal solution to the vast problems.
- [7](#) David Standish, "Playboy Interview", in William Rodney Allen ed., *Conversations with Kurt Vonnegut* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1988): 91.
- [8](#) Peter J. Reed, "A Conversation with Kurt Vonnegut", in Peter J. Reed and Marc Leeds eds., *The Vonnegut Chronicles: Interviews and Essays* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996): 8.