

# Stirrings Still

*The International Journal of Existential Literature*  
**Fall/Winter 2007 Volume 4 Number 1**

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*Stirrings Still* (ISSN: 1551-0433) is published annually by the English Department of Binghamton University. Subscription rates are \$15.00 for individuals, and \$45.00 for institutions. Subscribers outside the United States must include \$10.00 for postage. All payments must be made in U.S. Dollars, by international money order, or by a check made out to "Stirrings Still" drawn on a U.S. bank.

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*Stirrings Still* is indexed by the Modern Language Association International Bibliography.

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# Gothic 'Un-representations' of Terror in Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-5*

Maria Beville

With the aim of analysing *Slaughterhouse 5* as a work that explores the possibilities of presenting the unrepresentable, this essay approaches the novel as a Gothic-postmodernist text. The philosophical nature of Vonnegut's work is generally appreciated in relation to his use of the fantastic and his writing is often referred to under the category 'science fiction'. However, this essay will constitute a reading of the same as linked intrinsically to the evident Gothic preoccupations of the author; Gothic atmosphere; terror; the sublime; and most significantly, an awareness of artistic obligations to the unrepresentable. By the term 'unrepresentable' I refer to that as outlined in the postmodernist theories of Jean Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard and Slavoj Žižek as it manifests itself in literary form, and also on a more general level, as the sublime experience approached by earlier critical thinkers including Immanuel Kant, Edmund Burke and Anne Radcliffe. To give a brief outline: the unrepresentable is that sublime event, so important to Romanticism, Gothicism and postmodernism, which, when encountered by the subject and due to its extra-linguistic nature, effects the interruption of subjective action, causing a split between rationality and imagination (Lyotard 1991, 210). The sublime condition according to Lyotard, whose theory is based on Kantian philosophy, is one that results in simultaneous feelings of exultation and terror. Feelings of terror, according to Kant, result from the loss of 'time moving' and 'exultation' from the comprehension of the 'finite'. The feelings are the consequence of a conflict of reason

as it comprehends the sublime, and imagination as it fails to 're-present it' (Kant 2001, 24-26). Significantly, the terror is effectively twofold as an emotion inherent to the experience but also evoked by the failure of communication. The perspective of this essay will thus also focus on the philosophical potential of terror in Vonnegut's novel. Terror is the heart of Gothic literature so much so that David Punter calls it 'the literature of terror'. Similarly, it has a function in postmodernist art and theory as the evasive key to unlocking our postmodern hyperrealities; our desire for the return of terror being close to our desire for the collapse of the capitalist and realist enterprises, and also to our need for encounters with the sublimely liminal state that is heterogeneity evoked by unrepresentability. In this sense, the philosophical role of terror in *Slaughterhouse 5* may be regarded as the point of intersection of the Gothic and postmodernism in the text. From this point this essay will analyse Vonnegut's distinctly Gothic-postmodernist approach to terror and the unrepresentable which he undertakes via Gothic un-representation, presenting the lack of communicability of the experience.

Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse 5* deals both subtly and satirically but also aesthetically with the concept of terror as it affects the individual and as it may be regenerated in fiction, displaying an acute awareness of the encounter with the sublime unrepresentable that is inherent to 'terrifying' events. This essay will suggest that his allusion to the terrible through a Gothic kaleidoscope of narrative effects is an allusion to the unrepresentable, whereby it is represented as a lack, or 'un-representation'; a silence in literature that intimates an unconscious acceptance of ultimate otherness as intrinsic to human experience, what Lacan and Baudrillard might refer to as 'the real'. Though it is of course impossible to present what is

by nature unrepresentable, Lyotard states that postmodernist art has an obligation to the unrepresentable, whereby it must invent allusions to the conceivable that cannot be presented and celebrate the effects of sublime heterogeneity evoked by unrepresentability so valuable to our postmodern condition (Lyotard 1986, 79). Edvard Munch's painting, *The Scream*, achieves a firm response to this demand of Lyotard's and subsequently, is, according to David Morris in his essay on the Gothic sublime, expressive of 'the original and recurrent language of terror' (Morris 1985, 313): the unimaginable which can only be comprehended by the subject on an abstract linguistic and certainly non-verbal, level. One might consider the implications of Samuel Beckett's insistence on the impossibility, but necessity of expression as situated on the other side of the coin of presenting the unrepresentable. Beckett's dark and haunting expressions, his murmurings, repetitions and unnamables are in a work like *The Scream*, inverted, and celebrated for their sublime, unrepresentable nature. Expressionism becomes, effectively, a sort of 'un-representation' in which silence mimics the liminal experience of the sublime to the point of recreating the terror of the encounter with the unrepresentable on a conceptual, extra-linguistic level.

According to Morris, the Gothic, due to its concern with the sublime aspects of terror, whatever the historical and social context 'remains edgy, uncomfortable, disquieting (Morris 1985, 313). From this angle, Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse 5* can be regarded as a discerning example of the Gothic operating in a similar way. In Vonnegut's case however, unspeakable anxieties and terrors are presented to the reader through a biting and satirical effort in defamiliarisation that operates effectively as un-representation. While many authors approach fear and shock by trying, for example like Matthew Lewis, to bru-

tally present us with gross detail, Vonnegut, resembling some distinctive postmodernist writers such as Martin Amis, manages to suggest, by creating a unique perspective with its own unique language, the unknowable and terrifying realities of the events of the second World War, both on a personal and philosophical level. Inspiring use of silent images, contrasting sounds and narrative reversal in *Slaughterhouse 5* evince an image of a talented and deeply philosophical writer behind the text and display a personal knowledge of the multiple levels of fear which endow the work with profound expression.

By defining *Slaughterhouse 5* as a Gothic-postmodernist work, this essay observes that Vonnegut's deliberation on heterogeneity echoes the demands of the Gothic and postmodernism, predominantly in relation to terror, and offers a postmodernist depiction of perspectivism in order to consider the Gothic terrors of mortality. Subsequently, Vonnegut also achieves a recreation of the sublime space that exists between presentable and unrepresentable and by doing so attends to what is both a Gothic and postmodernist motivation via both Gothic and postmodernist techniques. It may be stated that in *Slaughterhouse 5*, Vonnegut's narrative style functions as an important example of Gothic-postmodernism to relate and explore the terrors of the unrepresentable. His appropriation of this is comparable to the theories of Baudrillard, Lyotard and Zizek and demonstrates that through postmodernism, the Gothic maintains its position as a powerful literary form to subvert the dominant limits of the confining discourses of realism.

Interestingly, Vonnegut maintains an unfamiliar terror throughout the work via the exceptional perspective of Billy Pilgrim: the man who came unstuck in time and who was ab-

ducted from Earth in 1967, (by aliens who, incidentally, look like upside-down toilet plungers) and taken to the planet Trafalmadore. Here, he was enlightened to reality outside of time and the structures of human community. By intimating terror through the suggestive and uncanny perspective of Billy, the unimaginable reality of the firebombing of Dresden and the terror of the experience of war on the individual is subtly exposed. In many ways this allows Trafalmadore to be interpreted as something of a haunting reflection of Dresden, the cityscape which, when encountered by Billy Pilgrim after the bombing, defies any attempt at realisation, rationalisation and morality. As a response, almost, Billy's escape to Trafalmadore and his adoption of the Trafalmadorian philosophy of existence is the first abstract and non-verbal response in the novel to the terror of his experience, that sublime terror which is ultimately a reaction to an encounter with the unfathomable and unrepresentable atrocity of genocide. In many respects, Billy's situation consequently becomes one that is characterised by spectrality. In terms of Jacques Derrida's hauntology<sup>1</sup>, he may be regarded as existing in that situation in which 'time is out of joint' (Derrida 1994, 5). Similarly, what Derrida refers to as 'the power of the ghost effect' (Derrida 1994, 2) can be applied to Billy's ability to time travel and to exist simultaneously in the past and future, escaping, yet being drawn back towards the experiences which terrify him. Significantly, as a character Billy manifests his own hauntological spectre in the sense that he existed as his own ghost before his first apparition (Derrida

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<sup>1</sup> Derrida's theory of hauntology, which is effectively a critique of ontology, is fundamentally concerned with history yet it is suggestively applicable to literature. According to Derrida we should embrace the spectres that haunt us as an intrinsic part of our present ontological situation, thus destabilising the structural ideologies that maintain their otherness, accepting them as *both self and other*.

1994, 11) and he hovers undecidably, hesitantly, across the dimensions of time and reality throughout the novel.

Like a scream, Billy's imaginative response to the terrifying situation, by its denial, amplifies the terror of the event. Importantly, the novel is dealing with Vonnegut's own personal experience of one of the most horrific and unjustifiable massacres in modern European history; the genocide of 130,000 people by burning and asphyxiation and the destruction of a sublimely beautiful and Gothic city. In the preface-like first chapter, Vonnegut says that for over twenty years he tried to write about his experience of leaving the airtight Slaughterhouse in Dresden, where he was detained as a prisoner of war to find a moonscape, littered with incinerated bodies, 'seeming little logs lying around' (Vonnegut 2000, 130), upon whom fire was streaming from the sky. He felt that he failed because he was himself unable to describe; to recreate in language the true terror of the experience. In regarding his early attempts at the novel as a failure, he acknowledges in some respect that the concern with the failure of representation which characterises his Gothic-postmodernist mode of writing extends to the real world outside of the novel, making *Slaughterhouse 5* readable as quite an intense manifestation of both personal and social terror.

Fascinatingly, and with implications for the concept of terror in literature, Vonnegut eventually found a way to 'speak' the unspeakable when he approached the events from a Trafaladorian perspective, from the absurd idealism of the fourth dimension where everything is upside down and inside out in terms of the reality of time and space. Arguably, it is this articulation that makes the novel a part of the group of fictions that may be considered Gothic-postmodernism. While the



work incorporates elements of many different 'genres', its heterogeneity forms something of a dominant inclination toward the tenets of the Gothic and the postmodernist text, most strikingly, to their terrors. 'Fantasy' (the classification which this novel has most commonly been ascribed) is part of both the Gothic and postmodernism. With this in mind the novel's preoccupation with the Gothic/ postmodernist ideal of attempting to present the unrepresentable becomes all the more apparent. In a typically Gothic and postmodernist manner, it works on the distortion and perversion of realities that can only be considered as sublime instances of terror and subsequently offers allusions to that conceivable which evades imagination.

Beckett's theatre of the absurd and the twisted perspectives shaped in his prose works illustrate something of this recurrent Gothic-postmodernist concern. Vonnegut's handling of it however, remains unique and memorable for its poetic postmodernist rendering of perspectivism. To Billy Pilgrim, the Trafalmadorians comment on their incomprehension of the 'incredible artificial weather' that Earthlings create when they don't want other Earthlings to live someplace'; on the 'showers of shells' (Vonnegut 2000, 77) that they pour upon their fellow human beings. Their perspective is one of curiosity and innocence toward the nature of human cruelty and this presents the events of the novel as all the more intolerable. Thus, it would seem that Vonnegut's ability to recreate momentous terror is based on the temporary acceptance of the Trafalmadorian perspective and of their theory of life and time, in which 'there is no why. This moment [like every other] simply is' (Vonnegut 2000, 55). Moments are 'blobs of amber' (Vonnegut 2000, 61). They are preserved forever in the fourth dimension, which unfortunately those on Earth refuse to see.

‘All moments, past, present, and future, always have existed, always will exist’ (Vonnegut 2000, 19). For this reason, their philosophy may be regarded as extremely fatalistic: ‘[o]nly on Earth is there talk of free will.’ Humans are ‘the great explainers’ (Vonnegut 2000, 62). Trafalmadorians live in peace because they know and accept that the Universe will end and that that moment cannot ever be changed: ‘the moment is structured that way’ (Vonnegut 2000, 84). Pertaining to death, Trafalmadorians maintain that it is just another blob of amber; that although someone may be dead, they are still alive in all the other moments they have lived, which are real simultaneously and can be seen all at once.

It is interesting that generally in the Gothic ‘death is an enveloping presence...it is not conceived in linear relation to life, as the terminus of a long or short journey’. It interrupts, shocks, pervades, returns (Morris 1985, 308); and death ‘is sublime because it remains a terrifying mystery, not simply unknowable but linked with human desires that we wish to keep unknown’ (Morris 1985, 309). In *Slaughterhouse 5*, death, in its transcendence of time, is certainly an enveloping presence, despite what it is reduced to in Trafalmadorian philosophy. We are told directly in the text that ‘[t]he Author of this book’ is ‘not overjoyed’ (Vonnegut 2000, 154) at the Trafalmadorian concept of death and eternal life, and their refusal to question why moments happen, but in his allusion to it throughout the text as a source of terror it becomes a haunting presence, distinctive for its sublime incommunicability. Bearing in mind that the Gothic, from its earliest moments ‘drew attention to new aspects of reality, and offered a fuller vision of life’ (Varma 1957, 209), and that it functioned to express a unique Gothic sublimity based on terror, Vonnegut’s novel may be seen as a definitively Gothic-postmodernist text offer-

ing a postmodernist rendering of perspectives to present the dominating terrors of mortality.

Fred Botting notes that the spatial and temporal separation of past and present is a key feature of the Gothic novel (Botting, 1996, 4). Usually, this involves the return of the past to haunt the present and in this novel one could argue that this is still the case and that ontology effectively becomes a post-structuralist hauntology. The terrible happenings of the war and their impact on Billy Pilgrim are presented outside of time, and from a liminal, still terrified perspective, but remain haunting to him whether he exists in a past, present or future moment. A striking example of this is when the older Billy is reminded by a song played at The Lion's Club, of four German guards he once saw in Dresden, who like Billy were 'destined' to survive the bombing. On witnessing the apocalyptic scene, the four men drew together with open mouths resembling 'a silent film of a barber shop quartet' (Vonnegut 2000, 130). This haunting, and silent image has the effect of stirring his memory and emotion and spurring him on to escape in another trip through time. In relation to this study, the significance of their effect on Billy is certainly in their silence. Evoking the image of *The Scream*, we can imagine as readers, those four terrified faces, on confronting the unimaginable: their devastated city strewn with the mutilated corpses of people they knew and even loved. The overwhelming power of terror, with its expansive effects on the imagination is here represented. The image of open-mouthed silence clearly has significant potential in terms of constructing some concept of an encounter with the unrepresentable. By un-representing it, in other words, by presenting the human, silent, awful but terrified response to it without direct reference, the intensity of the

unrepresentable may be characterised and is effectively presented as a presence in absence, an un-representation.

In a similar way, with a focus on non-verbal reactions to the unrepresentable, many terrifying events are presented and the narrative effectively becomes a tempest of swirling instants which flip time on its head and present death, terror, and loss of reality as the recurring themes that haunt Billy's life through his internal deterioration. Devendra Varma, who has been criticised for his religious appropriation of the Gothic, claims that the significance of the Gothic is that it 'grasps the infinite and the finite, the abstract and the concrete, the whole and the nothingness, as one, and from the tension (between human and divine) is kindled the votive glow that ever contemplates the world of Gothic mystery' (Varma 1957, 16). The world of Gothic mystery is the dark underside of existence; its atmosphere is gloomy and sinister, thrilled by suspense. Its ideology revolves around the binaries of good and evil, natural and supernatural, and its principle emotion is terror. War, in this sense, may be seen as intimately related to this reality, and so is the ideal Gothic-postmodernist setting. In Vonnegut's handling of the issue, the significance is one shared by Gothic fictions as he manages to present that liminality between the presentable and unrepresentable, the sublime union of the abstract and concrete, and to manipulate the dynamism of that space to contemplate the true powers of terror.

Against the backdrop of the horror of war, the 'pillar of salt' who allegedly wrote this novel (Vonnegut 2000, 16), in other words the frame narrator/ 'author', introduces the central theme of the novel as immortality, the principal motif as death and the central image as the ghost. In doing so he presents mortal terror as central to the novel in what seems a

consideration of Freud's insistence that death is unimaginable. According to Freud it is impossible to conceive one's own death in the unconscious. It must always be witnessed as a spectator (Piven 2004, 37). In *Slaughterhouse 5* Vonnegut performs a 'duty dance with death' and imagines the unimaginable, which can only be achieved from a defamiliarised perspective that is absurd and terrifying, so much so that Billy commits himself to a mental asylum because 'he is too alarmed by the outside world' (Vonnegut 2000, 72). Significantly, the narrator too assumes Billy's way of thinking to the point where it would seem that Billy is his impressionistic double, a positive *doppelgänger* to take on the burden of his fears. He also takes on Billy's rituals and habits, such as saying 'So it goes' after each mention of death or dying in the story. Unexpectedly, this fatalistic and dismissive phrase does not take away from the serious nature of war or death. Instead, it grants a sort of peaceful and universal dignity, a solemnity to all death, whether it be human, animal or material. Arguably, the repetition of the phrase, which is also an unrepresentation, by Billy and our narrator/ author also makes it strikingly clear that death is everywhere: an enveloping presence. 'So it goes' is uttered, almost whispered, one hundred times or more in the novel, from the mention of Jesus' crucifixion to champagne bubbles popping and disappearing in a glass. This ritual maxim, based on the belief in the potential for immortality in the fourth dimension, functions as a method of coping for our protagonist to the same extent that it is an impressionistic method of representing the terror of death for the narrator/ 'author'.

On another level the narrator also seems to believe that Billy is an epistemological authority: having travelled through time and space and seen the fourth dimension he knows every-

thing and is a would-be prophet for our time. Having experienced impossibly, his own death, much like a reborn messiah figure, Billy knows that it is 'violet light', just as pre-birth is 'a red light and bubbling sounds' (Vonnegut 2000, 31). We are also informed, when the narrator describes '[t]he dead bum still frozen outside the camp' that '[i]t's not so bad being dead' (Vonnegut 2000, 88). Billy would know. From this perspective Billy himself can again be regarded as a ghostly character. He is effectively the undead; immortal; *nosferatu*, having transcended death and time. Vonnegut has long been recognisable artistically for his suggestiveness and subtle allusions. Notably, he frequently uses the technique of planting images or sounds and reiterating them symbolically in the narrative, such as the bird who sings 'poo-tee-weet' as the sole voice in the silence that followed the massacre at Dresden, emphasising the unspeakable, and sublimely unrepresentable nature of the atrocity, and who pops up occasionally to remind us that 'there is nothing intelligent to say' about war. As just one example of this, when Billy awakens in his prison hospital bed, wearing a coat 'with a fur collar resembling a bat' (Vonnegut 2000, 99), we may take it as a subtle reference to the Vampiric nature of his existence in the fourth dimension, likened as it also happens to Christ's resurrected existence, which is invoked numerous times throughout the novel. When Billy meets the author Kilgore Trout and is told 'you looked like you realised you were standing on thin air' (Vonnegut 2000, 128), this theme of the immortal dead returned to life continues. And it runs throughout the novel, as '[h]e remembered shimmeringly' the experience of Dresden but didn't travel in time to the moment (Vonnegut 2000, 129).

Suggestiveness in relation to the notion of spectrality also extends to other people in the story, reproduced by the

same techniques. When Billy skips back to a moment when he visited the Grand Canyon with his parents as a young boy, in the cavern 'something ghostly floated in the air' (Vonnegut 2000, 65). It turns out, however, to be the suspense-killing radium dial of his father's watch. At this point the reference would seem irrelevant, that is, until Billy encounters, in the following pages 'starving Russians with faces like radium dials' (Vonnegut 2000, 66). However, all of these inclusions of spectrality lack the eerie, terrifying spirit of the most startling of ghosts in the novel, the victims of the war. In a typically Gothic manner, Vonnegut disturbs the reader with an ethereal and uncanny account of the unnatural presence of Jews and others killed and mutilated during Hitler's regime of extermination. At one point in the novel, we are told that the soldiers in Dresden were given some essential items: candles and soap; items which 'had a ghostly similarity' (Vonnegut 2000, 69). The true terror is revealed for those readers still in suspense, that these items were 'German made', 'from the fat of rendered Jews and gypsies and fairies and communists and other enemies of the State. So it goes.' (Vonnegut 2000, 69). Terror of the unrepresentable becomes presentable horror when we realise the brutal, repulsively unimaginable reality of human processing that defined the holocaust. The horror returns to terror once again however, when the room Billy enters is 'illuminated by candlelight' (Vonnegut 2000, 69). The sinister glow of the candles sends chills down the spine on a par with any original Gothic tale. It is an illustration, and an indirect representation on the most uncanny of levels of the Gothic sublime and the terror of the unimaginable. Morris, writing on the sublime terror of the Gothic novel, asserts that '[w]e might describe Gothic sublimity as drawing its deepest terrors from the return of the repressed' (Morris 1985, 307). In this case, Vonnegut is courageously suggesting that it is the return of a horrifying reality

that humanity is unwilling to recognise, that we all too readily push to the back of our minds so that we can eat dinner in comfort, and sleep easily and guilt free at night.

In a way, *Slaughterhouse 5* may be seen as moralistic in its implication that we all on some level adopt the fatalism of Tralfamadorian philosophy and accept that 'there is no why' to the terrible and terrifying cruelty behind man's inhumanity to man. Published in the United States, in the middle of the Vietnam War, the novel reflects the changing perspectives that lay behind the turbulent social revolutions of the day. But it also marks a profound commentary on the American 'crusade' in South Vietnam and the dubious tactics used which led to the deaths of thousands of innocent civilians. The unimaginable terror behind Billy's experiences can seemingly only be alluded to on the surface as a conceived play of absurdity and this tends on the one hand to downplay terror and death, by making it seem mundane and sometimes ridiculous. On other occasions however, it can do quite the opposite, for example: Vonnegut's inclusion of the personal traumatic event of the death of Billy's wife, Valencia, as a result of accidental carbon monoxide poisoning. From his defamiliarised perspective, her corpse was beautiful: 'she was heavenly azure' (Vonnegut 2000, 134). Similarly, the smell of a rotting corpse during the war is comparable to 'mustard gas and roses'<sup>2</sup>. This is a very significant evaluation of death in terms of the novel being regarded as Gothic-postmodernist text. Recalling Varma's comment that the difference between terror and horror in the Gothic is comparable to the difference between the smell of death and stumbling against a corpse, it could be argued that

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<sup>2</sup> This is included on numerous occasions in the novel also on one occasion to describe the smell of a drunk's breath. It functions in much the same way as the bird that 'goes poo-tee-weet'.



Vonnegut is inter-mingling both experiences of fear and creating a sort of 'third space' for fearful existence; a recreation of the liminality inherent in the experience of being terrified in which one is both afraid and fascinated, trapped in an eternal present dominated by the unimaginable sublime. By doing this he presents a Gothic and postmodernist concern via both Gothic and postmodernist techniques, the 'third space' functioning as a distinctly Gothic-postmodernist narrative site haunted by the terrors of unrepresentability.

Varma acknowledges in the same analysis that in Gothic fiction, 'terror when sufficiently violent embodied horror' (Varma 1957, 130). While the power of terror is subtly stronger and longer lasting, like a curious aroma, horror is in the instant of apprehension of the cause of terror, in Burke's own words: death (Burke 1998, 86), and Vonnegut's appropriation of this concept in his representation of such an experience is deeply insightful and rather poetic. In relation to this, it is in the process of narrative reversal that Vonnegut excels, possibly inspiring Amis' technique later used in *Time's Arrow/ The Nature of the Offence*. At one point in the novel, Billy sees a war movie backwards (Vonnegut 2000, 53). In this liminal context, war is 'peace and help'. Billy is a witness to '[t]he American fliers [who] turned in their uniforms and became high school kids' and extrapolates that then Hitler and in fact everybody 'turned into a baby and all humanity without exception, conspired biologically to produce two perfect people named Adam and Eve, he supposed' (Vonnegut 2000, 54). The irony in this is quite brutal but it denotes an unimaginable situation in, most likely, the only conceivable terms available. What is significant is that the terror in this is not lost. It quite possibly lingers for that little while longer as we decode the un-representation. Similarly, at one point in the text we are

told that for Billy and others, in ‘trying to re-invent themselves and the universe, science fiction was a great help’ (Vonnegut 2000, 73). And so, Dresden after the burning ‘was like the moon’ (Vonnegut 2000, 29). The rest of the world might as well be invaded by aliens, and the mental asylum appropriately becomes an experimental spacecraft. But this is nothing compared to the so-called ‘real world’. On Earth ‘[t]here was so much to see – dragon’s teeth, killing machines, corpses with bare feet that were blue and ivory. So it goes’ (Vonnegut 2000, 47). Billy goes even so far to conclude that ‘Earthlings must be the terrors of the Universe’ (Vonnegut 2000, 84).

However, according to Kilgore Trout, the novelist and idol of Billy, ‘there really were vampires and werewolves and goblins and angels and so on, but they were in the Fourth Dimension’, in line with Blake’s theories in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (Vonnegut 2000, 75); existing there supposedly, as abject projections of those terrifying aspects of our being, not allocated reality in our linear narratives of time. According to Jonathan Lake-Crane, Monsters and aliens often offer us ‘an inverted portrait of ourselves’ (Lake Crane 1994, 73); us ‘humans’: equally grotesque creatures, who produce ‘shit and piss and language’ (Vonnegut 2000, 51) as this novel demonstrates. Like Blake’s *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, the Gothic novel has been described by Botting as ‘an inscription neither of darkness nor of light, a delineation neither of reason and morality, nor of superstition and corruption, neither of good nor evil, but of both at the same time’ (Botting 1996, 9). In this sense this novel is not just a deconstructive satire of the viciousness of humanity and the evil of war, but of innocence and fragility and subjection to ‘a terrifying and unknowable mystery’: death.

J.M.S. Tompkins in his introduction to Varma's study, notes that 'the Gothic flame was often carried in a safety lamp' (Varma 1957, xiv). This corresponds to Stephen King's more modern theory that 'the fear face of our imagination' is often, having outgrown childhood, kept in a similar cage (King 2000, 143). In Vonnegut's novel, his postmodernist narrative seems the likely cage for the Gothic apprehension of the terror of war, genocide and mental illness; a special kind of cage to contain the un-representation of that 'paradox of an object which, in the very field of representation, provides a view, in a negative way of the dimension of what is unrepresentable'; that which may allow us to 'experience the impossibility of the thing' (Žižek 1998, 203). Here Žižek is appropriating Lacan's definition of the sublime object as 'an object raised to the level of the (impossible real) Thing' (Žižek 1998, 203). In relation to this sublime object, and its primary response: terror, Donald B. Doe claims that all features of the Gothic 'function in a manner analogous to terror and suggest pain and terror... [while] the plot suggests instances of the terrible' (Doe 1977, 167). This of course does not lead us to a reversed logic whereby it would be possible to say that all novels that function in a manner analogous to terror are Gothic, but it does outline what we should be looking for in a Gothic text. In Vonnegut's novel, we encounter not just a Gothic depiction of the sublime terror of death in his theory of immortality; we also receive a Gothic appropriation of something akin to Baudrillard's ideas on immortality, in a specifically postmodern context. In Baudrillard's words:

We long ago stopped believing in the immortality of the soul, a deferred immortality. We no longer believe in that immortality which assumed a transcending of the end, an intense investment in the finalities of the

beyond and a symbolic elaboration of death. What we want is the immediate realisation of immortality by all possible means. (Baudrillard 1994, 89-90)

In its postmodernist preoccupation with terror and the effects of the Gothic sublime, *Slaughterhouse 5* might be considered as a Gothic-postmodernist re-imagining of immortality in the vein of Baudrillard's theories. Immortality for Billy is realisable in the fourth dimension and he suggests that it is realisable for us all. But immortality in the Gothic novel is not all that satisfying, as Count Dracula and Melmoth the Wanderer would wish us to know. Often it is the potential to transcend the mortal coil of life and not the transcendence of mortality in death that is the key object of desire propelling the fantasy elements of Gothic fictions. Though death is that 'king of terrors', it is desirable as its terrors are defined not just by fear but also by longing. From a deconstructionist perspective, life may be considered as an equalled paradox, its terrors to be evaded and yearned for simultaneously and it is in this 'undecidability' that sublimity lies - and the unrepresentable and unimaginable nature of the concept - the end, remains, as evident in *Slaughterhouse 5*, a source of inspiration for the Gothic.

Vonnegut's novel explores the potential of art in alluding to the unrepresentable and proves that there are many creative ways of expressing or evoking that sublime concept which so evades our linguistic construction of self and reality. Vonnegut effectively offers his readers a mode of subliminal communication, an un-representation which haunts his reflexive novel to remind us of a fragmented and long lost sense of 'the real'. This can be interpreted as a possible response to the postmodern subconscious desire for a return of terror. Lyotard

was one of the first theorists to link this desire to postmodern culture when he said:

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries have given us as much terror as we can take. We have paid a high enough price for the nostalgia of the whole and the one, for the reconciliation of the concept and the sensible, of the transparent and the communicable experience. Under the general demand for slackening and for appeasement, we can hear the mutterings of the desire for a return of terror, for the realisation of the fantasy to seize reality (Lyotard 1984, 81-2).

What the self can know, how the self knows, and what it can be through its own imaginary existence is essentially the driving force behind postmodernist theory and literature. Lyotard states that the sublime has the effect of 'genuine heterogeneity on the subject' (Lyotard 1991, 210), proposing that an innate incommensurability lies at the heart of sublime experience in the form of 'the naked convulsions of differends' (Lyotard 1991, 210): that simultaneous experience of terror and exultation, fear and desire. He also suggests that through these differends one has the potential to exist for a moment beyond the perceived homogeneity that governs our acceptance of imposed realities and identities. Significantly, this view acknowledges the sublime unrepresentable as significant not for its infinite or transcendental qualities which were valued by Kant, but for its subjective and self-realising properties, for its 'extension of the domain of the perceptible' (Abinnett 2003, 46) and this has some thought-provoking implications for the role of terror literature in postmodern society.

*Slaughterhouse 5* functions as almost a direct reponse to Lyotard's demands and exhibits a terror that must be duly ap-

preciated, firstly, as I have already mentioned, in relation to the terror of the sublime unrepresentable so significant to postmodernism, and secondly, in relation to the philosophical strands of the sublime that make up the core of Gothic fiction and which moot its suspense and its terror. In this way, it also remains to be seen through Vonnegut's work that 'Gothic excesses' still have the power to 'transgress the proper limits of aesthetic and social order' (Botting 1996, 4), and also the order of the self. However, it is not part of a genre that is solely degenerative, destructive and transgressive, as in its representation of sublime terror the Gothic arguably 'reconstitutes the boundaries that horror has seen dissolve' (Botting 1996, 10). The horrors and atrocities of recent, 'postmodern' history need not be accounted for here. We are faced with them every time we watch the news. As outlined earlier, horror is a limiting experience as it presents the horrifying event in full and grotesque detail, causing the imagination to shrink and recoil into repressive isolation. The power of terror then, and the power of Vonnegut's appropriation of it, is in suggestion, and Vonnegut can be appreciated as a postmodernist part of the Gothic enterprise which seeks 'to stimulate the reader's imagination by the intimation of terror beyond the compass of words' (Varma 1957, 103).

So while Varma, Botting and others may claim that the Gothic has died, it is possible to reason that in a world that is today one of prolific linguistic or symbolic reality, the terror beyond the compass of words is apprehended in *Slaughterhouse 5* in a subtle way and that Vonnegut's Gothicism may be taken as a provocative attempt, in and through terror, to say the unsayable, to present the unrepresentable and to fathom the unfathomable. Thus, his novel may be regarded as setting a trend which can be considered Gothic-postmodernism and

which has to do with explorations of self and reality and the terror of the end, with issues that we cannot know or directly represent thereby recreating the sublime experience of terror for the desensitised postmodern reader and playing an invaluable role in replacing the heterogeneity of postmodern culture and the Gothic of art literature.

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