Cracked Messiah: Parody and Parable in Kurt Vonnegut's Troutean Novels

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Trout was out there talking to and gesturing at the lidless wire basket as though it were an editor in an old-fashioned book-publishing house, and as though his four-page handwritten yellow manuscript were a great novel, sure to sell like hotcakes. He wasn't remotely crazy. He would later say of his performance: 'It was the world that had suffered the nervous breakdown. I was just having fun in a nightmare, arguing with an imaginary editor about the advertising budget, and about who should play whom in the movie, and personal appearances on TV shows and so on, perfectly harmless funny stuff.' (Vonnegut, *Timequake* 228)

Introduction

This quotation demonstrates three important qualities of Kurt Vonnegut's most famous recurring character, Kilgore Trout: first, Trout's simultaneous unorthodoxy and comic wisdom; second, his relationship to his own writing; and third, his metafictional relationship to writing in general. In this paper, I will show how Trout manifests these qualities throughout his repeated incarnations as a fool figure, a science fiction writer, and a complex and ambivalent alter ego for Vonnegut, a novelist who is crucial to our understanding of the American postmodern ethos.

Vonnegut is typically studied along with other postmodern novelists (such as Nabokov, Eco, and Burroughs), and as such, his work is understood in the context of the contradictions, distortions, and frenetic intertextuality present in much postmodern work. Metafiction, fabulation, and pastiche are all strategies of postmodernism that Vonnegut makes use of.

However, it may not be helpful to examine Vonnegut's work entirely in the mode of postmodernism, since a search for a universal remedy for human ills or purpose for human existence seems to underlie much of his work, even if that search is never complete. Robert Tally's book on Vonnegut's work takes as its central claim that:

> Vonnegut is not himself a postmodernist, but that his works create, describe, and mobilize various images or icons of American life and that the larger picture produced in his *oeuvre* forms a postmodern iconography. Vonnegut's tone, sensibility, *ethos,* and even style are, I argue, more modernist than postmodernist, but the world he depicts in his novels is decidedly postmodern. (Tally xii)

I am inclined to agree with Tally, even as I describe Trout's role primarily through the lens of postmodernism. It is crucial to remember that for all of Vonnegut's problematizing of existing codes of morality he still grasps for a moral center and, while unable to find one, proclaims strategies for the possibilities of finding one (or several).

Vonnegut's specific brand of black humor has elicited a debate among critics as to where his moral center lies. Does he create an image of futility in which despair is the ultimate outcome, or does he propose potential remedies to the incomprehensible horrors that plague society? And if he is proposing remedies, are these remedies actually helpful, or are they merely escapist wish fulfillments? When his novels are read intertextually, the image of humanity he paints seems grim, but not so grim as to leave no possibilities for overcoming the oppressiveness of existence. Characters find solace in self-sustained ideologies throughout the entirety of the Vonnegut canon, whether it is God, science fiction, blind socialist altruism, trips through time and to alien planets, or a cultish hoax religion such as Bokononism. The adoption of these ideologies is often read as escapist and fruitless. As Lawrence Broer argues, "it is usually these

same critics who, seeing Vonnegut as a 'facile fatalist,' fail to understand the psychological function of Vonnegut's exotic settings and imaginary worlds, associating such fantasy creations . . . with frivolity and superficiality. The fact is that these escapist worlds warn against rather than affirm fatalist sophistries" (102). Additionally, the fact that Vonnegut leaves open the possibility for these solutions to fail highlights the role of the individual in choosing the solution, as well as adding to the self-reflexivity that characterizes his work. Vonnegut's solutions are fallible constructions, just as the pre-existing world is.

In describing Kilgore Trout specifically, scholars tend to place him in one of two alter ego roles: he is either a parody of Vonnegut and of science fiction in general or he has a prophetic voice and his stories function as parables that mirror Vonnegut's own opinions. Josh Simpson is one voice relegating Trout to parody: he describes how Trout represents the failures of science fiction as a genre. Jesús Lerate de Castro, on the other hand, focuses on how each Trout story in *Slaughterhouse-Five* functions as a parable that bolsters Vonnegut's own themes. I believe that both interpretations have their merits, and that putting them into conversation with each other would do much to show how Trout's role acquires its characteristic indeterminacy. As the conduit for some of Vonnegut's more fantastical ideas and narratives, Trout allows Vonnegut to advocate for specific solutions to the suffering that is ever-present in modern human life. However, because of the magnitude of the despair and inequity that Vonnegut portrays, messages of hope are potentially deceitful and are therefore safely concealed in the seemingly unworthy figure of Trout.

In order to argue that Trout fulfills this ambivalent function of Vonnegut's marginalized mouthpiece, I first show how Trout is set up as a simultaneously prophetic and pathetic voice through his characterization as a fool figure. In all four novels, Trout is ambivalently messianic,

and his pathetic exploits overlaid with his epiphanic stories and didactic philosophies show how such a fool character is the perfect postmodern conduit for Vonnegut's ethics and morality. I then show how Trout's stories themselves, science fiction tales that warn against the dangers inherent in the continued wrongdoings of society, are informed by Vonnegut's personal views of science fiction. Vonnegut did not have a particularly high opinion of the science fiction authors of his time, but he was also popularly classified as a science fiction author. Making Trout a failed science fiction author who regardless has stories to tell thus solidifies him as an ambivalent alter ego for Vonnegut. The stories themselves also have thematic functions that are important to consider. Finally, I will go into greater depth concerning the relationship between Trout and Vonnegut that further complicates Trout's alter ego role. In discussing *Breakfast of Champions* and *Timequake*, where Kurt Vonnegut is simultaneously narrator, author, and character, I look at how Vonnegut and Trout's interactions bring to light postmodern questions concerning the purpose and act of writing that run throughout Vonnegut's work. Understanding Vonnegut's interrogation of narrative authority, often involving Trout as both a scapegoat and a compeer, is crucial to granting Vonnegut a specific place in postmodern conversations about authorship, writing, and the fate of the novel as a genre.

Placing Kilgore Trout Intertextually: An Overview of the Character

Studying Kilgore Trout intertextually is essential to understanding his purpose in the Vonnegut canon. Kathryn Hume has argued that "too often reviewers have noticed small details like the multiple Kilgore Trouts and have rejected them, unaware that these details relate to a complex network of images and philosophical values" ("Heraclitean Cosmos" 224). It is my hope that, through this extensive overview of the role of Trout, we can better understand not only

Vonnegut's ideas generally but the evolution of his ideas over time. Qualities of Trout that do

not change over the course of the four novels I am studying include the fact that he is a science

fiction writer who is virtually unread and whose stories are only able to be found in obscure,

unsavory places like pornography stores. He is also always an older, isolated man whose sanity

is somewhat questionable and who lives in varying states of poverty.

Trout first appears in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* (1965). In this novel, Trout remains

an invisible influence through his science fiction stories, helping inspire Eliot Rosewater's

mission to help the poor and unloved people of the world. When Rosewater is placed in an

insane asylum and must prove his sanity in court in order to maintain his family's fortune, it is

Trout who appears and confirms that Rosewater's actions are sane.

By the publication of *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), Trout's role has grown larger, but

Vonnegut also depicts him much more negatively. Both Eliot Rosewater and Billy Pilgrim use

Trout's science fiction stories as coping mechanisms, but those stories also inform the

predominantly anti-war themes of the novel. Trout appears as a character for an extended period

of time, but as a spiteful misanthrope rather than the gentle, quirky presence he was in *God Bless*

You, Mr. Rosewater.

Trout is a main character in *Breakfast of Champions* (1973). The novel charts how

Dwayne Hoover and Trout inevitably meet, and how one of Trout's stories catalyzes Hoover's

psychotic break to violence. The plots of Trout stories are, as usual, present throughout the

novel, but Trout himself gets extended treatment as a character. He is portrayed more

ambivalently in *Breakfast of Champions* than in the two previous novels; he is both thoughtful

and unaware, misanthropic and invested in the human species, a writer unpopular and unskilled,

but also wise and indefatigable. Additionally, Vonnegut appears as a character in this novel and has a revelatory encounter with Trout, which will be explored in detail later.

In *Timequake* (1997), Vonnegut's final novel, Trout is a main character whose narrative runs parallel to Vonnegut's metafictional depiction of how he is reworking the failed novel *Timequake One* into *Timequake Two*, the novel that is presented in hard copy to the reader as *Timequake*. Vonnegut treats Trout with a great deal of respect in this novel, not necessarily in terms of the construction of his life experiences (Trout is still a destitute and unpopular writer, although not solely of science fiction in this case), but in terms of the credence he gives to Trout's morals. Not only are Trout's stories common inclusions in *Timequake*, but so are his thoughts and words in the form of speeches, plays, and conversations. Trout also serves as a "hero" of sorts in the novel, helping goad people back into using their consciousness and free will after a "re-run" of a period of ten years in which free will was null.

Thus, while Kilgore Trout does differ slightly from novel to novel, in these four novels specifically the similarities in depiction and role outweigh the differences.[1] Taken together, all four novels create the most comprehensive picture possible of Trout. As Hume says, "all [Vonnegut's] works form parts of a single tapestry" ("Heraclitean Cosmos" 209). I endeavor to explore the parts in which Trout is present in full, in order to see where the "Trout" threads of this tapestry have been woven, and how their different variations provide an image of Vonnegut's work as a whole.

Finding Comfort in Irrationality: Trout as a Fool Figure

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[1] *Jailbird* (1979) also features Kilgore Trout, but I have left it out of my analysis because in this novel Trout is a pseudonym for a separate persona that differs in many respects from the Trout of the other four novels.

In a 1973 *Playboy* interview, Vonnegut shows a typical self-awareness of his craft, explaining how Trout's stories function in his books: "When Shakespeare figured the audience had had enough of the heavy stuff, he'd let up a little, bring in a clown or a foolish innkeeper or something like that, before he'd become serious again. And trips to other planets, science fiction of an obviously kidding sort, is equivalent to bringing in the clowns every so often to lighten things up" (Standish 94). Trout's science fiction novels characterize him as a comic figure who remains on the border of society and comments on it from afar, but always ends up influencing it in an ironic or detached way. Trout's often fragmented and incomplete appearances throughout the novels lead Hume to say that "Trout is a metaphor, so his changes are not realistic and novelistic, but symbolic" ("Heraclitean Cosmos" 214). The most apparent of these mutable symbolic functions is that of the fool.

The mythical and symbolic significance of the fool character predates Shakespeare and calls back to the medieval period. In *A Dictionary of Symbols*, Cirlot interprets the Fool Tarot card to say that "the Fool is to be found on the fringe of all orders and systems," and that "the logic of the process is clear enough: when the normal or conscious appears to become infirm or perverted, in order to regain health and goodness it becomes necessary to turn to the dangerous, the unconscious and the abnormal" (110-111). Thus, the fool, with his inherent indeterminacy and ability to transgress boundaries, is an apt figure for a postmodern rendering. And not only does the fool interrogate the binary of good and bad, of conscious and unconscious, of rational and irrational, but he also, historically, involves the audience in the act. In her study of the fool's social and literary significance, Enid Welsford writes that "when [the fool] is really successful he breaks down the barriers between himself and his patrons so that they too inhabit for the moment a no-man's-land between the world of fact and the world of imagination" (28). As a fool figure,

Trout invites his readers into a realm of ridiculous science fiction that nonetheless contains hidden wisdom.

Trout's role as a fool is first set up in terms of his unpopularity and lack of talent. Society has given nothing to Trout, whether in terms of attention, readership, or a living wage for writing his stories. As Vonnegut says in *Breakfast of Champions*, his publishers "never told him where or when he might expect to find himself in print. Here is what they paid him: doodley-squat" (20). Trout internalizes this unpopularity and, in a way, he encourages this treatment of himself. For example, his excitement for going to the Arts Festival in *Breakfast of Champions* is heightened when he muses that "'they don't want anything but smilers out there . . . Unhappy failures need not apply.' But his mind wouldn't leave it alone at that. He got an idea which he found very tangy: 'But maybe an unhappy failure *is* exactly what they *need* to see'" (Vonnegut 37). Trout's goal at the arts festival becomes "to show them what nobody has ever seen at an arts festival before: a representative of all the thousands of artists who devoted their entire lives to a search for truth and beauty -- and didn't find doodley-squat!" (Vonnegut, *Breakfast* 37). Trout is planning to go to a festival in order to put on a type of performance meant to both instruct and morbidly entertain. He thus encapsulates the fool figure's public role. As Welsford highlights in her book, fools "owe their popularity to their gift of self-mockery, for exploiting their own absurdities without any apparent loss of self-esteem" (27). Trout is conscious, and quite proud of, the idea of everyone at the arts festival hating him: "he knew how ridiculous he looked. He expected to be received abominably, dreamed of embarrassing the Festival to death. He had come all this distance for an orgy of masochism. He wanted to be treated like a cockroach" (Vonnegut, *Breakfast* 232). Trout, as the fool figure, can become a sponge for the negative qualities that his audience does not want to acknowledge themselves as possessing. However, as

we will see later, the fool's joking self-deprecation often actually contains hidden wisdom for which he may be revered.

The fool is a comic figure, but ambivalently so. He "breaks down the distinction . . . between folly and wisdom" (Welsford 27). For Vonnegut, this means that even as Trout's messages are often comprehensive and intelligent, at the same time the stories can seem facetious or irreverent. Part of this arises from Trout's own views on life. His works are unclassifiable because his own philosophy is unclassifiable: "'I won't know myself until I find out whether *life* is serious or not . . . It's dangerous, I know, and it can hurt a lot. That doesn't necessarily mean it's *serious* too'" (Vonnegut, *Breakfast* 88). The comic side of Trout's role as a fool figure is important because it is actually what allows for a unique expression of Trout's wisdom.

Lawrence Broer has described the role of both Vonnegut and Trout as that of a shaman, "a kind of spiritual medicine man whose function is to expose these various forms of societal madness" ("Images of the Shaman" 103). But Trout's method of exposing societal madness *also* often looks like madness. I believe that the figure of a shaman, while useful for providing an overview of Vonnegut's prescriptions for society overall, does not capture the nuanced relationship between madness and wisdom present in Trout's interactions with the world. A more accurate figure to represent Trout, one that rests within the traditional fool archetype, is that of the holy fool. The holy fool is a traditionally Russian Orthodox figure, also known as a *iurodivy*, or "fool for Christ." "Foolishness for Christ" is a form of asceticism that manifests itself in "the subversive behavior of its practitioners who feign madness in order to provide the public with spiritual guidance and yet not be praised for their saintliness" (Kobets). Trout, as a holy fool figure, has dedicated his life to writing and publishing pulp science fiction stories that contain

within them explanations of and solutions for many of the issues plaguing the societies portrayed in Vonnegut's books. However, rather than publicizing his ideas, Trout wants to remain obscure and unpopular -- for example, there are several instances where Trout meets a reader of one of his books and does not admit that he is its author. His attitude towards the arts festival also attests to his tendency to want to portray himself as mad rather than wise.

The holy fool also shares a close association with Jesus Christ, as his "behavioral complex testifies to his imitation of Christ as he constantly seeks and inevitably finds humiliation, scorn, and physical suffering" (Kobets). A Kilgore Trout story in *Slaughterhouse-Five* entitled *The Gospel from Outer Space* actually portrays how Jesus is connected to the holy fool figure. In the story, an alien reads the New Testament Gospels, and "he supposed that the intent of the Gospels was to teach people, among other things, to be merciful, even to the lowest of the low," but he realizes that the Gospels actually taught this lesson: "*Before you kill somebody, make absolutely sure he isn't well connected*" (Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse* 109). The alien then offers a new Gospel in which "Jesus really *was* a nobody, and a pain in the neck to a lot of people with better connections than he had. He still got to say all the lovely and puzzling things he said in the other Gospels" (Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse* 110). Rosewater, who is relating the story to Billy Pilgrim, then decries Trout's inability to write and the narrator agrees, saying "he had a point: Kilgore Trout's unpopularity was deserved. His prose was frightful. Only his ideas were good" (Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse* 110). Thus Trout is placed in the same position as Jesus in the rewritten Gospel, as "*a bum who has no connections*," no matter how enlightened his ideas are (Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse* 110).

The comparisons to Jesus do not end at *The Gospel from Outer Space*. Trout is also visually compared to Jesus. In *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, Trout "was an old man with a full

black beard. He looked like a frightened, aging Jesus, whose sentence to crucifixion had been commuted to imprisonment for life" (Vonnegut 162). While this description identifies him as someone who is persecuted for his holiness, it also declares that he has to live an entire human life of such persecution with no promise of salvation or ascendence to a higher power. Trout's messianic depiction is thus a depressing one, one that proposes the idea of a world where a benevolent God could potentially neglect his subjects.

The holy fool figure arises out of the traditional fool figure, as is apparent in Trout's self-deprecating behavior at the arts festival in *Breakfast of Champions* specifically, as well as his actions and lifestyle overall. However, as the traditional fool delights and possibly confuses, the holy fool either incites outrage or portrays wisdom, depending on the perception of the audience. One audience is Vonnegut himself. In both *Breakfast of Champions* and *Timequake*, Vonnegut shows an immense respect for Trout's ideas. He frames Trout's contribution in *Timequake* by saying that "I was privileged to hear the old, long-out-of-print science fiction writer describe for us, and then demonstrate, the special place of Earthlings in the cosmic scheme of things" (Vonnegut xvi). This description of Trout as "the old, long-out-of-print science fiction writer" is often repeated, and serves almost as a sanctifying epithet for him, highlighting his divinity.

Additionally, regardless of Trout's level of self-deprecation and his inability to function within the confines of societal respectability, his ideas *do* get across to people, as we can see in characters such as Billy Pilgrim, Eliot Rosewater, Dudley Prince, and Dwayne Hoover. In *Timequake*, Dudley Prince sees Trout throwing away his manuscripts and arguing with the trash can he has thrown them in. Prince subsequently "retrieved each story and pondered it, hoping to discover some important message from a higher power encoded therein" (Vonnegut 75). Trout's ideas in general also spread throughout society and take on a religious connotation, whether it is

his simple colloquialisms such as calling mirrors *leaks*, his books, or his speeches. In *Timequake*, for example, Trout's Jesus-like utterance, "you were sick, but now you're well again, and there's work to do," inspires people to use their free will again after the rerun (Vonnegut 196). As it becomes widespread, teachers "say Kilgore's Creed to students after the students have recited the Pledge of Allegiance and the Lord's Prayer at the beginning of each school day. Teachers say it seems to help" (Vonnegut 196).

Trout *helps*, even if he is unaware of the power he has to help. He offers solutions, even if part of his purpose in writing is to show that society is doomed and any solutions he purports in the guise of science fiction might not actually work. The indeterminacy afforded by Trout as a fool figure is a safe place for many of Vonnegut's characters, because they can decide for themselves what will work and what will not. Because of this indeterminacy, Vonnegut can declare that "a plausible mission of artists is to make people appreciate being alive at least a little bit," while also quoting his most well-known writer-character as asserting that "'being alive is a crock of shit'" (Vonnegut, *Timequake* 1, 3). As a "cracked messiah," Trout is a figure of potential salvation that has been broken by a society that devalues him and by a creator who openly admits to giving him the luckless existence he is forced to endure (*Slaughterhouse-Five* 167). Trout's ideas (and Trout himself) may not always seem sane, but the gentle madness of his ideas is one of the few ways Vonnegut can make sense of the inhuman, terrifying madness that permeates the world that he portrays in his writing. The lessons Vonnegut's characters need to learn are often hidden in unseemly places, such as in the words of a foolish prophet-writer whose ridiculous stories about robots, aliens, and interdimensional space travel are actually immediately relevant to helping the characters survive in a real world that is menacing in its irrationality. The cracked messiah's irrationality is a much more comforting form of irrationality to believe in.

Realism's Failures to Represent: The Necessity of Science Fiction

In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut declares that "Earthlings are the great explainers, explaining why this event is structured as it is, telling how other events may be achieved or avoided" (85). Kilgore Trout's method of explanation is his science fiction stories. As an expression of the holy fool archetype, these stories are often described as parables, and thus, according to Benyei, each of Trout's stories "conflates theology and science fiction" (48). In conflating the two, ideological implications become present in each of Trout's stories. My focus in this section is not necessarily how such implications line up with Vonnegut's own political views[2] but how the inclusion of science fiction itself serves a greater metafictional purpose in Vonnegut's writing. Vonnegut's awareness of how Trout writes his stories leads to their characterization as parables: "Trout's favorite formula was to describe a perfectly hideous society, not unlike his own, and then, toward the end, to suggest ways in which it could be improved" (Vonnegut, *God Bless* 21). These suggestions are often moral ones, so Trout's messianic depiction lends credence to his stories as parables. But a distinction as merely parable is, in typical Vonnegut fashion, much too simple a distinction to make. These science fiction stories not only comment on society in order that people might change it, but they mirror Vonnegut's own pattern of writing about and commenting on society, giving another voice to his themes.

Robert Scholes' conception of fabulation as *ethically controlled fantasy* is relevant to Trout's science fiction stories. In ethically controlled fantasy, the "fabulation . . . tends away from direct representation of the surface of reality but returns toward actual human life" (Scholes 3). The reader registers a commentary on human life, but not because of its realist depiction.

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[2] It has been consistently noted that Trout's stories reflect Vonnegut's political views. See, for example, Lerate de Castro (118), and Reed ("Writer as Character" 111).

Instead, a shift *away* from realism allows the comment to be understood more fully. Take, for

example, *The Gutless Wonder*, a Trout story in which the "leading robot looked like a human

being, and could talk and dance and so on, and go out with girls. And nobody held it against him

that he dropped jellied gasoline on people. But they found his halitosis unforgivable. But then he

cleared that up, and he was welcomed to the human race" (Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse* 167-168).

This story, while not directly stating the damning notion that social acceptance of individuals

rests on concerns of appearance and presentation (such as bad breath) rather than the morality or

immorality of their actions, nonetheless provides such commentary. It slightly destabilizes

society as it is, transposing it onto a science fiction society with one minor difference -- the

leading robot is a robot, not a human. The same suspension of realism appears throughout

Trout's work and in his philosophy in general; for example, "one thing Trout said that Rosewater

liked very much was that there really *were* vampires and werewolves and goblins and angels and

so on, but that they were in the fourth dimension. So was William Blake, Rosewater's favorite

poet, according to Trout. So were heaven and hell" (Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse* 104). The fourth

dimension is a separate, intangible aspect of human existence that allows for a sheltered

exploration into what is wrong with society.

Trout's science fiction stories highlight Vonnegut's modernist struggle for solutions.

While resorting to the postmodern practice of fabulation, the stories rely on the notion that

human life is ultimately non-representational and yet they comment on society in the form of

warnings and advice. Such comments yearn for a self-sustained centering or ordering mechanism

to remedy the ones that have already failed. As Scholes writes, "modern fabulation accepts, even

emphasizes, its fallibilism, its inability to reach all the way to the real, but it continues to look

toward reality" (8). This tendency is made even more explicit when Vonnegut himself comments

on reality. Take this selection from *Timequake*: "Imagine this: A great American university gives up football in the name of sanity. It turns its vacant stadium into a bomb factory. So much for sanity. Shades of Kilgore Trout" (Vonnegut 4). Vonnegut is here referring to the use of the University of Chicago's Stagg Field to create the first controlled nuclear reaction, a breakthrough that would ultimately allow for the creation of the atomic bombs that were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. By comparing this event to the plot of a Kilgore Trout story, Vonnegut does two things. First, he underscores the ultimate insensibility of the world. "So much for sanity," he says (Vonnegut, *Timequake* 4). There is no simple, sane, ordered world to draw from; or at the very least it is impossible to make sense of the world in the form of writing. Second, in comparing an event that occurred in an objective reality outside of the text to Trout's writing, Vonnegut sets up the fabulative relationship between Trout's fantastical worlds and the inability to represent reality rationally.

The choice of science fiction to represent Trout's ideas is an apt one for Vonnegut for many reasons. In their preface to a 2011 speculative fiction-focused special issue of *American Literature*, Canavan and Wald state that "it is through the terms of SF . . . that our culture thinks futurity, thinks alterity, thinks difference itself. The chimerical speculations of SF, more than any other discourse, structure our collective imagination of what is possible" (244). Traditionally, science fiction has always commented on a possible future trajectory of human existence. Considering Vonnegut's repeated concern for the future of humanity, it makes sense to view science fiction as a modality to express one of his main concerns as an author.

However, the use of science fiction is not as simple as a mere search for the right elixir to heal society through a particular genre of writing. Ongoing debates about the literary value and use of science fiction make each Trout story, according to Peter Reed, "a comic little science

fiction story loaded with implication" ("Writer as Character" 123). Trout's stories end up taking

on metafictional relevance because of Vonnegut's own awareness of the status of science fiction

at the time he was writing. Vonnegut's views on science fiction were remarkably ambivalent, but

he ultimately wished to distance himself from the genre because of its lack of popularity and its

dismal literary reputation. In a 1969 interview with C.D.B. Bryan, he said that "I objected finally

to this label because I thought it was narrowing my readership. People regard science-fiction

writers as interchangeable with comic-strip writers" (4). Although Vonnegut's first popular

creative pieces were by-and-large science fiction stories, once he became a better-known novelist

he began to avoid the label seemingly out of concern for his literary reputation. Vonnegut also

did not like science fiction authors' superficial depictions of reality. In a 1965 *New York Times*

piece, he asserted that:

> Whatever [science fiction] knows about science was fully revealed in *Popular*
>
> *Mechanics* by 1933. Whatever it knows about politics and economics and history
>
> can be found in the *Information Please Almanac* for 1941. Whatever it knows
>
> about the relationship between men and women derives mainly from the clean and
>
> the pornographic versions of "'Maggie and Jiggs." ("Speaking of Books")

Although these shoddy representations of life offended a certain literary sensibility of

Vonnegut's, their incorporation into his writings offered him a certain type of freedom. As stated

earlier, the fabulative nature of science fiction is in fact why Trout's stories are so pervasive in

Vonnegut's novels. For Vonnegut, to be designated as a science fiction writer would negate

some of the literary quality of his work. But to include Trout as a science-fiction scapegoat of

sorts allows what Vonnegut saw as science fiction's positive qualities to enter into his narratives.

In his 1973 *Playboy* interview, Vonnegut said of science fiction that "the quality was usually

terrible, but in a way it was liberating, because you were able to put an awful lot of keen ideas into circulation fast" (Standish 93). This ability to convey ideas, rather than to give an accurate representation of reality, is the allure of science fiction for Vonnegut.

While Vonnegut's own attitude toward science fiction can help us understand why Trout is a science fiction writer, the attitudes that characters in the novels portray towards science fiction can also provide insight into how he wants us to read Trout's stories. For example, Eliot Rosewater says of science fiction writers that:

> "You're the only ones who'll talk about the *really* terrific changes going on, the only ones crazy enough to know that life is a space voyage, and not a short one, either, but one that'll last for billions of years. You're the only ones with guts enough to *really* care about the future, who *really* notice what machines do to us, what wars do to us, what cities do to us, what big, simple ideas do to us, what tremendous misunderstandings, mistakes, accidents and catastrophes do to us. You're the only ones zany enough to agonize over time and distances without limit, over mysteries that will never die, over the fact that we are right now determining whether the space voyage for the next billion years or so is going to be Heaven or Hell." (Vonnegut, *God Bless* 18)

For Rosewater, reality can only be represented in terms of a "space voyage." Any attempt to explain human life in terms of more accurate, small-scale representation is unsuccessful, because in Vonnegut's worlds all small-scale actions have large-scale consequences. The only way to represent these potential consequences is in the form of science fiction. In addition to the use of science fiction to understand the far-reaching implications of human actions, the inherently creative quality of science fiction stories helps Vonnegut's characters in organizing their own

worlds. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, as a result of their wartime traumas, both Rosewater and Pilgrim "found life meaningless . . . So they were trying to re-invent themselves and their universes. Science fiction was a big help" (Vonnegut 101). For someone living in the postmodern condition, all potentially stabilizing entities are revealed as constructs; there are no absolutes or central tenets or beliefs to fall back on. Linda Hutcheon describes fantasy as a remedy for such an inherently chaotic existence:

> The reader's act of forming the universe of fantasy . . . provides the freedom -- or the "escape" -- of an ordered vision, perhaps a kind of "vital" consolation for living in a world whose order one usually perceives and experiences only as chaos. That the order here is of a fictive universe does not matter; the need and desire for such order is real, as is the need for freedom, for the liberation of the imagination from the bondage of empirical fact. (*Narcissistic Narrative* 77)

Trout's science fiction stories cannot represent real life, but they can help order it in a way that is often therapeutic for the characters in the novel. As creating self-supporting systems of meaning-making is also a common theme of Vonnegut's writing, it is easy to see how the embedding of Trout's stories fulfills this function. In addition, Benyei's concept of *leaking* helps explain how the science fiction narrative and the textual narrative can be bridged; each Trout story "leaks into the narrated world on account of the prevailing metaleptic logic" (46). The universe of the Trout stories is not as distinct from the rest of the world as one would at first imagine -- for example it is unclear whether or not Billy Pilgrim's journeys through time and space are actual experiences, results of a breakdown in mental functioning post-trauma, or arise out of his obsession with Trout's stories. The fact that the time-travelling aliens in Trout's stories (in other books actually

called Tralfamadorians) are so similar to the Tralfamadorians Billy experiences confuses the distinction even more.

While critics often see the caricature-esque science fiction stories as parodic, I believe them to be more pastiches of the science fiction genre. Actual commentary on the science fiction genre almost always happens separate from the stories themselves; the generic conventions are repeated on their own terms. The commentary within Trout's science fiction stories concerns a preoccupation with the failure of pre-existing structures in human society. The fringe (science fiction) becomes an ordering system that can set right the chaos and meaninglessness inherent in the systems of mainstream society that do not work. One of these systems for Vonnegut is consistently literature/literary fiction (as opposed to science fiction). Indeed, if Trout's science fiction is parodic, it is parodic of *literary fiction*. It highlights literary fiction's inability to grasp the reality of human life. What Hutcheon calls the "literary inadequacies of a certain convention" being critiqued by parody may in this case refer to literary inadequacies of literature itself (*Narcissistic Narrative* 50). Take Eliot Rosewater's assertion that science fiction authors such as Trout "were more sensitive to important changes than anybody who was writing well. 'The hell with the talented sparrowfarts who write delicately of one small piece of one mere lifetime, when the issues are galaxies, eons, and trillions of souls yet to be born'" (Vonnegut, *God Bless* 19). Literature can no longer capture the immense gravity of living in the postmodern condition. As Rosewater tells Billy Pilgrim, "'that isn't *enough* any more'" (Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse* 101).

In several instances, Trout elucidates the qualities of literature that make it unsuccessful. In *Timequake*, he derides literary authors' use of characterization, saying, "'those artsy-fartsy twerps next door create living, breathing, three-dimensional characters with ink on paper . . . Wonderful! As though the planet weren't already dying because it has three billion too many

living, breathing, three-dimensional characters!'" (Vonnegut, *Timequake* 71). It is precisely

literature's ability to come close to depicting human life in an intimately detailed way that makes

it ineffective. "Real life" is what people are running away from, what people need to cope with,

what people need to interpret and perceive differently. Creating works of fiction that merely re-

present the world (realist literature) without re-interpreting or re-configuring it (like Trout's

stories do), does not help with the project of coping with everyday reality. This disdain for

literary realism is aptly illustrated by a Trout story:

> In Trout's novel, *The Pan-Galactic Money Bank*, the hero is on a space
>
> ship two hundred miles long and sixty-two miles in diameter. He gets a realistic
>
> novel out of the branch library in his neighborhood. He reads about sixty pages of
>
> it, and then he takes it back.
>
> The librarian asks him why he doesn't like it, and he says to her, "I
>
> already know about human beings." (Vonnegut, *Breakfast* 286)

Readers of Trout don't want a re-hash of the same constructions of life and people that have

traumatized them. What matters more to Trout are "'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'" (Vonnegut, *Timequake* 72). There is some

inherent flaw in realistic literary fiction's use of artful language that does not capture the

workings of the world in the way that science fiction can. In the contradictory nature

characteristic of postmodernism, it seems to be that art that attempts to represent life ultimately

fails because it presents instead an image that is too unbelievable, traumatic, or irrational to

process. Art, on the other hand, that does not need to represent human life in its actuality, is thus

able to convey ideas about life rather than a realistic image of it, and in this depiction of ideas, garners a more positive response from Vonnegut, Trout, and Trout's readers.

Vonnegut does not include such commentary in a vacuum. Postmodernism saw such a drastic change in the way that novels were written that many declared that the novel itself was dead. As Benyei relates, Vonnegut's inclusion of science fiction is just one of his "metacritical commentaries on these critical interfaces" (32). The inclusion of Trout's science fiction is self-reflexive in many ways. It reflects Vonnegut's own experiences with science fiction, it comments on its own merits and flaws, and it interrogates its own methods of creating meaning in opposition to literary fiction. And finally, it mirrors Vonnegut's own image of how he writes his stories:

> Once I understood what was making America such a dangerous, unhappy nation of people who had nothing to do with real life, I resolved to shun storytelling. I would write about life. Every person would be exactly as important as any other. All facts would also be given equal weightiness. Nothing would be left out. Let others bring order to chaos. I would bring chaos to order, instead, which I think I have done. (Vonnegut, *Breakfast* 215)

Science fiction, then, is one way that Vonnegut brings "chaos to order." The destabilizing quality of this philosophy of writing can unearth not only what is wrong with society, but what is wrong with how literature has traditionally tried to represent it. Trout's stories thus function as a crucial metafictional device in Vonnegut's project of tearing apart the world's way of understanding itself in order to put it back together both better than, and more aware of, what it was before.

The Problematized Self and Other Self: Trout as Alter Ego

Kilgore Trout is an essential figure in Vonnegut's broader metafictional project. While his role as a fool figure and science fiction author both provide the reader lenses through which to understand the world, his relationship with Vonnegut is less prescriptive. The most common description of Trout and Vonnegut's relationship deems Trout an alter ego for Vonnegut. Vonnegut himself describes their relationship in this way, saying in *Timequake* that "Trout doesn't really exist. He has been my alter ego in several of my other novels" (xvi). Critics have explored this alter ego role in terms of Vonnegut's identification with science fiction, ideas of authorship, life events, and philosophy and personality. Hume believes that the repetitive and overall consistent use of Trout's character in several of Vonnegut's novels makes Trout "his creator's most durable other self" ("Vonnegut's Self-Projections" 188). This relationship seems undeniable and crucial to understanding why Trout appears as often as he does; however, the inclusion of Trout as the "other self" often takes place in the same textual space where Vonnegut presents his "self" as a simultaneous narrator, author, and character. Vonnegut's self-reflexive inclusions of self problematize that self, and, consequently, complicate the seemingly simple alter ego relationship of Trout to Vonnegut. Greer describes this problematization: "If Vonnegut is made the 'I' of his texts by a 'personalization' of the narrator, or if Vonnegut is identified with his character, then the relation between author and text is misrepresented. Vonnegut can no more be identified with his narrator or with Kilgore Trout than he can be completely free of them" (312). These tangled metafictional webs of self are the focus of this final section. To fully understand how Trout functions in Vonnegut's works, it is imperative to first understand why Vonnegut inserts *himself* into his texts. Then we can explore how Vonnegut's functions as a narrator, author, and character create unique interactions with Trout. This analysis focuses

specifically on *Breakfast of Champions* and *Timequake*, the two Troutean novels in which

Vonnegut has a self-inserted persona that interacts intimately with Trout.

I have been discussing Kilgore Trout as a recurring character in the Vonnegut canon, but

in reality Vonnegut himself may be his own most important recurring character. Gholson writes

that "Vonnegut's narrative self becomes the narrative thread that runs through all his work"

(139). Interestingly, the narrator-author-character Vonnegut-self appears predominantly in novels

where Trout is also present, underscoring the importance of this self-insertion to the role of

Trout. The way this narrative self functions has been the focus of many critics' work, but not as

often in conjunction with Kilgore Trout, Vonnegut's other "self." In *Timequake*, Vonnegut

underscores the importance of the depiction of author as a self, saying that "any work of art is

half of a conversation between two human beings, and it helps a lot to know who is talking at

you. Does he or she have a reputation for seriousness, for religiosity, for suffering, for

concupiscence, for rebellion, for sincerity, for jokes?" (168). By incorporating himself as a

narrator and character, Vonnegut allows his personality to shine through. His writing does not

simply speak for him; he also speaks for his writing. The same idea holds true for Trout. Both

Trout's works and Trout's characterization function in concert and inform each other. For

Vonnegut, the display of the author-self happens metafictionally: "'there is also the matter of

craftsmanship. Real picture-lovers like to *play along*, so to speak, to look closely at the surfaces,

to see how the illusion was created. If you are unwilling to say how you made your pictures,

there goes the ball game a second time'" (Vonnegut, *Timequake* 169). Vonnegut uses a metaphor

of the visual artist, whose work is often known as a function of the self. To truly appreciate and

understand art, one must understand the process by which it is created, specifically the individual

process that the creator of the piece used to make it. Vonnegut's self-inclusion is a metafictional technique that lays this process bare.

Vonnegut's narratorial self-insertion creates two broad themes: first, it sets him up in a position of relative power as a "creator," and second, in highlighting his status as a creator, it reveals his work as a "creation," something that only exists in conjunction with his narrative self. Vonnegut's control over his writing is paradoxical. In one sense, he can be "on par with the Creator of the Universe . . . I shrunk the Universe to a ball of exactly one light-year in diameter. I had it explode. I had it disperse itself again" (Vonnegut, *Breakfast* 205). But at the same time, Vonnegut admits: "Here was the thing about my control over the characters I created: I could only guide their movements approximately, since they were such big animals. There was inertia to overcome. It wasn't as though I was connected to them by steel wires. It was more as though I was connected to them by stale rubberbands" (*Breakfast of Champions* 207). In this comment, Vonnegut creates self-reflexive texts that are revealed as constructions, built from the power of the narrative self, but at the same time he appears to have only a tenuous grasp on such texts. Making Vonnegut's acts of creation only "approximate" gives his characters weight as constructed beings. It imbues them with their own innate forces that allow the reader to see them as important, even if they intuitively know that the author is behind every action. It also makes Vonnegut as a character subject to the whim of his own creation -- he himself is constructed just as all of the other characters are constructed.

Vonnegut's self-inclusions in *Breakfast of Champions* and *Timequake* exemplify a rejection of "the traditional figure of the author as a transcendental imagination fabricating, through an ultimately monologic discourse, structures of order which will replace the forgotten material text of the world" (Waugh 16). Vonnegut's statements as a narrator are inherently

dialogic; he showcases for the reader the creative process of the novel through his metafictional displays. This is often done in the form of explanation. For instance: "Let's see: I have already explained Dwayne's uncharacteristic ability to read so fast. Kilgore Trout probably couldn't have made his trip from New York City in the time I allotted, but it's too late to bugger around with that. Let it stand, let it stand!" (Vonnegut, *Breakfast* 254-255). The exclamation at the end of his explanation grounds his work in narrative authority at the same time as he displays it as a construction. But why is this commentary so successful if it is self-aware to the point of mocking itself? The answer lies in metafiction's purpose. According to Waugh, metafiction "self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" (2). Through the mode of metafiction, the reality portrayed in Vonnegut's fiction is revealed as ridiculous and irrational. Declaring "'Let it stand!'" is defiance in the face of such irrationality, an acceptance of the supposedly unbelievable.

As a narrator Vonnegut is able to metafictionally interrogate methods of understanding reality, but in his added role as a *character* Vonnegut interacts with the reality he creates, including its other characters. Of all of the characters that Vonnegut interacts with, he places the most emphasis on his interactions with Trout. In *Breakfast of Champions* and *Timequake*, Vonnegut's in-text relationship with Trout occurs in several ways: descriptions of Trout, attitudes towards Trout, and, most importantly, conversations and interactions with Trout. These interactions are often at the core of the larger themes present in Vonnegut's works. As a self-proclaimed alter ego, Trout's actions and attitudes are almost always a marginalized expression of the Vonnegut-self. However, even in his relative marginalization as an impoverished, lonesome science fiction writer, Vonnegut privileges Trout over all of his other characters. One

can see this privileged status in Trout's high level of metafictional awareness. Because Trout is a writer, and a writer with similar goals to Vonnegut, he is hyper-aware of the possibility that his world could be a construction in someone else's mind:

> Trout was the only character I ever created who had enough imagination to suspect that he might be the creation of another human being. He had spoken of this possibility several times to his parakeet. He had said, for instance, "Honest to God, Bill, the way things are going, all I can think of is that I'm a character in a book by somebody who wants to write about somebody who suffers all the time."
>
> Now Trout was beginning to catch on that he sitting very close to the person who had created him. He was embarrassed. It was hard for him to know how to respond, particularly since his responses were going to be anything I said they were.
>
> I went easy on him, didn't wave, didn't stare. (Vonnegut, *Breakfast* 246-247)

Trout's musings to his parakeet potentially reveal something of Vonnegut's motives: he "wants to write about somebody who suffers all the time." Trout's comment is metafictional, but it also plays on Western religious ideology, and the idea of a God who puts humans on earth to suffer. Vonnegut, who, as a writer, asserts a similar role to "The Creator of the Universe," thus embodies and reflects something of an ideological system in Trout's world. In this case, metafiction not only shows how writing is constructed, but how the world itself may be as well. For Babaei and Taadolkhah, this is a fundamental role of metafiction: "revealing the constructedness of the novel is the first step in conceptualizing the world as a set of constructions made by men like the creator of these novels" (13). If Vonnegut's metafictional strategies reveal

the world to be so easily destabilized, Trout adds another layer of possibility to the fallible

systems in the world. If Vonnegut is the Creator figure of his textual universes, then Trout is an

avatar, or an incarnation of such a figure, functioning as the creator of his own texts within the

Vonnegut-text. Not only does this role call back to Trout's subversive wisdom as a holy fool and

a Jesus figure, but it also disseminates Vonnegut's own philosophy. In *Breakfast of Champions*,

Trout comes across a question scrawled in a bathroom stall: "'What is the purpose of life?'"

(Vonnegut 68). Trout "had an answer to the question. But he had nothing to write with, not even

a burnt match. So he left the question unanswered, but here is what he would have written, if he

had found anything to write with: / *To be / the eyes / and ears / and conscience / of the Creator*

of the Universe, / you fool (Vonnegut, *Breakfast* 68). Trout values his own potential as a

mouthpiece for the creative entity of his universe -- this creative entity being Vonnegut.

Additionally, his awareness of the creative power throughout the novel mirrors Vonnegut's own

self-awareness of his project. Trout is another expression of Vonnegut's own self-awareness, one

imbued with his own separate creative power.

When Vonnegut (the self) and Trout (the other self) come together in *Breakfast of*

Champions and *Timequake*, the resulting conversations are some of the most important passages

for understanding Vonnegut's larger themes and goals. They are also remarkably different from

each other in terms of context, style, and tone. Since Trout is Vonnegut's alter ego, I see these

conversations in a metafictional light, as dialogues between two different facets of Vonnegut's

writing self. In *Breakfast of Champions*, the two selves are incongruous, unknown to each other,

and one has much more power than the other. In *Timequake*, the two selves coexist and converse

easily, contributing wisdom and knowledge to each other.

In their conversation in *Breakfast of Champions*, Vonnegut practically ambushes Trout. Trout is frightened and hesitant, answering Vonnegut's inquiries with "ums" and "huhs" and other one-word answers. The conversation is profoundly one-sided. Vonnegut declares:

> "I am approaching my fiftieth birthday, Mr. Trout," I said. "I am cleansing and renewing myself for the very different sorts of years to come. Under similar spiritual conditions, Count Tolstoi freed his serfs. Thomas Jefferson freed his slaves. I am going to set at liberty all the literary characters who have served me so loyally during my writing career.
>
> "You are the only one I am telling. For the others, tonight will be a night like any other night. Arise, Mr. Trout, you are free, you are *free*." (*Breakfast* 301)

The entire exchange flabbergasts Trout. His only response to all of Vonnegut's grandiloquence is to cry out "'*make me young, make me young!*'" (Vonnegut, *Breakfast* 302). There is a serious disconnect between Vonnegut's purpose in seeking out Trout and Trout's reaction. Although Trout may be aware that he is a construction in someone else's fiction, he is not necessarily prepared for the reality-shaking consequences of meeting such a creator. In addition, Trout's response to Vonnegut's presence shows that he is unaware of the pivotal role he plays in Vonnegut's novels. Vonnegut tries to right this wrong by telling Trout that "'there's a Nobel Prize in your future,'" and that he will finally be able to get his books published reputably (*Breakfast* 299). But Trout is not looking forward; he does not care about being "free," because this has never meant anything to him, only to Vonnegut. Trout's desire (to be young) is one that Vonnegut cannot ultimately fulfill within the confines of his textual universe.

When taken as a dialogue between the Vonnegut-self who possesses narrative authority and his marginalized other self, Vonnegut appears to be attempting to make amends with this

part of his writing self, while at the same time ousting it. The resolution seems to be that, after

Breakfast of Champions, Trout will not longer appear in Vonnegut's novels. In fact, Greer

asserts that "when the narrator 'frees' Kilgore Trout, Trout is released from the responsibility of

representation" (320). Being freed from Vonnegut's project is what will finally allow Trout to

find his way out of squalor and into fame. After all, Vonnegut writes that Trout's rise to fame

does happen, but not until after the narrative of *Breakfast of Champions* ends.

But Trout *does* appear again. He is just as integral a character in *Timequake* as he was in

Breakfast of Champions. *Timequake* actually includes the process by which Trout achieves fame

(a different process than in *Breakfast of Champions*) as part of the story. In addition, Vonnegut

and Trout appear to have a much more intimate, comfortable relationship. They share in casual

conversation and coexist comfortably in the same narrative space. Whereas Trout is

dumbfounded and potentially even traumatized by his sudden meeting with the mysterious,

godlike Vonnegut in *Breakfast of Champions*, in *Timequake* Vonnegut and Trout appear to be

long-standing friends. And here Trout's thoughts are explicitly named as what they are: wise.

Vonnegut takes on a much more passive role, listening to Trout, rather than barging in and

declaring things to him. The longest interaction between Trout and Vonnegut in the novel takes

place during Trout's speech at the writer's retreat on Xanadu. During this speech, Trout invites

Vonnegut up to the stage and asks him to pick two stars and then to look from one star to the

other star. Trout continues:

> "Even if you'd taken an hour," he said, "something would have passed between
>
> where those two heavenly bodies used to be, at, conservatively speaking, a
>
> million times the speed of light."
>
> "What was it?" I said.

"You awareness," he said. "That is a new quality in the Universe, which exists only because there are human beings. Physicists must from now on, when pondering the secrets of the Cosmos, factor in not only energy and matter and time, but something very new and beautiful, which is *human awareness*."

Trout paused, ensuring with the ball of his left thumb that his upper dental plate would not slip when he said his last words to us that enchanted evening.

All was well with his teeth. This was his finale: "I have thought of a better word than *awareness*," he said. "Let us call it *soul*." He paused.

"Ting-a-ling?" He said. (Vonnegut, *Timequake* 242-243)

The dynamics in this conversation are different than in *Breakfast of Champions*. Trout is much more self-assured, and he takes on the active role in the conversation, while Vonnegut passively listens and asks questions. As an expression of two narrative selves, Vonnegut appears to have finally found a way to make peace with the alter ego that he continuously marginalizes. He does this by listening to and learning from the other self. Trout has always had a luckless existence in the plots of Vonnegut's novels, but up until *Timequake* he also was being pitied by Vonnegut rather than praised. In *Timequake*, Trout is still originally a poor and readerless science fiction author, but Vonnegut's narrative self provides him with a buffer of respect. Whereas in previous novels, Trout is self-loathing, in *Timequake* Vonnegut says that "his indestructible self-respect is what I loved most about Kilgore Trout" (Vonnegut, *Timequake* 211). The addition of this trait propels Trout into respectability by others as well. But if, in *Timequake*, the Vonnegut-self and the Trout-self are no longer incongruous, why do they still have to remain separate? One major reason is that metafiction is conversational -- it is a dialogic process. Without Trout, not only would Vonnegut be unable to converse with Trout, but he would also be unable to put Trout in

conversation with the worlds of his novels, to be able to comment on them in his own writing. The novels may appear incomplete or empty without Trout. The success of Vonnegut's novels relies on the interrogation of the world through many sources. While Vonnegut's narrative self may be a "thread" through the works, Trout (as an alter ego) gives that thread substance, providing it with the support it needs to stand within the textual universe. All authoritative powers are questionable in Vonnegut's works, which inherently jeopardizes Vonnegut's narrative authority -- any didacticism or overt breach of power could nullify his own narrative assertions. Thus, Kilgore Trout, a marginalized mirror image of Vonnegut, tempers Vonnegut's powerfully self-aware presence.

Conclusion

There are many other ways to illustrate how Trout is a crucial figure in the Vonnegut canon, but all of them rest on the idea that Trout is a supplementary voice that adds to the self-reflexivity of Vonnegut's work. Both of the conversations explored above conclude their respective novels; thus, they both end with Trout's words. Both phrases are absurd, basically meaningless phrases. "Make me young!" has no referents, no connection to the rest of the novel. But "Ting-a-ling" has infinite referents:

> Depending on his body language and tone of voice and social circumstances, he
> could indeed make it mean "And a merry Christmas to you, too." But it could also
> mean, like the Hawaiian's *aloha*, "Hello" or "Good-bye." The old science fiction
> writer could make it mean "Please: or "Thanks" as well, or "Yes" or "No," or "I
> couldn't agree with you more," or "If your brains were dynamite, there wouldn't
> be enough to blow your hat off." (Vonnegut 56)

Both endings privilege Trout's voice. But the ending of *Breakfast of Champions* points nowhere, revealing only confusion and destabilization. Perhaps this is why Tally argues that out of all of Vonnegut's novels, "*Breakfast of Champions* goes furthest down the road toward the typically postmodern novel" (xviii). *Timequake*'s ending, while similarly destabilizing, leaves open the possibility of potential (in fact, infinite) meaning. To me, this makes *Timequake* Vonnegut's most modernist novel, even while it follows postmodernist conventions. Of these conventions, Vonnegut's most typical one is metafiction, which Linda Hutcheon defines as "process made visible" (*Narcissistic Narrative* 6). Through Kilgore Trout, Vonnegut reveals the process of grappling with systems of meaning-making. A search for meaning can never end with one meaning -- it will either end in futility, or in infinite possibility. Many times, both solutions look exactly the same.

Trout's role in finding these potential meanings is threefold. As a fool figure, he allows the reader to delight in the irrationality of the world, garnering an initial acceptance of the ways things are. As a science fiction author, he provides a safe space for interpreting and interrogating realities that would be incomprehensible if represented through the lens of realism. Finally, as an alter ego for Vonnegut, Trout is in and of himself a metafictional device through which Vonnegut maintains a relationship with his own writing. Trout's voice is ultimately privileged, even as it is presented in a marginalized fashion in the guise of the fool and the science fiction author. But this guise is necessary for Trout to be taken seriously. Parody and parable coexist; Trout needs to mock the world in order to declare how we may fix it. He himself needs to be a pitiful product of the broken systems he critiques in order to critique them. In Vonnegut's world, Trout cannot be a messiah unless he is cracked. The process of unearthing the truth about the

world he lives in requires tearing every attested worldview apart and creating new ones from the wreckage.

In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut says that his characters are "the listless playthings of enormous forces" (Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse* 164). For Trout, these forces take the shape of a reading public that refuses to acknowledge his ideas or his chosen genre of writing, an economy that does not support him, a government that does not represent him, and a religion that does not give him hope. But, by writing, Trout is able to make these forces *his* playthings, parodying, critiquing, and providing potential solutions for everything he sees wrong with society. And Trout helps Vonnegut make the act of writing *his* plaything. Without Trout, Vonnegut's novels would lose a sense of possibility. The unlikely wisdom of Trout as a fool figure interprets anew a stale and outmoded religious ideology. The ingenuity of Trout's science fiction stories relentlessly challenges the literary conventions that would devalue his stories; it represents reality in a more valuable way than literature could. And as an alter ego for Vonnegut, Trout refuses to become absorbed into the central narrative self, always remaining a voice with potential for disruption, and very often getting the last word.

Ting-a-ling?

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