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The Double Logic of Narrative: The Critifictional Anti- Narrative of Kurt Vonnegut's Slaughter House-Five

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Abstract

More than 23 years have passed since the war was over whereas Vonnegut's struggle to compile a few words into a novel was not over. He already realized that he couldn't tell his story in the conventional narrative mode and he needed a new approach to describe a situation that goes beyond human comprehension. In Slaughterhouse-Five, Vonnegut follows a "Double Logic of Narrative" as a result of which the narrative simultaneously presents the primacy of the story (Histoire, Fabula) over discourse (receipt, Sjuzhet) as well as the importance of discourse over the story. The double logic of narrative" and the "critifictional anti-narrative" of Slaughterhouse-Five endorse the pursuit of non-knowledge undertaken by the narrator as well as the protagonist of the novel thereby throwing the readers into a labyrinth of complex techniques of narration. The critifictional anti-narrative of Slaughterhouse-Five places the reader in a position impossible to judge whether the story or the discourse is more prominent. The inversions and complications of the text-only serve to reinforce rather than dissolve the narrative logic. Slaughterhouse-Five, by writing itself into nonsense and non-knowledge becomes a fiction seeking 'LESSNESS', and the author by committing the blessed sin of divergence makes possible the "possibly impossible" and succeeds in his portrayal of the fractioned realities of human life and his pursuit of knowledge.

Keywords: Double Logic of Narrative – Critifiction - metafiction—digression- antinovel – non-linearity-surrealism- spastic time

A montage of satire, black humor, and science fiction, Slaughterhouse-Five (1969), a philosophical war novel by the American novelist Kurt Vonnegut, deals with the traumatic effects of the Dresden raid on both the main character and the narrator. The dilemma and the dread of writing anything intelligent about a heinous massacre,

forced the writer twenty- three years of procrastination to begin and complete the novel. More than 23 years have passed since the war was over whereas Vonnegut's struggle to compile a few words into a novel was not over. He already realized that he couldn't tell his story in the conventional narrative mode and he needed a new approach to describe a situation that goes beyond human comprehension. To the main character, Billy Pilgrim, the war has resulted in almost a lifelong stultification, quiet conformity in public life, and escapist fantasy in private life. And the entire story-the narrator's and the protagonist's is told in segmented images, with a few over transitions, and with sweeps back and forth across time.

Kurt Vonnegut's experiences as a soldier and prisoner of war had a profound influence on his later works. During the Battle of the Bulge, Vonnegut was imprisoned in Dresden and witnessed the Feb.13 – Feb.-15, 1945 bombing of Dresden which dilapidated most of the city. Vonnegut was one of the seven American prisoners of war in Dresden to survive in their cell in an underground meat locker of the plant known as "Schlachthof Funf" meaning slaughter house. The Germans assigned him the work of gathering and collecting cadavers for the mass cremation. This horrendous experience that forms the crux and core of Slaughterhouse Five is a major running theme of at least six other works by Vonnegut. Vonnegut, as he does in some of his other works such as Breakfast of Champions, uses an alternative title for this novel "the Children's Crusade: A Duty –Dance with Death". In the 13th century, children had been sold as slaves, and this metaphor is used to symbolize war, which in Vonnegut's opinion, is comparable to the sale of children into slavery. "This is a novel somewhat in the telegraphic schizophrenic manner of tales of the planet Tralfamadore, where the flying

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saucers come from”, says Vonnegut about his novel in the title page and this draws our attention to the narrative techniques employed by the novelist to describe Billy Pilgrim’s odyssey through time which reflects the journey of our own fractured lives as we search for meaning in what we are afraid to know.

Certain novels emerge with a strong plot with absolutely no story while others fail to reach the readers even with a striking story due to the lack of a well-defined plot. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut follows a “Double Logic of Narrative” as a result of which the narrative simultaneously presents the primacy of the story (Histoire, Fabula) over discourse (Receipt, Sjuzhet) as well as the importance of discourse over the story. The Narrative Reader explicates this technique in its glossary of narrative terms as:

The twin and contradictory gesture of narrative production, whereby a narrative will simultaneously present the primacy of the story (histoire, fibula) over discourse (receipt, sjuzhet) as well as stressing the importance of discourse over the story, in the first gesture, the event is the origin of meaning; in the second, the event is the effect of the production of meaning with particular narrative circumstances. This aporia constitutes the driving force of narrativity (McQuillan 317).

Vonnegut in *Slaughterhouse-Five* attempts to avoid knowledge deliberately, particularly the kind of knowledge that is received, approved, and determined by conventions. “The double logic of narrative” and the “critifictional anti-narrative” of *Slaughterhouse-Five* endorse the pursuit of non-knowledge undertaken by the narrator as well as the protagonist of the novel thereby throwing the readers into a labyrinth of complex techniques of narration.

The novel affirms its autonomy by exposing its lies; it tells stories that openly claim to be invented, to be false, and inauthentic. Dismissing absolute knowledge and what passes for reality, the novel defiantly states that “reality as such does not exist, that the idea of reality is an imposture (221). This makes the novel a ‘critifiction’, a term popularized by Raymond Federman in his book *Critifiction*. Critifiction refers to “a kind of narrative that contains its theory and even its criticism” (Federman 31).

The novel also flouts the conventional modes of narration making it an anti-narrative which Mc Quillian calls:

A text which seems to adopt the conventions of narrative but systematically works to question, subvert or undermine those conventions. It can be argued that the inversion and complications characteristic of such texts only serve to reinforce rather than dissolve a narrative logic. At the least such subversion depends upon that which it subverts (315).

The adoption of the critifictional anti-narrative renders the protagonist, Billy Pilgrim, easy access to non-knowledge. Billy Pilgrim is aware of the nature and time of his death which he relates to the readers using psychological time.

Billy’s death is the result of a strange string of events. Billy had been an incredibly inept fighter that according to his fellow soldier, Roland Weary, led to the capture of both. Just because Weary blames Billy for his capture and eventual death, Weary’s morbid friend, Paul Lazzaro, vows to have Billy killed, as, according to him revenge is “the sweetest thing in life (101). Billy, who travels in time, already knows where and how he would be killed: Lazzaro has his shot after a public speaking event in a future where the United States has been Balkanized. During Billy’s public speech, he declares that following his lecture he would be killed. He uses this fact to convey his message that because time is another dimension, all three-dimensional slices as we know them exist simultaneously. Therefore, everyone is always alive and death is not a tragic event. “Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time (17) and his random and repeated visits to the different parts of his life, including his death, expose us to the stark realities of human existence.

Set against the backdrop of the 1945 Dresden bombing, *Slaughterhouse-Five* makes a “faction” i.e. a fiction “based on and combined with facts” (Cuddon 302). The novel is also significant in another facet as it offers the readers glimpses into the author’s own life and his hellacious experiences of war.

Vonnegut ponders also over the nature of art. His refusal to separate the difficulty of telling his story from the story proper reflects one of the most significant developments in avant-garde art. He recognizes that the artist can no longer make an artificial distinction between the result of his artistry and its process. If he is to reveal anything like the truth, it must include means as well as ends. Thus, *Slaughterhouse-Five* may also be cast into the

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genre of a metafiction. The Oxford Dictionary of Literary terms defines metafiction thus:

Metafiction is a fiction about fiction: or more especially a kind of fiction that openly comments on its own fictional status. In a weak sense, many modern novels that speak about novelists having problems writhing their novels may be called metafictional in so far as they discuss the nature of fiction; but the term is normally used for works that involve a significant degree of self-consciousness about themselves as fictions, in ways that go beyond occasional apologetic addresses to the reader (Baldick 203).

Metafiction, by systematically flouting its conditions of artifice and thereby probing into the problematic relationship between real-seeming artifice and reality, celebrates the release of human creativity in the face of a culture where all forms of representations are reduced to the status of mere simulacra. Meta-fictionists, holding that “novel is very much like inscriptions on the frontispiece of the imaginary castle they invent on the spot”; consider the playful relationship established between the author and text a private act (Fredman 20).

Vonnegut’s treatment of time is also quixotic. Chronological or mechanical time (outer time, “objective time”) is represented in the novel as only one measure, one route of experience. Real-time includes psychological time (inner time, ‘subjective time’), which is not linear but free-flowing and multidimensional. Billy, the protagonist, becomes unstuck in time. Having been abducted by the Tralfmadorians, time becomes one entity to Billy. The Tralfmadorians teach him to experience events out of order, instead of experiencing the linear progression of time. Billy’s unorthodox experience of time teaches him more about his own ordinary experiences. The science-fiction elements of the novel include time travel using time warps. To the Tralfomadorians, everything happens simultaneously. Tralfamadorians don’t see human beings as two-legged creatures, either. They see them as great millipedes—“with babies’ legs at one end and old people’s legs at the other”. Memory, being one of the major themes of the novel, the memories of Vonnegut and Billy cannot move past the Dresden massacre. Vonnegut’s approach to the non-linear narrative technique in *Slaughterhouse-Five* shows clearly Vonnegut’s struggle to remember his war experiences which are similar to trying to complete a

puzzle, he puts pieces of his memory together: one fragment from his childhood, one fragment from war, one from here and there until he completes his novel in nonchronological mode. Narrating his novel in nonchronological structure is further proof that Vonnegut overturns old-fashioned storytelling techniques.

‘Poot-tee-weet’, the meaningless cluster of sounds on which Vonnegut ends his opening and closing chapters hint at the breakdown of communication in modern life. Billy Pilgrim realizes that World War II has ended, and the world is quiet enough for him to hear a bird tweeting. Vonnegut warns that there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre, and the bird’s chirp is as nonsensical as anything else anyone says after mass destruction. The illogical and absurd nature of human life is brought up in the climax of the book. By ending the novel with this phrase, Vonnegut indicates that he feels there is nothing else to say about the Dresden bombing and the utter devastation of war. Because of Billy’s time-travel and the non-linear aspects of *Slaughterhouse-Five*’s plot, this ending is not chronologically the last scene of the novel, but it marks an emotional ending for Billy: his experience in the war will shape everything as he goes back to civilian life. Ironically, the climax occurs not with the bombing of Dresden, but with the execution of a man who committed petty theft. In this entire horror, death, and destruction situation, so much time is taken on the punishment of the man.

The novel also contains autobiographical elements. The protagonist himself and the character, Kilgore Trout, whom Billy meets while the former runs a newspaper line, may be considered the personae of the author. *Slaughterhouse-Five* combines science fiction elements with an analysis of the human condition from an uncommon perspective, using time travel as a plot device and the bombing of Dresden in World War II, the aftermath of which Vonnegut witnessed, as the launching pad. As a narrative hybrid of “faction realities”, the novel leads to a re-evaluation and new reading of a major event in the history of Europe.

Just because language escapes analytical logic, the impossible becomes possible in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. It is a language that accepts and even indulges in contradictions: a language that plays with repetitions, permutations, neologisms, and puns; a language that dislocates conventional syntax while designing new typography, in so doing renders the world even more

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unintelligible. For example, in Chapter 3, shortly after Billy and his group have been captured, they pass German reserves rushing to fight at the front: “[The Germans] were festooned with machine-gun belts, smoked cigars and guzzled booze. They took wolfish bites from sausages, patted their horny palms with potato-masher grenades.” The cheery, silly-sounding words and phrases, like “festooned,” “guzzled booze,” “wolfish,” “horny,” and “potato-masher,” are at odds with the seriousness of the situation. (32). Escape into the rather unconventional modes of writing can be attributed to the absurdity and the impossibility of saying the world. Alain Robbe Grillet expresses his views on the absurdity and impossibility of saying the world in his essay “A Future of the Novel”, which Raymond Federman quotes in *Crifiction*:

The world is neither significant nor absurd. It IS, quite simply. That, in any case, is the more remarkable thing about it. And suddenly, the obviousness of this strikes us with irresistible force. All at once, the whole splendid construction collapses; opening our eyes unexpectedly, we have experienced, once too often, the shock of this stubborn reality we were pretending to have mastered. Around us, defying the noisy pack of our animistic or protective adjectives, things ARE THERE. Their surfaces are distinct and smooth, intact, eroding their smallest corner, in flattening their slightest curve (14-15).

The realization that there is either too much to know or nothing more to know is true of Vonnegut’s novel that is framed by chapters one and ten in which Vonnegut himself talks about the difficulties of writing the novel and the effects of Dresden on his own life:

All this happened, more or less. The war parts, anyway, are pretty much true. One guy I knew was shot in Dresden for taking a teapot that wasn’t his. Another guy I knew did threaten to have his enemies killed by hired gunmen after the war. And so on. I’ve changed all the names. (1)

Vonnegut relates his unsuccessful attempts to write about Dresden though he had been there in the vortex of war for twenty-three years. He is very proud of the outline of the

story that he draws in crayon on the back of a roll of wallpaper. The outline, however, does not help Vonnegut’s writing. He initially expected to craft a masterpiece about this grave and immense subject, but, while the horrific destruction he witnessed occupies his mind over the years, it defies his attempts to capture it in writing. Vonnegut’s antiwar stance only adds to the difficulty for he realizes that writing a book against war would prevent war as effectively as writing a book against glaciers would prevent their motion. He remarks “I think of how useless the Dresden part of my memory has been, and yet how tempting Dresden has been to write about” (2). The result is *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Vonnegut defends the rather unconventional mode of his narration in the introductory chapter:

And I say to Sam now: “Sam here’s ‘the book’. It is short and jumbled and jangled, Sam, because there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre. Everything is supposed to be dead, to never anything or want anything ever again. Everything is supposed to be very quiet after a massacre, and it always is, except for the birds. (14)

The author’s reflections about the birth and growth of his novel make *Slaughterhouse-Five* the clearest instance of metafiction or fiction about fiction. The impossibility of saying anything new diverts the attention of novelists to fiction itself- the techniques and art of fiction, the language used, and the modes of narration. As the world becomes or and more unintelligible, artists, poets, and novelists realize that the real world is perhaps somewhere else. And even if the world is not elsewhere, it is a world no longer to be known, no longer to be expressed or represented but to be imagined, to be invented new. All fictions are more or less a commentary on the text itself, about the process of being and maintaining existence. In self consciously displaying the fictional nature of all representations of reality, metafiction point out that our knowledge of the world is ever mediated through language. Since the relation between language and art is already problematic, mimesis in art has become knotty. Therefore, metafiction, by explicitly commenting on the process of fiction-making, displays the arbitrariness of language that fails as a medium of communication since meanings are always slippery. Derrida calls it ‘the indeterminacy of language’. Patricia Waugh describes metafiction as “fictional writing

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which self consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality” (2). The real world is now to be found in language; inside the language and can be created only by language. Thus, language becomes an autonomous reality creating a world with the word. Rather the accepting the limitations of the possible, Slaughterhouse-Five proposes no limits for language into the impossible, even if that language becomes contradictory or irrational. It no longer opposes what is communicable to what is not communicable, what makes sense to what does not make sense, for there is much value in making nonsense as there is in making sense.

The play on the nonsensical is evident in the opening and closing lines of the novel. The novel begins with the following line: “Listen: Billy Pilgrim has now come unstuck in time” (1) and ends in “Poo-tee-weet” (157). Vonnegut narrates his story by adopting a double point of view. First, he lets his readers know about his own war-time experience so that they will never forget as they read about his characters’ experience, that Vonnegut is spinning a story partly out of his life materials. Then, the author stands back, hovering offstage assuming all the prerogatives of the omniscient narrator. In this role, he is above and beyond the action, telling things that characters cannot know, supplying broad perspective in time and space, and going into the private thoughts of his characters.

Vonnegut makes most of his sentences diminutive, some, of medium length and a very few of them long. Written in a spare, declarative style, the sentences are simple—often blunt—and repetitive, and are arranged in short paragraphs within concise sections separated by asterisks. Vonnegut uses no transitions between sentences or paragraphs, so the overall feeling is one of abruptness or chopiness. He opens, more often than not, with the subject. Just as he prefers to use short scenes, parables, anecdotes, and notions not overtly connected, he leaves the reader to make transitions and relations. He chooses to use simple sentences with as few conjunctions as possible thereby leaving the reader to make both connections and emphases. Vonnegut also makes an endless play with repetitions. For instance the phrase, ‘so it goes’ occurs one hundred and fifty times in the novel and is used whenever death is mentioned, be it that of a man, animal, or the bubbles in champagne.

Imagination becomes pla[y]girism in Slaughterhouse-Five. Imagination is used in the sense that it is essential in the formulation of a discourse; pla[y]girism, because the novel brings together pieces of other discourses; an unfinished endless discourse because what is presented here is open at both ends, and as such more could be added endlessly. As Tristram the narrator says “the more I write, the more I need to write” (TS 78). Vonnegut makes many of his points by alluding, directly or implicitly, to classic stories in the Bible. He engages in a form of what is known as mythopoeia: the remaking or reinterpreting of myths. Thus, the knowledge of the world and man is replaced by an act of searching (researching even) within the fiction itself for the implications of what it means to write fiction. Slaughterhouse-Five exposes its lies and thus becomes an act of self-reflection.

Vonnegut rejects the traditional plot with rising action, climax, denouement, and catharsis and takes up an incoherent plot. An ordered and rational arrangement would suggest some cause and effect, some human motivation, some progress, and resolution. It would impose meaning on what men regard as absurd, chaotic, and obscene. So Vonnegut writes in his introductory chapter, “It is so short and jumbled and jangled, Sam, because there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre” (14). The conventional story form would have reduced such atrocities to something comprehensible and finite. On the other hand, the war buddies know that their knowledge of Dresden cannot be contained and that it is infinite and comprehensible. The story is told partly in chronological time and largely in psychological time. It consists of apparently discrete images, quotations, thumbnail sketches, and so on, taking the readers back and forth across the time, from history to fantasy, facts to fiction. The zigzag movement of narration Vonnegut affirms is the authentic rendering of the mind's resistance to the neatness of pattern and schematization, and at the same time, it is a continuous declaration by the author of the artful arbitrariness of all authorial decisions. Vonnegut like Lawrence Sterne took inspiration from the crisis of not having to say anything new and sinned divergence – moving away from the accepted ways of telling a story. The deviant mode of narration ultimately strengthens the story and highlights the plot, thereby making it a “blessed sin of divergence”. If the traditional novel continued to describe and explain reality to give that reality a certain moral and even spiritual order, based on the obsolete formulas of Realism and Naturalism, the new fiction

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presents the form rather than the content of reality. To achieve its aims, such sort of fictions bring together fragments of reality, remnants, and detritus, and consequently, montage, collage, nonsense, chance happenings, automation, abstraction, stream of consciousness, and so on, become the governing elements of Slaughterhouse-Five Just like Tristram Shandy. Eliot words in Four Quartets is true about Vonnegut's novel

Who shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the First Time (Little

Gidding).

Slaughterhouse-Five ends where it began with the jabbering the bird, "poo-tee-sweet". Thus, "the end often seems like a beginning and the beginning often marks the end" (Iser 9). The novel exposes its readers to the grim realities of human life such as the helplessness of man in a highly mechanized world, the illusion of free will, the existential angst, and man's incessant search for happiness and fulfillment. The wide implications of the novel make it impossible to categorize the novel into any one particular genre.

The novel's focus on the absurd situations, presented humorously explicitly exposes elements of Black Humour ingrained in the novel. Black Humour, a form of extreme savage satire, makes the reader laugh. Black Humour as defined by M.H. Abrams is where "Baleful, naive or inept characters in a fantastic or nightmarish modern world play out their roles in what Ionesco called a 'tragic farce', in which the events are often simultaneously comic, horrifying and absurd" (2).

Slaughterhouse-Five is also noted for its fine blend of Realism and Surrealism. Some of the scenes like the war episodes, especially the bombing of Dresden are presented with due regard o historical objective reality:

Dresden was destroyed on the night of February 13, 1945, Billy Pilgrim began. We came out of our shelter the next day. He told Montana about the four guards who in their astonishment and grief resembled a barbershop quartet. He told her about the stockyards with all the fencepost gone, with roof and windows gone – told her about

seeing little logs lying around. Some people had been caught in the firestorm. So it goes. (130).

Such true-to-detail descriptions account for the realistic aspect of the novel, whereas, the dream sequences and the fantastic come under the surrealism mode, plunging the readers into a world of illusion. Billy's departure on the spaceship and his life on the planet Tralfamadore provide an escape from the violence and suffering on earth and at the same time put forth an alternative philosophy of life that would make life easier for the Earthlings. Slaughterhouse-Five, thus also falls under the genre of the "fantastic literature", causing hesitation in the reader whether the story is to be believed or not. Such forms of writing, situated on the borderline between the marvelous and the uncanny have been dealt with in detail by Todorov in his Introduction a la Literature Fantastique (1970). Disk de Geest speaks of this in his essay on "French Structuralism" in Julian Wolfreys' Modern European Criticism and Theory:

Todorov tries to reconstruct, by the principles of Structuralist narratology at that time, the underlying pattern that yields this fantastic effect. On the level of syntax, the specific concatenation of events contributes strongly to the effect of the suspense. On the level of the semantic and thematic organizations, Todorov discriminates between themes of the (e.g., metamorphosis or the multiple personalities) and themes of the other (e.g., sexuality, cruelty, and death (Wolfreys 269).

The novel does not confine itself to a single theme. It scuttles from a scathing satire on war, mechanization, patriarchy, modernity, middle-class life, marriage, family, and too many such motifs. The characters are carefully culled by the writer to reinforce the divergent themes of the novel. Both the characterization and the narrative trajectory adopted by Vonnegut fall in line with the themes, the novel is concerned with. The novel is primarily about war and its traumatic effects. But Vonnegut realizes the difficulty of telling the turmoil and catastrophe of war using a well-ordered, coherent, and well-structured plot and therefore he adopts the narrative techniques of Critifiction and anti-novel to serve his rationale.

Timewarp, the extra-sensory perceptions, the dreams, the fantasies, the tales of Tralfamadore and a

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protagonist who "has come unstuck in time"(17) are all the various mechanisms employed by the author for the narration of a tale of total disintegration. Vonnegut also takes care to ensure the participation of his readers by leaving certain 'gaps' in his work. Such gaps are called 'hermeneutic gaps' or "information gaps", "the most typical gap in narrative fiction" (Rimmon Kenan 12). According to Kenan:

The hermeneutic aspect of reading consists in detecting an enigma (gap), searching for clues, forming hypotheses, trying to choose among them, and (more often than not) constructing one finalized hypothesis. Hermeneutic gaps can range from very trivial ones, which are either filled-in automatically do not require filling-in, through various degrees of importance, to gaps that are so crucial and central in the narrative as to become the very pivot of the reading process(128).

Such gaps can be "temporary that is, filled-in at some point in the text" or "permanent that is, remain open even after the text has come to an end" (Renan 128). Slaughterhouse-Five is full of such gaps which enhance interest and curiosity, prolong the reading process, and contribute to the reader's dynamic participation in the meticulous deciphering of the story. Vonnegut achieved this by maintaining a discrepancy between the story-time and text-time

The narrative device of spastic time leads to a logical and emotional instability in the novel which makes it easier for the readers to identify themselves with Billy who attempts to make sense of his life. We do not see Billy as everyone else in his life sees him, rather, instead of seeing life in a linear progression, understanding it moment by moment, we see the entirety of his life coming together to define him. In other words, we can better understand and sympathize with Billy's dazed wandering through the totality of events that make up his existence. "The subversive treatment of the various categories of time" has often been suggested as "one of the characteristics of modern narratives" (Kenan 58)

The timing of the novel's publication also deserves attention: in 1969, the United States was in the midst of the dismal Vietnam War. Vonnegut was an

outspoken pacifist and critic of the conflict. Slaughterhouse-Five revolves around the wilful incineration of 100,000 civilians, in a city of extremely dubious military significance, during an argument just war. Appearing when it did, then, Slaughterhouse-Five made a forceful statement about the campaign in Vietnam, a war in which incendiary technology was once more being employed against non-military targets in the name of an unconvinced cause.

The crtfictional anti-narrative of Slaughterhouse-Five, thus, places the reader in a position impossible to judge whether the story or the discourse is more prominent. The inversions and complications of the text-only serve to reinforce rather than dissolve the narrative logic. Slaughterhouse-Five, by writing itself into nonsense and non-knowledge becomes a fiction seeking 'LESSNESSness', and the author by committing the blessed sin of divergence makes possible the "possibly impossible" and succeeds in his portrayal of the fractioned realities of human life and his pursuit of knowledge.

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