

CAT'S CRADLE: THE APOCALYPTIC CREATIVITY OF KURT VONNEGUT

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From the earliest times down to our own days, St. John's vision of the Apocalypse has been the source for a considerable corpus of imaginative works which have explored the relationship between individual and community by means of the historical process of finitude. It is therefore not surprising that apocalyptic imagination reaches its greatest heights in historical and cultural periods which are marked literally or symbolically by a profound sense of destruction and death. While there is no doubt that this element of pessimism permeates much of apocalyptic literature, it must be noted that, strictly speaking, the biblical concept of the Apocalypse has a clear prophetic orientation. To quote Lois Zamora:

Apocalypse is not *merely* a synonym for disaster or cataclysm or chaos. It is, in fact, a synonym for «revelation», and if the Judeo-Christian revelation of the end of history includes –indeed, catalogues– disasters, it also envisions a millennial order which represents the potential antithesis to the undeniable abuses of human history. (10)

The same paradoxical interrelation between destruction and construction, between catastrophe and revelation, is the structural principle articulating the narrative world of *Cat's Cradle* (1963). Kurt Vonnegut's fourth novel can be interpreted from a negative standpoint laying emphasis, as Stanley Schatt does, on the idea that its apocalyptic ending does not entail any kind of universal revelation or transformation, since «there is no suggestion... that any of the characters really change as a result of the catastrophe.» (68) Nevertheless, in addition to these negative implications, a positive dimension can

be detected: not for nothing is it the very destruction of the world that drives the narrator to write his book, to reveal to us literally *The Day the World Ended* and to make the reader an imaginary survivor of the end of the world. Seen from this perspective, the apocalyptic treatment developed by Vonnegut would serve to illustrate, in the words of John Barth, «how an artist may paradoxically turn the felt ultimacies of our time into material and means for his work.» (78)

In the following pages I would like to suggest that the author uses first and foremost the literary apocalyptic tradition to endow *Cat's Cradle* with a creative and parodic dimension. I see this process of transformation as being in line with postmodern fiction, and justifying the opinion of Tom LeClair when he states that novels of this kind «though often possessing a deconstructive element, are primarily reconstructive, showing how orders and forms in the world (and not just in the artistic text) can arise out of seeming chaos.» (21)

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Christopher Calvert has pointed out that Vonnegut uses St. John's vision of the Apocalypse in three of his novels:

The image sequences of darkness in *Mother Night* and of fire in *Slaughterhouse-Five* follow closely the vision of apocalypse in the *Revelation* of St. John. The remaining key image in St. John's account is water and this is supplied by *Cat's Cradle*, making Vonnegut's three World War II novels an apocalyptic trilogy structurally designed around the three most important elements in biblical apocalyptic literature. (53)

In the particular case of *Cat's Cradle*, this statement is fully confirmed, not only in the image of water, which is undoubtedly a key image, but also through other explicit allusions to the final book of the New Testament. In Vonnegut's narrator's final description of the freezing of the ocean, we read:

There was a sound like that of the gentle closing of a portal as big as the sky, the great door of heaven being closed softly. It was a grand AH-WHOOM. I opened my eyes —and all the sea was *ice-nine*. The moist green earth was a blue-white pearl. The sky darkened. *Borasisi*, the sun, became a sickly yellow ball, tiny and cruel. The sky was filled with worms. The worms were tornadoes. (163)

This passage is very similar to one in St. John's vision where at one point he glimpses a throne through a door open in the sky and «before the throne there was a sea of glass like unto a crystal.» (Rev. 4: 6) The parallel between this «sea of glass» and *ice-nine* —the substance which causes the oceans to freeze in the novel— is clear, as well

as the reference to crystal which corresponds to «blue-white pearl.» In addition, the statement that «the sun became black as sackcloth of hair» (Rev. 6: 12) is an image which can be identified with the darkening of the sky and the sun's transformation into a «sickly yellow ball» in Vonnegut's novel.

Another significant analogy can be appreciated in the fact that both John, the narrator of *Cat's Cradle*, and his biblical homonym «reveal» to us that the end of the world is a direct consequence of the disappearance of water as such and its transformation into a destructive element.¹ Furthermore, it is worth noticing that «Papa» Monzano and the exterminating angels happen to use the same means (vials) to bring about the end of the world.

These references and allusions to St. John expand the apocalyptic framework of *Cat's Cradle*, but also contain in the final instance a parodic intent. This aspect is made clear in the marked dissimilarity between the Christian and the Bokononist bible. In this respect, while the Christian faith considers the sacred scriptures to be a compendium of divine truths, the Bokononist bible openly admits, in the words of its prophet Bokonon, that his is a religion based on *foma*, that is, on «harmless untruths.» Moreover, if the Apocalypse is announced as the last and final word of God to the world, hence its prophetic importance, the final sentence closing *The Books of Bokonon* and *Cat's Cradle* reads as follows:

If I were a younger man, I would write a history of human stupidity; and I would climb to the top of Mount McCabe and lie down on my back with my history for a pillow; and I would take from the ground some of the blue-white poison that makes statues of men; and I would make a statue of myself, lying on my back, grinning horribly, and thumbing my nose at You Know Who. (179)

Vonnegut uses another familiar literary model to extend and develop the novel's apocalyptic vision: Herman Melville's masterpiece, *Moby Dick*. The literary echoes of this «mighty book» are evident from the very beginning of *Cat's Cradle*, where the narrator introduces himself with these words: «Call me Jonah. My parents did, or nearly did. They called me John.» (7) This phrase, which immediately brings to mind the famous opening line of *Moby Dick*, also recalls the biblical aspect of Jonah in Father Mapple's sermon. It follows that John, like Ishmael and Jonah, will be led by «Conveyances and motives, both conventional and bizarre» (7) until he fulfils his mission

1. Here we might mention the possible influence on our author of the famous apocalyptic poem by Robert Frost titled «Ice and Fire», in which these two images of destruction find a direct correspondence in the atom bomb and ice-nine, Hoenikker's two lethal creations. John L. Simons has also seen a similitude between this scientist and the Charon of the *Divine Comedy*, in that both function as underworld figures entrusted with the task of leading man «into eternal dark, into fire and ice» (97).

which is both prophetic («to preach the Truth to the face of Falsehood») and literary («To preach Bokomonism to the face of Christianity.»)

Both Ishmael and John are witnesses of the destruction to which they are driven by their leaders. In *Moby Dick*, it is Ahab who with his obsessive monomania leads his crew to their tragic death. His literary equivalent in *Cat's Cradle* is the dictatorial president of San Lorenzo, who suffers from an incurable disease and commits suicide by swallowing a portion of ice-nine, which in the end will represent the death-sentence for all humanity.

Other correspondences between the two novels are derived from the similarity between the white whale and Mount McCabe, the main mountain enclave of San Lorenzo. *Moby Dick* has «a peculiar snow-white wrinkled forehead, and a high, pyramidal white hump» (281) and harpoons «all twisted and wrenched in him» (260) while Mount McCabe is described as follows:

It was in the sunrise that the cetacean majesty of the highest mountain on the island, of Mount McCabe, made itself known to me. It was a fearful hump, a blue whale, with one queer stone plug on its back for a peak. In scale with a whale, the plug might have been the stump of a snapped harpoon. (133)

A later description also tells us that Mount McCabe «was a natural formation» which «from a distance... seemed conveniently laced with ramps and ledges.» (133) There can be no doubt that this is another obvious allusion to the natural wrinkles that distinguish the whale.

In both novels there is reference to the mirage known as «Fata Morgana.» In the final chapter of *Moby Dick* this optical illusion is mentioned when, after the violent attack of the whale, some crew members watch the sinking of the «Pequod.» It is then that the battered silhouette of the boat is likened to a «fading phantom, as in the gaseous Fata Morgana.» (684) In *Cat's Cradle* there is a chapter called «Fata Morgana» in which we are told how Frank Hoenikker, after spending four days in a boat with hardly a bite of food, thinks he is suffering from this optical illusion: «I raised my eyes to my Maker, willing to accept whatever His decision might be. And my eyes alighted on a glorious mountain peak above the clouds. Was this Fata Morgana —the cruel deception of a mirage?» (56) Bearing in mind this character's state of physical exhaustion, it is hardly surprising that he should doubt the reality of his vision. Moreover, if we reflect on the close resemblance between the white whale and Mount McCabe, and the fact that *Moby Dick* «had actually been encountered in opposite latitudes at one and at the same instant of time» (280), Frank's «Fata Morgana» takes on even greater significance.

Another parallelism between *Moby Dick* and *Cat's Cradle* is seen in the prophecies. In Melville's novel it is the mysterious Fedallah who finally predicts the tragic end of Ahab and the «Pequod» just as in *Cat's Cradle* it is Bokomon who prophesies the end of the world with these enigmatic words: «the golden boat will sail again when

the end of the world is near.» (71) The «golden boat» referred to by Bokonon is «the lifeboat of the ship that had brought Bokonon and Corporal McCabe to San Lorenzo» (136): a lifeboat which «Papa» Monzano had had gold-plated and used as a bed. When this «gold bed» (in which lies the crystalised body of the dictator) accidentally falls into the sea, Bokonon's prophecy comes true.

All these explicit allusions to *Moby Dick* lay special emphasis on the apocalyptic character of the novel. As Christopher Calvert observes:

Vonnegut's point may be that after approximately one hundred years of American history, the time between *Moby Dick* and *Cat's Cradle*, the same tendencies toward destruction are inherent in American society and they beckon with the same call to doom. (36)

However, it should also be noted that whereas Melville attempts to increase the verisimilitude of the novel by using a first-person narrative viewpoint, Vonnegut deliberately breaks with this illusion of objectivity, and thus, at the very beginning of the narration, informs us that John has been converted to Bokononism, which implies that «all of the true things I am about to tell you are shameless lies.» (9) In this way Vonnegut humorously counteracts the seriousness to which he has only half-tried to give shape by means of allusions to Melville's work.

Gulliver's Travels is another literary source for *Cat's Cradle*. Although this work could hardly be included in the apocalyptic tradition, Vonnegut makes use of it to stress jokingly the sickness of the human condition and its atavistic leanings towards destructiveness. In *Cat's Cradle* there are at least two explicit allusions to Swift's famous work.

In the land of Brobdingnag, tiny Gulliver gives a graphic description of the highly disagreeable physical aspect of a gigantic woman in these terms: «There was a woman with a cancer in her breast, swelled to a monstrous size, full of holes, in two or three of which I could have easily crept and covered my whole body.» (151) This repugnant vision is similar to the scene where Newt Hoenikker, «a very tiny young man ... as nicely scaled as Gulliver among the Brobdingnagians» (72), describes his father's grotesque ugliness: «His pores looked as big as craters on the moon. His ears and nostrils were stuffed with hair. Cigar smoke made him smell like the mouth of Hell. So close up, my father was the ugliest thing I had ever seen.» (13)

In the land of the Houyhnhnms, Gulliver contrasts the noble qualities which distinguish the creatures after whom the race was named with the primitive brutality of the Yahoos:

The Yahoos were the most filthy, noisome, and deformed animal which Nature ever produced, so they were the most restive and indocible, mischievous and malicious: they would privately suck the teats of the Houyhnhnms' cows,

kill and devour their cats, trample down their oats and grass, if they were not continually watched, and commit a thousand other extravagancies. (319)

In *Cat's Cradle*, the behaviour of Sherman Krebs, the «National Chairman of Poets and Painters for Immediate Nuclear War,» clearly shows the same irrational and destructive nature as the Yahoos. After lending him his New York apartment, John returns home to find that

Krebs was gone; but before leaving, he had run up three-hundred-dollars' worth of long distance calls, set my couch on fire in five places, killed my cat and my avocado tree, and torn the door off my medicine cabinet. He wrote this poem, in what proved to be excrement, on the yellow linoleum floor of my kitchen. (52-53)

Doing justice to his extravagant and nihilistic position, Krebs shows himself to be as irresponsible and savage as Swift's Yahoos. Moreover, the fact that this character (whose name evokes the word «crap») writes the poem in his own excrement brings to mind the revolting behaviour of the Yahoos, who on seeing Gulliver for the first time left him an unforgettable souvenir: «they began to discharge their excrements upon my head.» (270)

The same idea of filth and stench extends to the city of Bolívar and its inhabitants:

When Johnson and McCabe came upon the city, it was built of twigs, tin, crates, and mud—rested on the catacombs of a trillion happy scavengers, catacombs in a sour mash of slop, feculence, and slime (86)

The people were thin. There wasn't a fat person to be seen. Every person had teeth missing. Many legs were bowed or swollen. Not one pair of eyes were clear. The women's breasts were bare and paltry. The men wore loose loincloths that did little to conceal penes like pendulums on grandfather clocks. (88)

The negative vision which emerges from these quotes shows that Vonnegut's satirical model is clearly imitative of Swift. Both authors set out to criticise the putrid condition of humanity. Nonetheless, as Robert Scholes has indicated, there is a major difference between the two. While Swift's satiric procedure aims to reform the ethics of society by expounding the defects and imperfections of individuals, for Vonnegut «the spirit of playfulness and the care for form characteristic of the modern fabulators operate so as to turn the materials of satire and protest into comedy.» (41) In other words, while Swift criticises human nature, always with constructive moralising intent, Vonnegut rejects the moral certainty which characterises traditional satire and «seeks no reform of a world probably beyond remedy and certainly beyond comprehension.» (Harris 30)

This does not mean to say that Vonnegut does not feel indignant in the face of human stupidity, but that his literary response to it is different. Thus, in the most classic line of black humour, Vonnegut holds that laughter is the only instrument which can make us bear the senselessness surrounding of the tragic human condition. This has led Jerome Klinkowitz to dub *Cat's Cradle* «a mock-apocalyptic novel.» (52)

As we have just seen, Vonnegut makes use of the apocalyptic tradition to develop characters and motifs with which the reader is familiar. But at the same time his use of these literary models aims to create a tone of parody with respect to the original material. Parodying the style and spirit of these works, the author corroborates Linda Hutcheon's dictum: «Parody is one of the techniques of self-referentiality by which art reveals its awareness of the context-dependent nature of meaning.» (85)

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The textual and self-reflecting identity of *Cat's Cradle* is also reaffirmed by the use of literary games, another of the central aspects of the novel. A cat's cradle is a children's game which involves creating different geometric forms with a length of rope held taut in the hand. This game, which gives the novel its title, is the main creative metaphor used by the author to develop «the creative/destructive aspects of the innate human instinct to play.» (Tanner 189) This instinct for play mentioned by Tanner is clearly shown in Felix Hoenikker who, we are told, was only «playing» when he invented the atom-bomb. His three children also have their amusements: Angela plays the clarinet Frank's hobby is model-making and Newt paints pictures. This predisposition to creativity extends to the other characters. Thus, Mona Aamons Monzano is «a dazed addict of the xylophone»; Rudolph, Felix Hoenikker's twin brother, is a «music-box manufacturer»; Philip Castle makes mosaics; McCabe and Bokonon «create» a religion and John is a writer. When most of these characters die because of ice-nine, Vonnegut implies that all creative activity is under threat as long as people like Hoenikker are dedicated to the «game» of destruction. However, it is ironic that *Cat's Cradle*, like the Apocalypse, is born of the creative imagining of the end of the world.

A cat's cradle represents an empty and insubstantial image where each figure has no inherent significance. Its meaning is assigned to it by the players as they establish certain rules for the game. If these are respected, each player projects a meaning onto each figure. Thus, metaphorically speaking, the players create a fictitious order over the chaos of the world. But when the spirit of playfulness is missing, the game becomes a «nonsense game.» This is just what Felix Hoenikker does in the novel. When the scientist invents ice-nine, he creates a «cat's cradle,» but without respecting the two basic requisites which, according to Peter Hutchinson, should be found in every game: «a sense of humour—however light—and a feeling of spontaneity.» (14) In fact, when Hoenikker «plays» at creating ice-nine, he does not do so in search of entertainment (or at least not entirely so) but at the express command of the military. Moreover, if all play

should be a spontaneous, free and voluntary occupation, Hoenikker's «game» is as imperative and tyrannical as that of the Queen of Hearts in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*.

Cat's Cradle is an «artistic game» in which each chapter comes to form a miniature «cat's cradle» where every so often and «as it was supposed to happen» repeated images appear. This cyclical and dynamic process characterising the children's game is reflected in the circular structure of the novel itself.

The last chapter of *Cat's Cradle* is entitled «The End.» This chapter supposedly represents the final «chapter» of the world and of three books: Vonnegut's, John's and that of *The Books of Bokonon*. But this ending is deceptive, another *foma*, because the novel does not finish here in a strict sense, but in the first chapter («The Day the World Ended») where a John —as transformed by his experience as St. John, Ishmael and Gulliver— decides to write *Cat's Cradle*, a Bokononist book, instead of *The Day the World Ended*, the Christian book he originally intended to write. Thus, the end of the novel brings us back to the beginning, mimicking the repetitive nature of the cradle game. This process of repetition is also emphasised in the name Bokonon itself, the name of the author of *The Books of Bokonon*. The title of this Bokononist bible is especially appropriate, bearing in mind that the author's name suggests the word-play «Book-on-on.» As this word-play suggests, Bokonon is a character who «is written by himself» and in becoming «a book on himself» acquires the same fictitious nature as his work. However, the literary game does not end here. As John L. Simons points out:

Bokonon's «real» name is Johnson, that Johnson, alias Bokonon, is really «John's son», his author's imagined progeny, and each of them is Von's son since Johnson became the maker of *The Books of Bokonon* the year he landed on the fictional (but all too real) island of San Lorenzo, which was 1922, the year Kurt Vonnegut was born. (105)

Vonnegut's literary creation can thus be compared to the religious «creation» of Bokonon, since both fictionalise reality through the medium of games and draw attention to their own artificiality. In this connection, Klinkowitz notes that

meaning lies not in the content of a novel or the materials of a religion, but rather in the business of dealing with them. Once that process, that act of play, is complete, content should be forgotten. If not, it becomes the stuff of great mischief. (54-55)

To prevent the ingenuous reader from falling into this dangerous trap, Vonnegut hastens to say that «Nothing in this book is true.» In this way, the novel challenges the conventions of traditional narrative and asks to be read and interpreted simply as what it is: a literary game. In fact, *Cat's Cradle* fits the definition of a literary game perfectly:

a literary game may be seen as any playful, self-conscious and extended means by which an author stimulates his readers to deduce or to speculate, by which he encourages him to see a relationship between different parts of the text, or between the text and something extraneous to it. (Hutchinson 14)

In *Cat's Cradle* Vonnegut implicitly suggests that postmodern fiction is useful because it shows us that literature is an artistic game constructed to fictionalise our apocalyptic world. For this reason, Philip Castle recognises at the end of the novel how terrible it would be if «all of a sudden, there were no new books, new plays, new histories, new poems...» (145) This list, left significantly open, could well be completed with «new cat's cradles,» transforming, as does Vonnegut, the apocalyptic tradition into a creative game.

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