

WASTELAND SCENERY AND TECHNOLOGICAL SUICIDE IN KURT VONNEGUT'S APOCALYPTIC NARRATIVE: ADMONISHMENT AND EXHORTATION.

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A good number of Kurt Vonnegut's works deal with the consequences of technological abuse and its effects on natural order. The proliferating presence of the artificial, as opposed to the natural, leads to an abundance of dangerous or critical situations in his novels and short stories. Oppressive atmospheres and adverse environmental circumstances usually mark a setting in which nature, as well as the human being, face the threat of imminent extinction, as both are trapped in a continuous process of systematic decay and degradation. From an ecological point of view, this constant repetition of theme in Vonnegut's narrative offers plentiful scenes that describe how industrialized society's accumulation of huge amounts of chemical wastes and residue propitiates a progressive deterioration of the natural surroundings, inevitably leading to their subsequent demise. The ways and reasons of environmental destruction depicted by the author are indeed numerous, besides being quite common in everyday life; for instance, the effect of the omni-present and most worshipped of all industrial entities, the automobile, is a recurrent theme related to pollution in several works by Vonnegut, such as in *Breakfast of Champions*. He also draws attention to how we human beings jeopardise the Earth's future by littering it with empty plastic containers and other disposable materials which are not environment-friendly, as well as the remains of products used only to demonstrate how rich, attractive and clever we are; that is, to satisfy our own vanity. However, the most dismaying point he craves to make clear is that the planet continues to degrade not merely due to our greedy and vain disposition, but also because most people are utterly apathetic to global destruction, even when it is happening all around them. His underlying reproval is twofold, denouncing that the land is destroyed along with the people and that they are generally unaware of such an obvious truth. We persistently pollute without conscience, yielding absurd results, and yet, we never learn from our mistakes and keep abusing the planet until it will no longer be able to support us. Lawrence Broer also sees this pattern in Vonnegut, describing what he believes are the intentions behind his constant

portrayal of wasted landscapes, expressed by means of the author's alter-ego, Kilgore Trout:

The world that Vonnegut envisions through Kilgore Trout is a dying, nearly uninhabitable civilization of rusting junkers, which has turned the surface of the earth into an asphalt prairie, the atmosphere into poison gas, and the streams, rivers, and seas into sludge. Now even the automobiles, along with every form of animal and plant life, are threatened with extinction. (Broer, "Pilgrim's" 147)

Considering our ultimate dependence on nature and its resources, it is of logical consequence to acknowledge that not only the survival of the natural element surrounding humankind may be at stake, but also that of human beings themselves, endangered by noxious industrial activities in the apparent guise of scientific progress. But alongside the damages suffered by the environment, in Vonnegut's narrative we also encounter the portrayal of technology as a potential menace in the more intimate sphere of human social development, which is to say within the artificial societies designed by people themselves. The basic situation dealt with in most of these cases is generally the application of some kind of scientific advance which ultimately supposes a danger to the human condition, although its initial purpose was, ironically, that of providing remedies for a troublesome situation. The dystopian results of the ill-use of scientific knowledge converge into a persistent and insoluble lack of harmony between material technological progress and human spiritual improvement, as such aspects may even prove to be contrary, and not just incompatible. The immediate outcome is essentially what Thomas Carlyle defined as the destruction of "Moral Force", whose absence provides the main cause for the progressive decay which has taken place in modern society, as far as the spiritual climate is concerned. The consequences brought forth have gradually forged a dehumanised environment and an unpleasant sense of alienation experienced by the inhabitants of the new "technologically-based" world. As Carlyle himself already stated during the Industrial Revolution:

Undue cultivation of the outward, again, though less immediately prejudicial, and even for the time productive of many palpable benefits, must, in the long run, by destroying Moral Force, which is the parent of all other Force, prove not less certainly, and perhaps still more hopelessly, pernicious. This, we take it, is the grand characteristic of our age. By our skill in mechanism, it has come to pass, that in the management of external things we excel all other ages; while in whatever respects the pure moral nature, in true dignity of soul and character, we are perhaps inferior to most civilised ages. (Carlyle 18)

Besides questioning the utility of scientific advance, Vonnegut's treatment of the issue of technological unhappiness constantly focuses on a central problem that has little to do with technology itself, concentrating more on the imperfections

present in the character of human beings and the existence of a self-destructive impulse within it. Such is the case presented by his short story "Harrison Bergeron", in which the society of the twenty-first century beholds the establishment of a "new order" designed to guarantee equality between individuals. However, this condition is imposed upon the population in an overtly abusive manner, based exclusively on ignorance and the lack of all intellectual activity. The formula put into effect in this case is but a mere stupid and arbitrary attempt to assure social peace; an absurd project which, while serving the purpose of avoiding any possible conflict between people, simply resorts to the prevention of any kind of competition. The method employed is that of handicapping individuals both physically and mentally, thus neutralizing all their natural skills and abilities. By means of this mechanistic process, the very existence of the human being is at risk, in spite of the apparent aim of achieving true progress for humanity, as one citizen childishly believes: "we'd be right back to the dark ages again, with everybody competing against everybody else. You wouldn't like that, would you?" (Vonnegut, *Welcome* 9). Making use of uncanny situations similar to this, Vonnegut also wishes to highlight the frivolous attitude of society's leaders whenever they propose to carry out certain types of social reform, either based on blind faith in technology or some other mass-controlling design, such as consumerism, radical religious gibberish, or political demagoguery. As Lawrence Broer properly points out:

This is the demonic world of free enterprise and the vicious class system it creates; the cold and ruthless efficiency of big business conglomerates indifferent to human suffering or the destruction of natural resources; attendant corporate legal viciousness; the lunacy of irresponsible mechanization; the amassing of nuclear weapons in the pursuit of peace; the bizarre quest for God and spiritual salvation through material acquisitions and technological advance... (Broer, *Sanity* 4)

Vonnegut actually insists more on a proper human approach to a given matter, prior to the employment of any kind of advanced technology. He defends the idea that any innovation intended to improve the human condition previously requires a cautious consideration of human character as well, besides full understanding of the risks implied. Harrison Bergeron matches the pattern of constant human folly; he rebels against the handicapping machinery of the government by making use of his natural gifts of wit and physical resources, but ends up acting as intolerant as his enemies. He strives to liberate himself and all other men and women whose skills, whether on the intellectual or on the athletic scale, are likewise diminished by force, but the problem arises anew when Harrison assumes a dictatorial behaviour which proves to be equally oppressive: "Everybody must do what I say at once!... I am a greater ruler than any man who ever lived! Now watch me become what I *can* become!" (Vonnegut, *Welcome* 11). In his determination of redeeming the world, Harrison makes the mistake of believing he is above all other individuals and constricts the

values of the revolution to himself. His praiseworthy struggle to overthrow the mutilating technocracy is thus converted into a vehicle of exclusive self-praising absolutism, surrendering to the ever-present element of human vanity and a deplorable attitude of superiority.

In many other works by Vonnegut, the technocratic societies portrayed undergo similar processes, transforming the respective utopias they pursue into bewildering dystopias. Such is the case presented by the story “Welcome to the Monkey House”, as the author ushers us this time into a future society so immersed in automation that the main consequence is soaring unemployment, which becomes a major problem along with that of over-population. In an attempt to avoid the subsequent dangers that may threaten social stability, the best solution the authorities come up with is the systematic mass-sterilization of the people. This is also done in the conviction that human beings should be totally distinct from animals, even for the natural functions of sex, and must be deprived of any primitive animal trait, including those related to the instinct of reproduction. Hence, the true purpose is merely to control human behaviour, and what was initially intended as improvement and progress disguises only tyranny and power abuse. The destructive process implied is evidenced by the resulting spiritual discontent, since those living in the newly balanced society, deprived of the satisfying pleasures of sex and the ability to procreate, lead empty lives which grant no meaning to the individual notion of existence. Moreover, without employment or any other challenging activity, life becomes purposeless to them, and many begin to think there is no sense in being alive, as disenchantment gives way to the consideration of suicide. This growing indifference towards life eventually becomes evident to the authorities themselves, who can think of no better answer to the problem than to furnish the citizens with special premises in which they can be relieved of their burden by induced death. The people are even encouraged to make good use of them, just as they should make good use of their right to vote or their freedom of religious creed:

The average citizen moped around home and watched television, which was the Government. Every fifteen minutes his television would urge him to vote intelligently or consume intelligently, or worship in the church of his choice, or love his fellowmen, or obey the laws –or pay a call to the nearest Ethical Suicide Parlor and find out how friendly and understanding a Hostess could be. (Vonnegut, *Welcome* 32)

All the ironic situations depicted reveal the futility of attempting utopia exclusively by means of scientific development. More accurately, the problem does not lie in science or technology themselves, but rather in the erroneous criteria followed in their application. It is the inadequate use of knowledge and scientific advance that alters the natural balance of things in Vonnegut’s approach to the matter, dangerously isolating humankind from nature. In this sense, human initiative seems permanently doomed to bringing humanity and the environment more damage than

benefit. One of the most common features of modern human society reflected in Vonnegut's narrative is precisely the decline of natural activities on the human being's part. Among these, there is special attention paid to the increasing absence of family-raising initiatives in the minds of citizens belonging to the post-industrial sphere. This condition of infertility may at first seem voluntary, but is actually instigated by the materialistic and dehumanised features of the technologically advanced era. Human beings become less and less human as they come closer to a machine-like existence, all in the name of progress and a supposedly more "civilized" world. In relation to this, Wendy B. Faris does not hesitate in stating that: "'civilization' is winning too easily over the natural world and it turns out to be equal in many respects to 'barbarism'" (Faris 45). As a general outcome in Vonnegut's works, any artificial alteration of the processes ruled by nature eventually backfires, ending up as a threat to humanity itself. This can be clearly observed in the short story "Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow", in which the forces of science have finally won over those of disease, eradicating practically every single cause of death except those related to accidents, homicide, or the very slow effect of time. The logical result is that people reach extremely advanced ages before they even begin to grow old physically, consequently bringing about problems of living space, employment, and food provision. Again, life in society becomes progressively unbearable and mutual hostilities between individuals arise, as even close relatives begin hating each other for want of a more suitable existence. The bitterness present in the attitude of two middle-aged men towards their great-grandfather denotes this, as both consider the possibility of murdering their elder in order to enjoy more food and room to live in:

"Against Nature," said Em. "Who knows what nature's like anymore?... gosh, Lou, a body can't help thinking Gramps is never going to leave if somebody doesn't help him along a little. Golly -we're so crowded a person can hardly turn around, and Verna's dying for a baby, and Melissa's gone thirty years without one." (Vonnegut, *Welcome* 293)

Once more, natural balance has been altered by scientific manipulation. Tampering with nature's most closely kept secrets, Man has broken the natural cycle of life by depriving it of its necessary conclusion, that of the eventual death of each and every living being when the time comes for it. Hence, an irresponsible use of scientific knowledge, initially intended to improve conditions of life for humanity by banishing death, has ironically produced a contrary effect, condemning mankind to an even more difficult existence and stimulating mutual destruction among human beings, including those of the same flesh and blood.

In other works by Vonnegut, such as the novels *Cat's Cradle* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the dynamics of mutual destruction are an outstanding feature as well, but follow a more "traditional pattern"; that of war. However unfortunate,

generalised open conflicts are among the many fratricidal types of activities people have engaged in since the very beginnings of human evolution, and war techniques have also evolved in direct proportion to the acquisition of knowledge and technological skills. Needless to say, it is a widespread truth how every single discovery or advance made in the field of applied science has been preferably used for destructive or warlike purposes as a first choice. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, just as the Tralfamadorians would eventually wipe out the entire universe while testing new rocket fuels, scientific progress on Earth serves to design the fire-bombs made of jellied gasoline that wipe Dresden off the face of the planet. The result in the latter case is a lunar-like scenery of complete devastation, as the main character himself describes it in only five words: “‘It was like the moon’ said Billy Pilgrim” (Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse* 179). The idea or image of a lifeless atmosphere is also rendered in *Cat’s Cradle* after the oceans become contaminated with “ice-nine”, and all the water on Earth immediately becomes solid as a rock by means of a cataclysmic chain reaction, much like that of an atomic explosion. The planet suddenly becomes a huge glacier as a perpetual winter begins, condemning all life forms to inevitable extinction:

I opened my eyes- and 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 filled with worms. The worms were tornadoes.
 [...] There were no smells. There was no movement. Every step I took made a gravelly squeak in blue-white frost. And every squeak was echoed loudly. The season of locking was over. The Earth was locked up tight.
 It was winter now and forever. (Vonnegut, *Cat’s* 163, 168)

There are even similarities to the dreaded “nuclear winter” foreseen by scientists such as Carl Sagan, who together with other researchers introduced this theory as the immediate aftermath of massive atomic explosions, according to which the spread of smoke in the atmosphere from nuclear-started fires would absorb sunlight, darken the sky and ultimately lower the temperature of the Earth (Turco 1283).

In contrast to these appalling descriptions of the after-effects of human folly –although intrinsically connected to them within Vonnegut’s apocalyptic perspective–, it is likewise common to find the compensating presence of several amiable natural elements in many of his novels, among which we may observe the recurrent use of animals as part of the scenery or taking part in the action. His persistence in the use of this positive imagery leads him to describe an entire biological ecosystem in *Galápagos*, despite the fact that the appearance of such beings is usually not so numerous in other works, and is mainly reduced to a single sample of a certain species; Vonnegut shows a special fondness towards dogs, for instance –as can be seen in *Mother Night*–, as well as cats, horses and other

domestic creatures in his other novels. However, the most outstanding and significant animal interventions are those carried out by a wide range of birds throughout his narrative, comprising both imaginary and real-life species in an array moving from the most unusual to the plainest.

As for the common functional attribute shared by the different animals appearing in his narrative, it must be stated that they all serve as a means of support for the human characters involved in the plots. They do this by sympathising with the humans in the course of their problematical affairs, relieving, consoling or even warning them about something in their whereabouts. In most cases, by means of their odd presence alone, they either contrast vividly with the negative situation at hand, or they attempt to alert the human characters of what is going on in the surroundings. Thus, we encounter common pets, such as Paul's cat in *Player Piano*, performing the same essential mission as the curious and exotic marine iguanas found in *Galápagos*, both admonishing the human being for his dangerous betrayal to nature and to himself.

As previously stated, the most relevant instances of animal protagonism resort to birds as the means to convey the message, perhaps due to the positive symbolic values linked to this kind of animal, traditionally related to freedom and such arcadian ideas as happiness or a harmonious and balanced relationship with nature. Hence, the tragic extinction of the majestic eagle-like Bermuda Erns in *Breakfast of Champions*, as well as the peaceful and placid cohabitation of the Titanic bluebirds in *The Sirens of Titan*, and above all, the awesome beauty of the courtship dance carried out by the blue-footed boobies in *Galápagos*, are all attempts to draw our attention, appealing to our common sense as the narrator describes the gratifying simplicity of natural life in contrast to the over-sophisticated, artificial, and harmful existence we lead in modern technological society. Vonnegut even reaches a point in which his message juxtaposes the concepts of nature, spirituality and art in amalgamated images of the most transcendental aesthetic value, as the narrator in *Galápagos* puts it:

And that brings us back to the really deep mystery of the blue-footed boobies' courtship dance, which seems to have absolutely no connection with the elements of booby survival, with nesting or fish. What does it have to do with, then? Dare we call it 'religion'? Or, if we lack that sort of courage, might we at least call it 'art'? (Vonnegut, *Galápagos* 110)

Focusing on the repetitive situations which use fowls representing nature, we find that the most significant one is the insistent appearance, in several works, of a small bird of undefined species which always produces the same basic sound: "Poo-tee-weet?". There are four references to this animal in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, which relate to the moments following the Dresden bombing and the instant Billy Pilgrim wakes up in the hospital ward, where he is recovering together with another

traumatised war veteran, Eliot Rosewater. This latter situation links the novel with the one titled *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, whose main character is the aforementioned roommate. Both he and Billy are self-deluded individuals who are not willing to accept reality after the nerve-shattering experiences they have gone through, and try to conceive the world around them in a way that would seem more understandable to them. Eliot, fond of pulp science fiction, gets Billy to feed his thoughts on that kind of books and eventually causes him to formulate his Tralfamadorian interpretation of the universe. Likewise, in the novel bearing his name, Eliot also encounters the “poo-tee-weet” bird on four occasions, which can be interpreted as a repetitive series of *déjà vu* episodes that stem from one single incident, since it always appears in the branches of a tree, surrounded by a green lawn or garden. Yet the prolific appearances of this creature do not end here, but also extend to the novel *Cat’s Cradle*, one of the most apocalyptic of Vonnegut’s works and the first to employ this resource, although with a slight variation in its chant, expressed as “poo-tee-phweet”. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, as well as in the other novels referred, this sound bears an obvious onomatopoeic character, much like the word “tweet”, but there is more to it than meets the ear, since we may see that the expression “Poo-tee-weet?” clearly uses an intentional question mark in its literal or written form (Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse* 215). Such a condition forces us to suspect that it may carry along some kind of meaning, providing us with more than just a mere representation of a bird’s chirping. Monica Loeb is among the few researchers suggesting that the bird should be trying to communicate an apparent message, but it is not clear exactly what that message might be (Loeb 119). From a strictly formal point of view, the expression resembles the chant of a bird, seeming to be nothing else; but going beyond simple appearances we find that, alongside the interrogative intonation –otherwise an absolutely unnecessary element in the reproduction of sounds not related to human speech–, Vonnegut makes use of verbs such as “to say” and “to ask” in his narration in order to introduce the sounds made by the animal, using them in a dialogue form and, therefore, granting them a linguistic function. This, of course, indicates that the bird is necessarily gifted with the ability to communicate intelligently, and would thus be using a kind of particular language, much like that of many other characters, both human and non-human, in Vonnegut’s novels; examples of this type of situation are the Shah of Bratpuhr speaking in his native tongue in *Player Piano*, or the use of telepathic language by the Tralfamadorians in both *The Sirens of Titan* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, as well as Bokonon’s own breed of philosophical and religious terminology in *Cat’s Cradle*. The similarity between the linguistic features of such characters and those of the recurrent “talking fowl” leads us to believe that the inquisitive appearances of the bird fulfil the same mission these others have been assigned. Since all the characters mentioned are outsiders, in the sense that they do not really belong to the environment depicted, or simply act as external observers of a given

situation which requires impartial judgement, the bird would be serving an equal purpose. This particular animal, traditionally related to nature in its most bucolic sense, proves to be clearly out of place regarding the anti-natural conditions in which industrial and urban society is presented in Vonnegut's works; what is more, its appearance openly clashes with the surroundings on every occasion. Owing to its status as an outside element, the bird is able to perceive how the human being has isolated himself from the benefits of nature, having exchanged them for the supposed fruits of technological progress. Identically, the Shah of Bratpuhr, Bokonon and the like are characters who also witness the absurdity and nonsense upon which modern society carries forth its development, since they, too, enjoy a neutral view that allows them to plainly see the truth of the situations taking place at large –whilst other characters, being of the non-observing type, are much too involved in the surrounding social mechanisms to be conscious of what is actually going on within their environment. Bearing in mind the fact that the languages or forms of communication used by these impartial observers are just as much a product of Vonnegut's literary imagination as the “words” used by the bird, this leads us to the idea that they all speak in the name of their creator –the author–, thus establishing a direct correspondence between them and Vonnegut himself as master of all those different tongues he has coined. Therefore, we may state that they represent the voice of the author, who in turn would be the observing witness of his own reality –as he expresses his views and opinions, by means of his fiction, in an attempt to impartially judge matters from an outer vantage point.

Since the bird figure is the only element of this type to appear several times in three of Vonnegut's novels, and because such frequency consists of the repetition of identical situations in which the animal appears suddenly and spontaneously, always uttering the same chant, exceptional importance must be granted to these interventions. Once having acknowledged that the bird is a symbol of universal value, representing the pastoral view of nature and its idealistic sense of harmony, peace, and joy, we must also consider the fact that each and every time it appears, it is evidently alien to the situation at hand, as some sort of misfit that does not belong there and only serves to attract the attention of those who notice its inappropriate presence. The impression it gives is identical to that of a sudden warning or admonishment. The very first time Vonnegut uses this figure in his narrative is right after the moment of complete disaster in *Cat's Cradle*, when ice-nine has been spilled into the sea, leading to the freezing of the oceans all over the planet. As the end of the world takes place, the narrator perceives: “the cry of a darting bird above me. It seemed to be asking me what had happened. ‘Poo tee-phweet?’ it asked.” (Vonnegut, *Cat's* 162). Analysing this from a more “logical” or likelier point of view, we may consider the *narrator* to be the one who should actually wonder what has happened, astonished by the results of the man-made catastrophe, as he transfers his thoughts to the chirping sound of the bird, whilst the animal would be

“responding” to those thoughts with a reprimanding question of the type: “You see what?”, surprisingly quite similar to the sound of “Poo tee-phweet?”.

As far as the bird’s intervention in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* is concerned, the calamitous chaos brought about by Eliot Rosewater’s excessive idealism reaches its peak the moment he hears the chant, immediately commencing to awaken from his delirious state after that very instant. The animal’s insistence itself denotes a clear attempt to wake someone up: “He awoke to find himself sitting on the rim of a dry fountain. He was dappled by sunlight filtering down through a sycamore tree. A bird was singing in the sycamore tree. ‘Poo-tee-weet?’ it sang. ‘Poo-tee-weet. Weet, weet, weet’.” (Vonnegut, *God* 177). On this occasion, the alerting purpose is reinforced by other elements such as the image of the dry fountain, which symbolizes Eliot’s infertile existence. It is also emphasized by the sunlight coming down through the leaves of the tree, and the tree itself as a symbol of life. All this, along with the green colour of the lawn, provides a sense of hope and renewal for the future, warning against the negative effect of an artificial existence, as it alludes to a closer and more beneficial relationship with nature. Furthermore, the tree is a sycamore, which symbolizes growth, persistence, strength and endurance in many human cultures, virtues which Eliot unfortunately lacks.

As we bring our attention to its presence in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the use of the bird as literary device becomes truly obsessive, its relevance being such that the novel begins and ends with the same reference to the animal’s alerting chant. The occasion in both cases is the same, coinciding with two simultaneous events: the coming of springtime and the end of World War II in Europe, both taking place immediately after the bombing of Dresden. The descriptive contrast is most obvious: the atmosphere of emptiness and desolation in the streets of the ruined city, enhanced by the sinister presence of the coffin-shaped wagon, which in turn clashes with the first spring leaves breaking out from the trees, along with the gleeful “conversation” of the birds in their boughs:

Billy and the rest wandered out into the shady street. The trees were leafing out. There was nothing going on out there, no traffic of any kind. There was only one vehicle, an abandoned wagon drawn by two horses. The wagon was green and coffin-shaped.

Birds were talking.

One bird said to Billy Pilgrim, “Poo-tee-weet?”. (Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse* 215)

In this case, Vonnegut’s purpose is again fulfilled, but with greater impetus than the other instances previously mentioned; in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the author thoroughly accomplishes the mission stated by his “canary-in-the-coal-mine” theory of the arts, using a bird’s chant to convey the message just as the canary in the coal mine warns the miners that they are going too far and the situation becomes so dangerous it could bear fatal results:

Writers are specialized cells doing whatever we do, and we're expressions of the entire society –just as the sensory cells on the surface of your body are in the service of your body as a whole. And when a society is in great danger, we're likely to sound the alarms. I have the canary-bird-in-the-coal-mine theory of the arts. You know, coal miners used to take birds down into the mines with them to detect gas before men got sick... they chirped and keeled over. (Vonnegut, *Wampeters* 238)

We must not forget that the animal speaks on behalf of Vonnegut himself and his point of view, or as Jerome Klinkowitz would put it, the author *is* the “canary in a cathouse” (Klinkowitz 10). Consequentially, *Slaughterhouse-Five* would be the product of the artist's sensitivity in his aim to alert humanity of the dangers it faces. The expression “Poo-tee-weet?” would therefore constitute a recommendation to reflect upon the value of life. In other words, regardless of the fact that death is the eventual fate of every living being, the biological cycle renews its course and life continues notwithstanding. Hence, the casket-shaped wagon remaining in Dresden after the bombing, representing the inevitable “final journey” that awaits all human beings, compensated in turn by the green colour of the vehicle itself, which is availed by the first signs of springtime, affirming nature's condition as a cyclic process constantly undergoing regeneration.

The essence of the message is that, although death is a necessary phase in the natural cycle, it is pointless and contrary to the rules of nature to bring unnecessary death and devastation to any living creature, which is precisely what war brings about. The bird's interrogative reproof invites humanity to look after the most precious gift in the universe, which is life itself. The bombing of Dresden therefore supposes an outrage, an attack upon everything the natural element represents. Vonnegut expresses his rejection of war in terms of a defence of nature and its rules of balance. In this sense, certain technological “wonders” designed by human beings, which include bombs such as the ones dropped over Dresden, imply an unnatural proliferation of death and destruction, dangerously altering the harmonic balance of nature. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the small bird survives the man-made disaster, just as Vonnegut himself survived it, and both are faced with the same responsibility: alerting those who would care to heed their message, one so clear that it can even be understood in the form of a bird's chirping: “Everything is supposed to be very quiet after a massacre, and it always is except for the birds. And what do the birds say? All there is to say about a massacre, things like ‘Poo-tee-weet?’” (Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse* 19).

Vonnegut's attempt to shake our consciences and awaken us to the reality of our folly, evidenced by our disdainful attitude towards the rules of nature, is none other than the essential mission of any artist who prizes his condition as such. In this sense, John Cooley states: “Thus, one of the traditional functions of the poet is invoked anew: to warn against violations of natural law, and to create images,

metaphors, and myths both ecologically harmonious and sufficiently compelling to protect the natural world” (Cooley 420). In this way, Vonnegut fulfils his duty as an artist and a humanist, demanding more natural and healthier conditions for humanity by means of the recurrent natural elements in his works, which monitor the foolish, unnatural behaviour of human beings. He does not deny the evident fruits of scientific progress, but the useless and wrongly directed schemes of its practice, especially when the human being proposes to break the laws of nature and the equilibrium they establish. Lawrence Broer agrees with this point of view by remarking that Vonnegut has always been in favour of the positive values of science and does not cultivate primitivism of any sort, contrary to other anti-technology writers:

Vonnegut admonishes us that our only hope for salvation is by intelligently and humanely directing our course into the future. He would have us move up the evolutionary ladder, not down, questioning though not always condemning mechanical and material change, using our brains to determine when such change is humanly valuable, when destructive... (Broer, “Pilgrim’s” 151)

Science, technology, and the mechanization of certain activities can surely make life easier and more gratifying for human beings, bettering our conditions of existence, but only as long as such means of improvement remain subject to prudence, rationality, and above all, respect towards nature and humanity itself as a part of it. On the other hand, the lack of science would necessarily imply lack of knowledge, and therefore suppose a regressive process, contrary to natural evolution. Consequently, the only formula by means of which technology and humanity may co-exist in harmony with the enveloping environment resides in the human being’s own awareness of the need to preserve nature and everything connected with it, attempting a truly symbiotic relationship between the artificial and the natural, in order to achieve the necessary balance.

In short, Vonnegut wishes to express the idea that, if we humans were to realise the deep moral responsibilities implied, knowledge would be better employed –that is, not in search of unlikely utopias, but of a greater stability and a healthier state of harmony with the world around us. He brings up the matter of consciousness, as opposed to delusion, insisting on the need of a strong sensibility on the human being’s part, in order to value existence and avoid the dangers of wrongly used technology. The problem therefore would not be the supposed menace of knowledge, essentially innocuous, but possibly the human being’s profound lack of knowledge concerning himself and his surroundings, leading him to stumble constantly over the same stone, invariably heading towards self-annihilation.

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