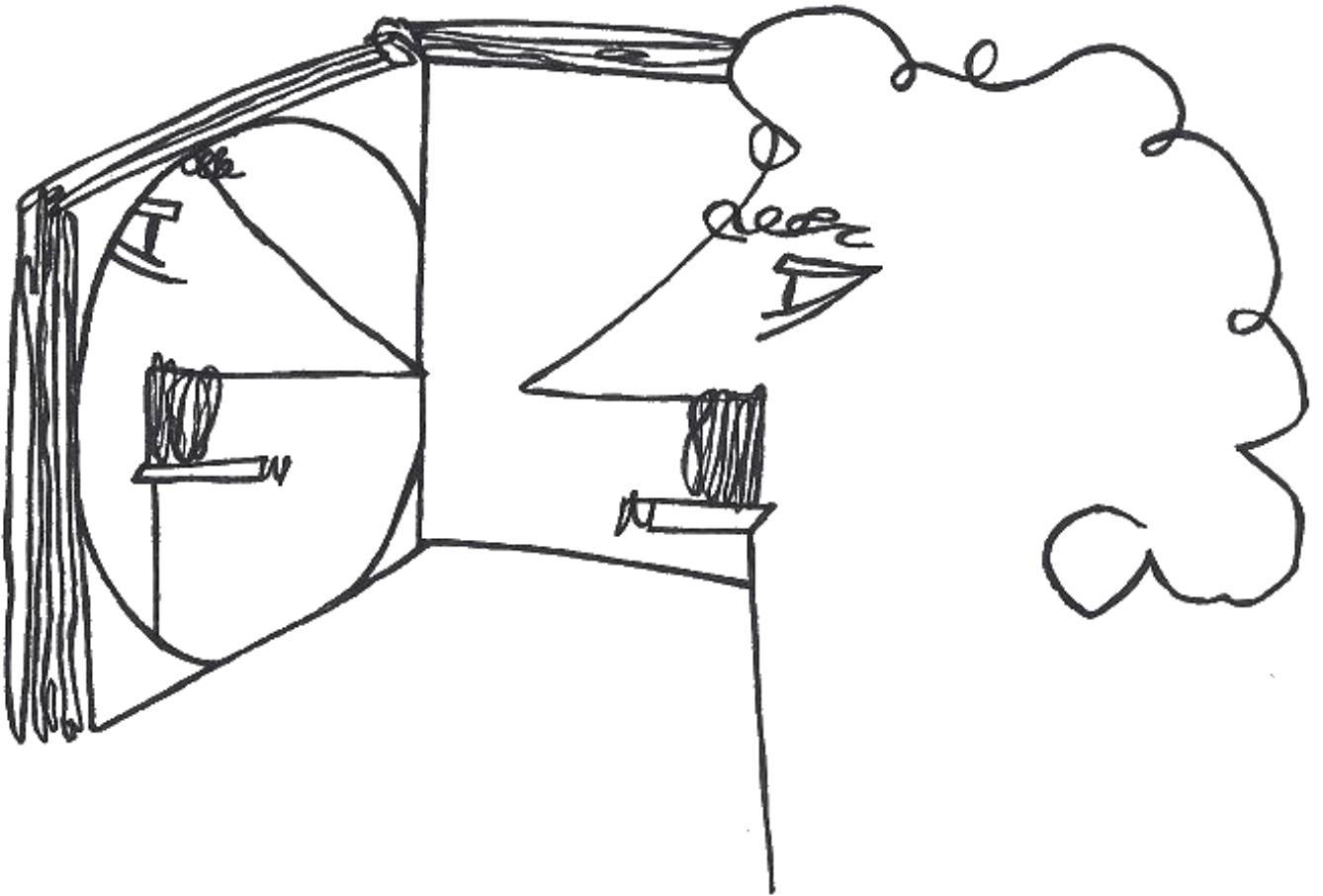


Reflections of the Self:
Kurt Vonnegut and Autofiction



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Abstract

Readers of Kurt Vonnegut might attest to the feeling that somehow, Vonnegut himself runs through the pages of his fiction. They could refer to the autobiographical elements of his novels, especially WWII in *Slaughterhouse Five* (1969), but even more than that, readers seem to talk to Vonnegut himself as they read his words. This thesis connects Vonnegut's extraordinary work to the elusive concept of autofiction: fiction that expresses the inner life of the author purely through their writings. Author-characters are explored through Kilgore Trout in *Slaughterhouse Five* (1969), the science fiction writer who communicates much truth in his many lies, and the character of Winston Niles Rumfoord in *Sirens of Titan* (1959), who builds the world to his will. Additionally, projective technique will be explored: the extent in which the narrator in *Cat's Cradle* (1963) employs the critical distance of an author.

Thank you to

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Introduction

“That name was my last name, too” (52), *Cat’s Cradle*’s narrator states as he is confronted with his own name etched into a large angel tombstone, but the name itself remains unmentioned. Reading Kurt Vonnegut’s interview with Charlie Reilly, this strange coincidence gains even more ambiguity:

CR: In *Cat’s Cradle*, is it correct to say the narrator never identifies himself?

KV: That’s correct.

CR: And yet I’ve read that in a scene in the original manuscript, the narrator walks into a tombstone shop and is shocked to see engraved on a tombstone his own name, and that name is...

KV: The name was “Vonnegut”, yeah. (8)

Vonnegut remarks that his editors told him to remove the name because it was “so enormously distracting” and “a mystery that could never be resolved” (8), and he followed their advice. The named-but-unnamed tombstone is only one example of Vonnegut’s own ambiguous appearances in his fiction. His writing consistently confuses the line between fact and fiction, reality and fabrication, truth and lies. The aspects of Vonnegut’s personality, such as his experience in the firebombing of Dresden, objectively inform his writing, but also arguably comprise much of what makes his writing so interesting.

Since 1967, when Ronald Barthes’ essay titled “The Death of the Author” was first published, its concept has become colloquial in literary studies, considered “the most influential literary theory” in *The Guardian*, an essay that “symbolizes the rise of what would come to be known as ‘theory’” (Gallix). Barthes’ death of the author contradicts the practice that “the *explanation* of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the end, through the more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, the voice of a single person, the *author* ‘confiding’ in us” (Barthes 143). In essence, it radically removes the

author from the text. It is quoted alongside ideas of New Criticism, which examines a text excluded from any historical or cultural context and the author's intention, and which is the most widely used and taught theory in literary studies today, especially its method of close reading (Thomas). Using these methods to analyze literature, interpreting a text's meaning shouldn't be influenced by the author's life, opinions, practices, or beliefs. However, with regard to personal works of writing, like diaries, letters, memoirs and autobiography, this distinction becomes more complicated. In such fields of lifewriting, the author has to be an essential part of analysis. So, works of literature that are undeniably connected to the author seemingly cannot be analyzed without knowledge of their life events. The analysis of Vonnegut's fiction in this thesis shows that this is not necessarily the case. Autofiction, a genre that falls in between lifewriting and fiction, exposes the inner life of the author via the text, rather than their life. The inner life is the main subject of autofiction, even when the plot considers totally different characters, topics, or even worlds. Because of his consistent interaction with the relationship between author and text and his exploration of personal ideas and beliefs through fictionalized elements, this thesis will consider Vonnegut's writing as works of autofiction: fiction that expresses distinctly non-fictional elements of the author. The conclusions that will be drawn about Vonnegut in his autofiction will not be based on factual life events, wherein an author's ideas and thoughts could never be confirmed, but rather in the text, in which those ideas take shape in characters, voice, and narration.

A general definition of autofiction is a much-disputed question. A first definition emerged in French literary criticism in the seventies, when the author Serge Doubrovsky coined the term in relation to his own novel *Fils* (1977): he defined the term as "Fiction, made up of events and facts that are strictly real" (qtd. in Vilain 5). The theory of autofiction remained mostly in French circles for forty years after that. The book *Autofiction in English* attempts to find and define a similar genre in English literature, though it starts off with the recognition that

“there is no single definition of autofiction either in English or in French” (Dix 2). This comment is exemplary for the ambiguity of this field; Dix writes how “this sense of autofiction as an evolving and emerging genre bears directly on the question of how to define it” (2). Doubrovky’s first definition presents problems, for example, because it remains very close to autobiography. It appears difficult to establish a difference between the two, though there must be one; Doubrovsky determined the difference to lie in notoriety, namely that “a work of autobiography is a narrative that reinforces a life story that the audience already understands to a greater or lesser degree, so that the audience’s prior experience of the subject is a formative element of autobiography” (Dix 4). Still, as Dix concludes, the distinction “remains problematic” (4). This thesis will not consider (auto)biographical facts when interpreting Vonnegut’s ideas in his fiction. Autofiction, as a general definition that this thesis will be using, is a fictional expression of an author’s non-fictional ideas, thoughts and beliefs, and offers a more comprehensive expression of an author’s ideas than only biographical facts. It creates a nuance between the radical “Death of the Author”, that condemns any context from the author, and a biographical approach, that stresses using facts of the author’s life in analysis. Autofiction uses fictional elements, only to be found in the text itself, to express an author’s ideas that cannot be confirmed, only speculated upon, when using biographical facts. Certainly, biographical knowledge can add to reading experience, as Vonnegut’s career as a soldier during the firebombing of Dresden that he describes in *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969) demonstrates, but autofiction exhibits that analysis of the author in the text is already sufficiently interesting without this knowledge.

Marjorie Worthington investigates autofiction in an American contemporary context in her book *The Story of ‘Me’*. Despite its obscure position in English literature, Worthington illustrates how “autofictional texts have been proliferating [in the US] for decades” (1). Her definition, and its distinction from autobiography, stresses that autofiction depicts “author-

characters in clearly fictional situations” and that it “revels in ambiguity by evoking the name of its author and including nonfictional information about him/her, while quite consciously fictionalizing the author-character at the same time” (4). Her mention of author-characters is significant, because it focuses the realization of autofiction on the characters that represent the author; a realization that will be explored in this thesis as well, concerning Kilgore Trout in *Slaughterhouse Five* and Winston Niles Rumfoord in *Sirens of Titan* (1997). With regard to Vonnegut, Worthington writes that “the author-character [in Vonnegut] is depicted as more author than character. In other words, [...] the unnamed author-character admits that the work he appears in is a fiction of his own making” (54). This hints at the interesting relationship between author, narrator, and character that Vonnegut consistently explores. As an elaboration on this, Kathryn Hume writes about his characters as “straightforward projections of some part of his psyche” (177). This is apparent in his “alter ego” Kilgore Trout, “through whom Vonnegut can complain insouciantly about his frustrations” (179). Hume also mentions the general “projective technique” (177) in his fiction that is more complex than his author-characters. Hume writes that “projections can approach an allegorical degree of abstraction” (177), which also applies to the autofiction that will be explored in this thesis, expressed in the narration of *Cat’s Cradle* (1963), wherein the author is projected through the point of view of the first person narrator.

In this thesis, Vonnegut’s fiction will be analyzed as works of autofiction, texts that express and explore the author’s thought in a non-biographical, fictionalized way. Worthington’s theory of fictionalized author-characters will be applied to Kilgore Trout in *Slaughterhouse Five*, a character that resembles Vonnegut in his position as a critical writer in society, and to Winston Niles Rumfoord in *Sirens of Titan*, who fulfills an author’s role of omniscient creator in a futuristic scenario. Additionally, *Cat’s Cradle* will be analyzed in light

of Hume's projective narrative technique, particularly the knowledgeable and distant point of view that the narrator employs.

Chapter 1

Truth Through Science Fiction:

Vonnegut as Trout in *Slaughterhouse Five*

To consider any of Vonnegut's characters as autofictional, it is worthwhile if not necessary to discuss his most commonly considered alter ego, Kilgore Trout. The quirky science fiction writer is often analyzed and written about, both in the context of Vonnegut's writing as well as him as an author (Hume). Trout parallels Vonnegut in several aspects, both disgruntledly classified as science fiction writers, both experiencing little success in their younger years, both writing from a vast imagination and societal critique, causing many scholars to consider Trout to be the author's canon alter ego: "All these parallelisms enable Kilgore Trout to be clearly identified as a personal and literary projection of the author" (de Castro 117). This chapter will consider Trout as an autofictional character in the novel *Slaughterhouse Five*. Though Trout appears in many of Vonnegut's novels, including *Breakfast of Champions* (1973) and *God Bless You Mr. Rosewater* (1965), he arguably has the most interesting impact on the story and characters in Vonnegut's most famous novel. This chapter will analyze Trout's actual appearances and dialogues and the influence he and his books have on other characters' lives. It will argue that, as an autofictional version of Vonnegut, the role that Trout fulfills as an author is one of metaphor and critique that could be considered as Vonnegut's own intervention.

Billy Pilgrim, the novel's passive and slightly silly protagonist, fights as a soldier in the Second World War, which functions as a historical backdrop to this novel as a whole. Specifically, the firebombing of Dresden, which both Billy Pilgrim and Vonnegut himself have experienced first-hand, plays a significant role. In February 1945, the Allied forces used 1,300 bombers to drop approximately 4,000 tons of explosives on the civilian center of the German city, subsequently destroying it and many, if not all, of the people that resided there. Though the death toll has been debated heavily throughout history, it is generally agreed upon to be a

terrible and unnecessary attack (Tony). After suffering through the firebombing, Billy Pilgrim meets another patient in a veteran's mental hospital, who introduces him to Kilgore Trout. This patient is Eliot Rosewater, another recurring character, the protagonist of *God Bless You Mr. Rosewater* (1973) in which he becomes infatuated with Kilgore Trout. In *Slaughterhouse Five* he fittingly introduces Pilgrim to the writer and the genre of science fiction because "they were trying to re-invent themselves and their universe" (Vonnegut 101); they use science fiction as their method of escape after their terrorizing experiences in the Second World War. After this introduction, Trout quickly becomes Billy's favorite author as well. Though Trout lives in his own hometown and they have met several times, it's not until near the end of the book that he consciously meets Trout, who is "cowardly and dangerous" (166) and leads a company of newspaper boys. Trout "did not think of himself as a writer for the simple reason that the world had never allowed him to think of himself that way" (169); his personality seems to be rooted in this sense of insignificance and the apparent hardships he has experienced, and so he does not understand Billy's fandom, but gladly gets invited to his wedding nonetheless. During Billy's wedding, where he is the only person who is not in the business of optometry, Trout enjoys the attention he receives – he is "happy and loud and impudent" (171) and fools a "dull" girl into believing that writing things that are untrue is "fraud", revealing himself to be a satirical humorist who enjoys making ridiculing displays of things that he deems foolish. Importantly, he recognizes Billy's predicament of moving uncontrollably through time, and suggests he has seen "through a time window" (174). This peculiar comment is an indication of Trout's imagination, similar to Vonnegut's, and his importance within this novel.

De Castro's article, "The Narrative Function of Kilgore Trout and His Fictional Works in *Slaughterhouse-Five*" is a key analysis of this significance. As he points out, there are six works by Trout that are explicitly mentioned within *Slaughterhouse: The Big Board*, *Maniacs in the Fourth Dimension*, *The Gutless Wonder*, *The Gospel from Outer Space*, "Jesus and the

Time Machine” and “The Money Tree”. These works are the most explicit forms of autofiction within *Slaughterhouse* because they function as Vonnegut’s social commentary and criticism as well as paralleling the plot. *The Big Board* is a “textual duplication” (de Castro 117) of Billy’s experience, telling a story of two humans who are kidnapped to an alien planet to be locked up in a zoo. Additionally, it emphasizes a “lack of meaning” (118) in life that can be found throughout *Slaughterhouse*, underlined by the nihilism enforced by Tralfamadorian thought, and that Vonnegut considers in many of his works. Lastly, the story criticizes the “excessive importance human beings attach to money” (118), since the couple in the zoo still manage a stock market to ensure their riches, despite being imprisoned, on display. A similar criticism is found in “The Money Tree” and in many of Vonnegut’s works that feature middleclass, empty jobs like automobile dealers and optometrists. *Maniacs in the Fourth Dimension*, which depicts “people whose mental diseases couldn’t be treated because the causes of the diseases were all in the fourth dimension” (Vonnegut 104), is not only connected to the ways of Tralfamadorian communication, which occurs in the fourth dimension, but also “reflects the sickly state of society” (de Castro 118), especially since its plot is outlined while Rosewater and Pilgrim reside in a veteran’s mental hospital, where they receive considerably unsubstantial treatment which fails to relieve them of their severe trauma. Lastly, *The Gutless Wonder* criticizes the “dehumanization brought on by war” (118), most likely connected to the Vietnam war that Vonnegut was witnessing at the time of writing *Slaughterhouse*. It follows a robot with bad breath who attacks people from the air with bombs that resemble napalm, and who is terribly disliked, until he finally fixes his breath; then he becomes incredibly popular. Importantly, Vonnegut writes that “nobody held it against him that he dropped jellied gasoline on people. But they found his halitosis unforgivable” (168). With this painful irony Trout (and thus, Vonnegut) criticizes the thoughtlessness and even glorification of warfare: “the way American society accepts the cruelty of war as something natural” (de Castro 119). In this way, Trout’s

fiction functions as “parables or metaphors attempting to correct our vision of the world” (121) and can be considered as the “prophetic voice speaking through the mouth of the author” (121). In portraying Trout this way, as a prophetic voice whose novels offer harsh criticism masked in humor and irony, Vonnegut seems to mimic his own role as a writer in society.

In addition to paralleling the main plot, Trout’s novels offer a great comfort to the war traumas of Rosewater and Pilgrim. It is said that “science fiction became the only sort of tales [Billy] could read” and “science fiction was a big help” (Vonnegut 101) to reinventing themselves. This dealing with the world after trauma, or reinvention, can only be done through the “lies” that can be found in science fiction. Rosewater explains that normal fiction “isn’t *enough* any more” (101) and tells his psychiatrist that they ought to come up with “a lot of wonderful *new* lies” (101) if they want to keep everyone alive. As Josh Simpson puts it, the main function of Trout’s fiction in *Slaughterhouse* is as a backdrop of escapism: “[Billy’s] Tralfamadorian existence must be approached as an escape mechanism grounded in mental instability but – and this is key – fueled by Troutean science fiction” (267). Though it is known that Vonnegut advocates against “sweet lies” that cover harsh but important truths, as is visible all throughout *Cat’s Cradle*, in *Slaughterhouse* these lies seem to fulfill an important purpose of keeping two war veterans on their feet. In addition to its metaphorical role, Trout and all science fiction passages function as “dramatic comic relief” (de Castro 120) to both the reader as well as the characters. The antilinear conception of time, the existence of aliens, and the discovery of multiple dimensions all seem to mask the central conflict in the novel, which is the massacre of Dresden. Vonnegut uses Trout and science fiction to veil his critique of past and current war, religion, capitalism, as well as to mask his own trauma in complex constructions and entirely new planets.

These implicit ideas, however, arguably differ from the “sweet lies” that Vonnegut detests: the science fiction that Billy uses to reinvent his life does not make his life exactly

easier. Following Simpson's ideas, Billy uses Trout's novels to think up the Tralfamadorians, who imprison him in a "simulated Earthling habitat" (Vonnegut 112) and watch him in everything he does, leaving him "no place [...] to hide" (112). Objectively, these are unpleasant conditions, but Billy does not seem to care. He even gains a rather positive attitude from the Tralfamadorian's ignorance: "most Tralfamadorians had no way of knowing Billy's body and face were not beautiful. [...] This had a pleasant effect on Billy, who began to enjoy his body for the first time" (113) and when asked if he is happy in his see-through zoo exhibit, he answers "about as happy as I was on Earth" (114). When, at one point, Billy finally expresses some of his war trauma, exclaiming to the aliens how "Earthlings must be the terrors of the Universe" and asking "how can a planet live at peace?", he realizes from the alien's responses that "he was being stupid" (116) and these are silly Earthling questions. He learns from these experiences, and later says "I suppose that the idea of preventing war on Earth is stupid, too" (117). Instead of being sweet lies that cover up Billy's trauma, his imaginings with the Tralfamadorians offer him an extraterrestrial perspective that works as a coping mechanism for it. His incredibly human and traumatized question of "why me?" (76) is at last answered with "Why *you*? Why *us* for that matter? Why *anything*? Because this moment simply *is*. [...] There is no *why*" (77), a satisfying conclusion to a lost and hurting war veteran who wonders about the evil in the world. Having learnt that "among the things [he] could not change were the past, present, and the future" (60), Billy thoroughly adopts Tralfamadorian thought, and responds to death as the aliens do, which is to "simply shrug" and say "so it goes" (27). He does this to great consistency, even uttering the phrase to a champagne that "didn't make a pop" and that had "gone dead" (73). This is how Billy becomes the character as we know him, detached, passionless, superficial, responding with either "um" or "so it goes" to events that would shock any normal human being, ranging from brutally failed suicides to inhumane murder in war. Though he swallows and accepts the alien's ideas easily, the reader might be more inclined to

resist. These are not sweet and easy lies. They seem to be part of a full and comprehensible theory of the inevitability of war and pain that goes against human intuition, which is to find reason for everything. This theory is expressed in Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse*, as we have seen, sprouted in Billy Pilgrim's mind through Trout's science fiction novels.

Though its science fiction aspects may make it appear as such, neither Vonnegut nor Trout's novels attempt to cover up truth, but instead to lay it absolutely bare. In fact, these aspects are a great vehicle for doing so, as the character of Rosewater expresses passionately in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* (1965): "[science fiction writers] are 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" (27). By placing humanity in the extraterrestrial, creating new dimensions, using non-existent structures, both Vonnegut and Trout attempt to estrange human society to such an extent as to create a new perspective. The reader experiences humanity in a new light, and will, if the writers are successful, consider it to be profoundly strange.

What makes Kilgore Trout an autofictional expression of Kurt Vonnegut is not the parallels of their lives, but rather of their ideas. The function of Trout's novels in *Slaughterhouse Five*, coherently outlined by de Castro's text, mirror the intended function of Vonnegut's novels in reality: to provide commentary and criticism on society and metaphors of humanity. Billy Pilgrim, the novel's protagonist, is an example, though distorted and silly, of how Vonnegut envisions his novels to be received by those who read them: as a reinvention of their incredibly human lives, an introduction to new strange ideas, a coping mechanism to their pain, a refreshing critical perspective. Though Vonnegut's novels might not have the life-altering effect of becoming unstuck in time like Trout's have, they can inspire at least a similar

effect in its readers; to consider the world's destructive traditions as absurd and attempt to break them.

Chapter 2

Creating the Creator:

Vonnegut as Rumfoord in *Sirens of Titan*

In the intergalactic story of *Sirens of Titan*, Vonnegut writes critically of armies, war, capitalism, and religion. Its science fiction elements assist in creating an awareness of reality and its frivolous traditions, similar to what has been discussed within *Slaughterhouse Five* in the previous chapter. In addition, however, the novel contains the intriguing character of the mysterious, intelligent and rich Winston Niles Rumfoord, who flew a spaceship into “an uncharted chrono-synclastic infundibulum” (7) and now only materializes on Earth every fifty-nine days. Like many novels by Vonnegut, *Sirens of Titan* grapples with the concept of free will. It does this through Rumfoord, whose character nearly functions as an omniscient narrator as he predicts, steers, and orchestrates the lives of the other human characters in the novel. As an autofictional character, Vonnegut presents Rumfoord as an explicit creator and storyteller like he himself, as an author, creates and tells stories. Because of his complicated position within time, namely that he exists as “wave phenomena” (7), Rumfoord is not a consistent character; he is not fixed within one context. He appears on different planets at different times, which offers him the unique opportunity to interfere with other characters as if he is the author of their lives. The character that he uses above all is that of Malachi Constant, an arrogant and impossibly lucky businessman who acts in all kinds of immoral ways with his wealth. What looks like an extraordinary and humorous story of an involuntarily time-travelling prophet orchestrating the life of a cocky businessman, really mirrors the process of a critical author molding an unsatisfactory society into something new.

Rumfoord, “the novel’s great manipulator” (Marvin 47), functions as an author in *Sirens* mainly because of his exceptional knowledge. Like many of his narrators and Vonnegut himself, he knows everything that has happened, is happening, and will happen. In the

beginning he exclusively predicts these futures to his wife, which caused her to refuse to see her husband because she “didn’t like my fortunetelling” (Vonnegut 20), and Malachi Constant, a businessman who Rumfoord claims he has “met [...] on Titan, which, I am given to understand, is a moon of the planet of Saturn” (10) in some version of the future. Owing at least partially to this near-omniscient knowledge, Rumfoord carries himself with implicit superiority. Constant is impressed by him to be “something else again – morally, spatially, socially, sexually, and electrically” and is “bullied into feeling inferior” (16) merely by his presence in the room. Only adding to this effortless superiority, Rumfoord offers Constant some of his knowledge: “If it’s really so important to you, at this stage of our relationship, to feel superior to me in some way, [...] think of this: You can reproduce and I cannot” (17), though it only adds to the impression that he is continuously aware of everything in the universe. Another addition is his indifferent attitude towards the knowledge of the future; he explains to Constant how telling the future is “the simplest, most obvious thing imaginable” and when he “genially” tells Constant of his unfortunate future of being “bred by the Martians – like farm animals”, he “shrugged” (21). He is even able to read people’s minds and calls mindreading the “easiest thing in the world” (17). Evidently, Rumfoord behaves like a character that has been endowed with author-like knowledge, which he carries with an arrogant superiority that expresses by way of an indifference towards other, lesser characters and an enjoyment in playing with them. In addition to his awareness of events, Rumfoord also shares a different view of time with the author. As Wolfe theorizes, “Vonnegut is fond of taking certain characters (in this case Rumfoord: later it will be [*Slaughterhouse Five*’s] Billy Pilgrim) and letting them view the distant future” (966). Indeed, because he flew into a chrono-synclastic infundibulum, Rumfoord’s vision of time appears similar to Pilgrim’s “unstuck” position: “[...] life for a punctual person is like a roller coaster. [...] I can see the whole roller coaster you’re on” (Vonnegut 54) and so, he “has a view of time similar to Vonnegut’s” (Rubens 66): considering

the lives of his characters in their entirety, like an author. Through Rumfoord, Vonnegut interacts with ideas of his own authorship and morality, and the questionable aspects of his character as an author. Especially through Rumfoord's actions as a creator, Vonnegut comments on the destructive effects of his near omniscience on his pawns, the characters, as well as himself.

Rumfoord's primary pawn, Malachi Constant, is not an unthinkable candidate for Vonnegut himself, because he "assumes the role of the typical Vonnegut villain – materialistic, crude and self-centered" (Wolfe 967). Rumfoord's planned plot is that of the Martian suicide, which will serve as a fundament for the new religion he has invented, the Church of the God the Utterly Indifferent. In fact, it is "Rumfoord's intention that Mars should lose the war – that Mars should lose it foolishly and horribly" (Vonnegut 176), because he uses the Martian soldiers as saints in this new religion. He speaks, "The war that ends so gloriously today was glorious only for the saints who lost it" (182) and his fortunetelling that "came true in great detail" (183) adds to the credibility of the religion. The basis of the religion is that "puny man can do nothing at all to help or please God Almighty, and Luck is not the hand of God" (183). The religion, in essence, encourages its believers to focus on their own lives on Earth, and only act kind or charitable for the sake of their fellow humans, instead of a God's judgement. Rumfoord ultimately uses Malachi Constant in this religion too, playing the part of the protagonist in a parable that proves luck is not the hand of God. Constant becomes the religion's Antichrist since he, when he first met Rumfoord, accounted his incredible wealth to luck, saying "I guess someone up there likes me" (15). Rumfoord lectures about Constant, exclaiming that "we are *disgusted* by Malachi Constant, [...] because he used the fantastic fruits of his fantastic good luck to finance an unending demonstration that man is a pig. [...] He wallowed in every known form of voluptuous turpitude" (256). It is clear that Constant's capitalistic conquests are against Rumfoord's idealism, and thus against his newfound religion. Like Vonnegut, he is

“trying to alter events to conform to what he believes is a viable moral system”, and “because of the nihilistic view that Rumfoord has drawn from his knowledge of the future[,] he realizes that the only hope for man lies in a complete restructuring of society, and he hopes to bring about this restructuring” (Wolfe 967). Since Rumfoord’s knowledge is similar to that of the author’s, he shares Vonnegut’s nihilism, as well as his desire for society to be different. The difference, in this case, is that Rumfoord can exercise control over his own world and be a literal author of it, unlike Vonnegut, by for example creating the Church of the God of the Utterly Indifferent, which exists as a type of utopian religion conceived “to bring about more realistic and tolerable human relationships” (Wolfe 967). His control over the Martian society and their brutal deaths seems, as Wolfe calls it, “cynical” (966) in such an idealistic view, but that is brought upon mostly by nihilism: it has to be done. Rumfoord himself writes that “any man who would change the World in a significant way must have showmanship, a genial willingness to shed other people’s blood, and a plausible new religion to introduce during the brief period of repentance and horror that usually follows bloodshed” (Vonnegut 176). Constant, in this case, is an acceptable victim; crudely, it seems that he deserves it, since his sacrifice along with all the Martians serves for a better world, by Rumfoord’s hand.

The credibility of Rumfoord as Vonnegut’s author-character is strengthened by Rumfoord’s own weakness, his humanity, that prevails even despite his exceptional power. As is revealed by the end of the novel, he himself was used in an elaborate plan set up by the Tralfamadorians to send their lost traveler, the alien Salo, home. Not only Rumfoord, but the entire planet Earth had been involved in this scheme: Stonehedge, the Great Wall of China, the Golden House of the Roman Emperor Nero, and the Palace of the League of Nations had all been built as messages in Tralfamadorian calling for patience and understanding to Salo. Rumfoord, near-omniscient, is unaware of this plan, described by Salo as “a surprisingly parochial Earthling at heart” (278). When he finds out, he is broken by it, believing himself to

be “one of the principle victims of [Tralfamadorian] influence” (289) and ironically protests that he takes “a certain pride, no matter how foolishly mistaken that pride may be, in making my own decisions for my own reasons” (290). Thus Rumfoord, as the literal author of his world, shaping it to his own wishes – or so he thought – had been shaped to some other wishes all along, and remains a helpless part of bigger forces in the universe. In addition to Tralfamadorian influence, Wolfe points out that he “exists only as wave phenomena and thus is totally at the mercy of such erratic forces as static electricity and sunspots” (967). This is clear when Rumfoord becomes violently sick because of a sun storm, and Salo comments he had “seen Rumfoord and Kazak sick with sunspots many times before” (Vonnegut 285). Wolfe pinpoints that he is not “a figure of stability in an unstable universe” (967), remaining human after all, even after his remarkable achievements as the author of his world. Nonetheless, Rumfoord attempts to keep up appearances, when he rightfully and calmly predicts that an “explosion is going to blow the terminal of [his] spiral clear off the Sun, clear out of the Solar System” (Vonnegut 292), meaning his regular schedule of materializations is going to move out of his familiar Solar System. It does not seem to bother him greatly, casually commenting that “it isn’t as though I were dying or something. Everything that ever was always will be, and everything that ever will be always was” (292). Though it appears that he has again become the stable creator that he always considered himself, the Universe still controls him: his trusted companion, the “hound of space” (300) Kazak, dematerializes without him. Much like Vonnegut, he is painfully human and dreadfully helpless, even in moments of great creation. Though he might possess near endless knowledge and a unique awareness of time, it is a mere illusion that Rumfoord himself is a kind of God, a creator above the Universe itself. The destruction of that illusion, the reality of humanity, is Vonnegut’s commentary. Wolfe summarizes that he “suggests that these realities [of meaningless cruelty and death] will follow man wherever he goes, whatever he does, not because of a failure in man’s vision of himself

(though this is certainly involved), but because, fortunately or unfortunately, they are a part of what makes him human” (969). Morse writes that Vonnegut “includes an uncompromising vision of the random violence of the universe and the limitations of all human beings” (56). Both of these interpretations are potent and relevant to Vonnegut’s commentary on the life of the creator; even when living in a self-constructed idealist utopia, man remains man, with all his idiocracy, destruction, and helplessness.

In the complex world of *Sirens of Titans*, Rumfoord seems to rule: as a creator, author, a God-like figure, materializing infrequently with great stature and always-true predictions. He writes his Earth with a great eye for detail, choosing his victims wisely – the plot focuses on Malachi Constant, the capitalist, immoral businessman, becoming one of the Martian soldiers. His religion inspires great kindness from the citizens of Earth, and despite the incredible human sacrifices that had to be made, Rumfoord appears to be successful in creating an ideal world from his perspective. His knowledge of characters and awareness of timelines strongly mirrors that of an author, like Vonnegut, who creates his own worlds of nihilistic space travel. Not only his strengths, but more so his weaknesses and his helplessness towards the greater forces in the Universe resemble Vonnegut, who can only do so much in writing idealistic science fiction. Vonnegut uses this author-character of Rumfoord not only to emphasize this empty illusion of the superiority of the author, but also to discuss the possible immorality that is inherent in controlling characters to create a story of one’s own will. The theme of free will is prevalent in Vonnegut’s fiction, and in this case, it considers the free will of characters in fiction, and the implications of an omniscient author.

Chapter 3

Autofiction in Style:

Critical Distance in *Cat's Cradle*

Thus far, this thesis has considered Vonnegut's autofiction in terms of the characters in his writing. It has examined personalities, analyzed behavior and interpreted dialogue. For one particular novel by Vonnegut, however, this analysis is not effective. Though the plot in *Cat's Cradle* is critical of fundamentalist religion, "[offering] a complex and nuanced commentary on twentieth-century belief systems" (Thomas 28), and Vonnegut himself is known to be, asking in his autobiography "Might not we do without religion entirely?" (Vonnegut, *Palm Sunday* 181), all of its characters are convinced by Bokononism, the fictional religion of the novel. Except for the very minor character of Dr von Koenigswald, who only "agrees with one Bokononist idea", that "all religions, including Bokononism, are nothing but lies" (Vonnegut 157), there is not a single character in *Cat's Cradle* who is not a devout Bokononist. This means that the previously applied method, using Worthington's theory that identifies and analyzes author-characters, can hardly be effective, since Vonnegut would be unlikely to be convinced by such a belief system. Instead of using author-characters, then, this analysis must use Hume's concept of projective narrative technique. Vonnegut is not displayed through characterization, but through style. The novel uses and exchanges two types of point of view: literary, distinguishing between first, second or third person, and a personal, based on lived experience and opinion; the concepts coexist and comment on one another. The interaction between the literary and the personal point of view in *Cat's Cradle* creates an ironic style, wherein Vonnegut invokes the reader to take on a critical distance that mirrors his own cynical position towards organized religion.

First, it must be established what the literary point of view in *Cat's Cradle* entails. The *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* defines "point of view" as "the position or vantage-point

from which the events of a story seem to be observed and presented to us” (Baldick). The key word in this definition is "seems"; it leaves room for the possibility of an unreliable narrator, which is important to consider, because it connects the literary and personal point of view. In the first-person perspective especially, narrators can only describe their own experience, which is limited and could be incorrect or misleading. Literary point of view distinguishes between first, second or third person, and focuses on the position of the narrator in relation to the action in the story. In the case of *Cat's Cradle*, the literary point of view of the narrator is interesting; it is in first person and describes the action in the past tense from a current speaker: “I began to collect material for a book to be called *The Day the World Ended*” (Vonnegut 1). Because of this, the text is littered with comments and asides from the current narrator, who has gained new knowledge since the events that he describes transpired. There is thus a certain distance between the narrator and the action: he reminisces, remembers, and feels superior to other characters because of the knowledge he already possesses: for example, he describes, shortly after meeting them, that “when it came time for the Mintons to die, they did it within the same second” (63), mentions in between dialogue that “the little son of a bitch”, Newt Hoenikker, “had a crystal of *ice-nine* in a thermos bottle in his luggage, and so did his miserable sister” (79), and after the world-ending disaster with *ice-nine*, he describes that he “was better qualified to answer those tough questions than any other human being[.] [...] I knew what had gone wrong – where and how” (194). The action that is described is invariably influenced by that extra knowledge: he describes ‘Papa’ Monzano’s death of *ice-nine* as “no novelty now, God knows. But it certainly was then. ‘Papa’ Monzano was the first man in history to die of *ice-nine*” (169). Additionally, as Said Mentak states, “one could call the narrative a written speech”, wherein the narrator makes use of “direct address” (97); the narrator is aware that he is storytelling and speaks to the audience directly. It should be noted that this analysis concerns a postmodern concept of direct address, which does not mean that the author “assumes a voice of

authority higher than that of the addressee” (97). Instead, the narrator “aspires after closeness and [...] stability and wholeness of the author, the characters, and the reader” (97). This closeness is an important part of autofiction, too, because there is no intention for there to be an explicit split between the author and the characters, and the story is a direct expression of the author. Mentak continues to discuss *Cat’s Cradle*’s narrator, stating he “does not show any consistency” (99) and becomes an interesting kind of unreliable narrator, because he “violates the rule” of a first-person narrator and “becomes omniscient” (99). Indeed, the narrator is aware of the other characters’ history, for example when he meets a couple, the Crosbys, on the plane. After a short dialogue with them, he describes: “[H. Lowe Crosby] wasn’t a terrible person and he wasn’t a fool. It suited him to confront the world with a certain barnyard clownishness” (Vonnegut 66). Many detailed character descriptions like these appear throughout the story, breaking with the tradition of the first-person which should only contain the knowledge and experience of one person’s limited perspective. Additionally, the narrator knows a great deal about *ice-nine*, even more than the people he meets at the laboratory of Felix Hoenikker, its inventor: “Dr Breed was mistaken about at least one thing: there was such a thing as *ice-nine*. And *ice-nine* was on earth” (36). Evidently, the literary point of view within *Cat’s Cradle* offers many interesting interpretations but can impossibly be called traditional. The current, first-person, unreliable, omniscient narrator blurs the line between author and narrator.

This literary point of view is combined with the personal point of view, based on experience and opinion, which can be described with the colloquial definition. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “point of view” as: “the perspective from which a subject or event is perceived, or a story, etc., narrated” (*OED*). In contrast to the literary point of view, this definition emphasizes the character of the narrator, since his background and experiences shape his perspective, whereas the literary definition looks at his position in relation to the action. In the case of *Cat’s Cradle*, the personal point of view is rather limited. The reader knows little

more than that the narrator is called “Jonah”, though his parents “called me John” (1). The personal point of view of the narrator is never greatly expanded. The reader knows he is a writer, because he intends to write a book about the father of the atomic bomb, and they know that his unspecified last name appears on a gravestone monument: “There was a last name written there. [...] The name was my last name, too” (51-52). Most importantly, they know that he “was a Christian then” (1) and is a Bokononist now.

The change in religion of the narrator is arguably the most important aspect of the autofictional irony of *Cat's Cradle*, because it is integral to his gained knowledge and comments on past events. Though the narrator did not know then, he does now that the members of the Hoenikker family constitute his *karass*, which is the name for a Bokononist “team” that “do God’s will without ever discovering what they are doing” (2). A *karass* “ignores national, institutional, occupational, familial, and class boundaries” (2) and basically symbolizes groups of people whose lives are inexplicably intertwined. The narrator’s *kan-kan*, the instrument that leads him into his *karass*, is the book that he is writing about the atomic bomb. His *wampeter*, which is the core of the *karass*, something which “the members of its *karass* revolve about [...] in the majestic chaos of a spiral of a nebula” (37), is the dangerous invention of *ice-nine*, the highly deadly substance that the father of the atomic bomb, Felix Hoenikker, devised. His *wrang-wrang*, a person who “steers people away from a line of speculation”, is a homeless person that trashed his apartment while he rented it to him; the person whose mission it was to disenchant the narrator from nihilism. The narrator observes but does not own a *duplass*, a *karass* consisting of a neat union of only two people. He explains that a *granfalloon* is a “false *karass*, [...] a seeming team that was meaningless in terms of how God gets things done” (65), and defines things like “the Communist party, [...] the General Electric Company, [...] and any nation, anytime, anywhere” (65). He understands, and even experiences, the Bokononist ritual of *boko-maru*, the “mingling of awarenesses” (112) achieved by pressing the soles of feet

together. He uses Bokononist phrases like “busy, busy, busy”, which amounts to the realization of “how complicated and unpredictable the machinery of life really is” (47). The narrator is a knowledgeable and devoted Bokononist, which is the most important point of view he has because he frames the story and its events entirely within the context of these concepts. While he tells the story, he informs the reader of the religion and how it redefines everyday objects and concepts inside an imaginary framework that is constructed through linguistically random words and unfamiliar ideas. Bokononism is not connected to a collective idea of spirituality; its words are not similar or comparable to those used in religions in the real world. Despite the fact that the narrator is completely consumed by Bokononism as he tells the story, the absurdity of the religion, established through the humorous words and the paradoxical backstory that emphasizes that everything within Bokononism is a lie, keeps the reader at a critical distance. Sentences like “inwardly, I *sarooned*, which is to say that I acquiesced to the seeming demands of my *vin-dit*” (144) are so random that they make the reader take a step back, because they are so clearly made up. In a sense, it is a similar distance to that which the narrator holds, since he knows more than the characters that he describes. Because the faith is so unfamiliar, one can remain at a distance from it and its believers and consider the religion from a non-believing standpoint; a standpoint from which Vonnegut considers all non-fictional religions. In that critical distance, Vonnegut’s idea of the absurdity of all religions becomes understandable: they, too, categorize simple objects or habits with made-up spiritual words, act out meaningless rituals, and blind themselves from reality. This critical distance constitutes the autofictional style in *Cat’s Cradle*. Hume’s description of projections that can reach an “allegorical degree of abstraction” (177) portrays how Vonnegut creates autofiction in style: his own critical distance to religion is mirrored in the narration and its effect on the reader.

There is an inherent paradox to Vonnegut’s Bokononism, too; the religion admits that it is nothing but lies and is built on political and economic necessity (123), and while the narrator

and every other believer is fully aware of this, they nevertheless believe its teachings to be the absolute truth. The foreword to the novel states that “Nothing in this book is true. ‘Live by the *forma* [harmless untruths] that make you brave and kind and healthy and happy.’ *The Books of Bokonon*. 1:5”. During the first introduction to the religion, the narrator speaks of the “bittersweet lies of Bokonon” (1) and does so admiringly throughout the book; at the same time, he never considers alternative truths. When the narrator learns how Bokononism came into existence, that it served so that “people didn’t have to pay so much attention to the awful truth” (124) and that the leader of the island knew that “without the holy man to war against, he himself would become meaningless” (125), and how in that way, the religion was consciously and publically constructed, it does not change his ideas about it. The regular response to such knowledge, however, would be disbelief or confusion about the legitimacy of such a deliberately designed faith. Thus, the critical distance towards the religion grows and asserts itself similarly to the literary point of view of *Cat’s Cradle*: experiencing the events of the story with a certain type of superiority, caused by possessing different knowledge. In a similar sense, Vonnegut considers real-life religion with the knowledge that all “spiritual” words are merely words and all rituals are simply made-up; the style is autofictional because it offers the author’s perspective. Whereas the narrator considers non-Bokononist things in a Bokononist light, the reader follows a Bokononist narration while remaining non-Bokononist. In *Fundamental Flaws of Fundamentalism*, Thomas writes how “Vonnegut’s work depends on paradox, a technique that makes *Cat’s Cradle* an apt commentary on the flaws in fundamentalism” (28). It can be argued that the inherent irony within the narration constitutes this paradox: the more the narration is convinced of Bokononism, the more the reader is encouraged to remain distant. Thomas phrases this well, stating that “this critical distance helps us open our eyes, remove our prejudices and assumptions about those issues and beliefs at the core of our being so that we can reexamine our own lives – even the religion, or lack of religion, that moves us” (32); *Cat’s*

Cradle encourages to reconsider the concept of religion with the new, personally experienced thoughts of the author. The reader's distance to the story is important in the same way that it is important when reading *Slaughterhouse Five* or *Sirens of Titan*, or any novel by Kurt Vonnegut for that matter: because of their absurdity, framed by the convincing autofictional elements of Vonnegut himself, the reader is able to reexamine the absurdity of the world that they are based upon.

In the interaction between the first-person narrator and his gained knowledge, Vonnegut creates a type of irony that distances the reader from the claims of the narrative. This critical distance that the reader is offered and the irony within the absurdity and inherent paradox of Bokononism can be interpreted as Vonnegut's personal experience of organized religion and faith; it constitutes the autofictional element in style. Though at first glance *Cat's Cradle* seems to be a chaotic and humorous telling of an absurd fundamentalist religion that has no chance at saving the world from its demise, in fact the unconventional narrator offers the unique experience of the author. Hidden in the threads of its style, there is the undeniable voice of Vonnegut, urging the reader to take on a critical distance and to take it beyond this novel, to the strange structures of the real world.

Conclusion

This thesis has attempted to illustrate how Kurt Vonnegut's fiction can be considered autofiction in terms of Worthington's author-characters and Hume's projective technique. Defining autofiction as the fictional expression of an author's non-fictional ideas, this thesis has argued that elements of the author's thought can be found and analyzed solely through considering their fiction. This analysis can interpret elements of the author's ideas and beliefs without explicitly taking biographical or historical fact into account. It is an approach that does not condemn nor obligate context, but urges the focus to be on the text as the perspective and expression of the author.

In *Slaughterhouse Five*, author-character Kilgore Trout, academically agreed upon as Vonnegut's 'alter ego', expresses his thought in ridiculous and badly received science fiction. He offers fictional metaphors of non-fictional affairs, such as war, religion, time, capitalism, and space travel. His stories are special types of societal critiques, hiding between pages of strange stories. This thesis has argued that Vonnegut fulfills a similar role to Trout, in the sense that he too creates science fiction around a metaphor for reality. Realizing these metaphors can be truly eye-opening for many readers, as Billy Pilgrim's life is profoundly transformed by reading Trout's fiction. Similar experiences can be brought on by reading Vonnegut's critical metamorphoses of reality.

Additionally, this thesis has argued that in *Sirens of Titan*, author-character Winston Niles Rumfoord has the prophetic vision and immoral control of reality of an author. By being similarly unstuck in time as Billy Pilgrim because of his flying into a chrono-synclastic infundibulum, and by creating the religion of "The Church of The God The Utterly Indifferent", a faith that stresses the importance of luck and God's lack of influence, Rumfoord is able to bend the world to his will, and create a society that pleases him slightly more. His constant awareness of the characters and the action in his world, past, present, and future mirror the

knowledge of an author building a story. In the end, Rumfoord is only part of a much bigger plan, and he himself played a pawn, a realization that ironically frustrates him greatly. An analysis of Rumfoord as an author raises interesting questions about the morality of an author – do characters have agency? Should they? Is an author permitted to use his characters for his own will, often torturing or even killing them? Though these questions were not profoundly discussed in this thesis, they are certainly interesting to consider.

In the final part of this thesis, the narrative technique in *Cat's Cradle* was analyzed to be an autofictional projection. As a first-person narrator, the narrator in *Cat's Cradle* is rather detached, cold, and uninterested. He tells the story, his story, as if he is constructing it; as if he is the author of it. The thesis argues that this is the autofictional element within *Cat's Cradle*: the critical distance of the narrator. Because he is telling the story as a newly born Bokononist, he relates all experiences to this fabricated religion. Still, he does not do so with his feelings about Bokononism, his beliefs about it even, but only describes the religion as an objective observer would. As a consequence, the reader likely struggles to be immersed into the narrator as a character. Instead, the reader might be inclined to doubt the religion and its sincerity; and therefore, doubt all religions and their sincerity.

Studies of autofiction consist of questions on fiction and reality. Often used as a dichotomy, truth and fiction seemingly cannot co-exist. In fact, when writing is fiction, it is known to be imagined and fabricated. Yet, in fictional expressions of non-fictional ideas, they collide. Even in fabricated writings, elements of truth remain. Indeed, this thesis has attempted to prove how (science) fictional writings can even contain more truth than non-fictional writings, when they fulfill a metaphorical role that aims to expose real world structures. The fact that Vonnegut's fiction so often fulfills this role is not a coincidence; it is a strategy. As his author-characters exemplify, Vonnegut's writing exists to parallel, ridicule, criticize and disentangle the world. Similar to Trout, Vonnegut's fiction is often funny or absurd, until one

looks into the allegorical qualities of the writing, whereupon it is often confronting reality and its strange, destructive tendencies. Similar to Rumfoord, Vonnegut is an idealist in his fiction; by exposing and criticizing problematic structures, he suggests revolution, radical change. In contrast to Rumfoord, he does not offer many alternatives. Similar to the narrator in *Cat's Cradle*, Vonnegut frames the world in absurdity, so that readers might never consider it the same. Naturally, his stories of time travel, exotic planets, and disastrous tropical islands are fabricated, but the systems they function in are nothing but similar to our own. Precisely by framing fiction in reality, Vonnegut's autofiction is able to dismantle them both.

Though, evidently, Vonnegut lends himself easily to analyses of autofiction, one can wonder what fiction could be considered autofiction and what could not, or whether there is a distinction there at all. When autofiction is fictional expressions of non-fictional ideas, many novels and authors apply, because it extends beyond Worthington's postmodern American examples that autofiction contains the author's name or the author's biography. If autofiction is simply reading the author within the fiction, then perhaps all fiction applies. It is not wrong to think so. Disconnecting the writer from the fiction is not necessary for analysis. In fact, it can be insightful to consider what elements of the author's thought are implemented within the structures of their fiction. Autofiction is not meant to be an exclusive definition, only applicable to writers that explicitly mention themselves. Remembering fiction to be a human creation, written down by an author with ideas, thoughts and beliefs, is an invaluable addition to the experience of literature.

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