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Postmodern (Midwestern) Morality

The Act of Affirming Humanity in a Screwed-up World

“Hello, babies. Welcome to Earth. It’s hot in the summer and cold in the winter. It’s round and wet and crowded. At the outside, babies, you’ve got about a hundred years here. There’s only one rule that I know of, babies—:

“God damn it, you’ve got to be kind.”

—Kurt Vonnegut,

God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater

Kurt Vonnegut’s Social Commitment: Acting Humane Even When the Odds Are against You

WHILE KURT VONNEGUT’S reputation as a major American writer has been the subject of much debate for the past thirty years, his status with his readers has remained exceedingly healthy.¹ Vonnegut’s devoted reading public, those who have—as Wayne Booth suggests about author-reader relationships in *The Company We*

Keep: An Ethics of Fiction—invited the author into their lives, embracing the negotiated philosophy of a postmodern, Midwestern moralist, have remained faithful in a manner that is humorously akin to the rock-and-roll groupies who followed the Grateful Dead across the country for so many years, or, perhaps even more so, the citizens of some Indiana town where folks gather around one of their own boys who's made good, waiting to hear what he has to say. It is this faithful following—one created by narratives that are at once profound and intimately familiar, one which was responsible for the early paperback sales of such works as *Mother Night* and *Cat's Cradle*—that scholars at first briefly acknowledged, then ignored. This cult of readers was first mentioned by early critics like John Somer and Jerome Klinkowitz, but since Vonnegut's commercial success, little has been said about these readers and their significant influence as they continue to purchase Vonnegut's work, passing it on to subsequent generations and keeping his entire canon in print—an impressive list of more than twenty books that Dell has continued to refurbish and hawk with new cover designs.

My first experience with this group of readers occurred on a rainy and unseasonably cold evening in November 1991 in the heart of the country, in the heart of the Midwest. My wife and I, along with several thousand admirers of Vonnegut, had paid \$12.00 a ticket to listen to the author deliver a speech in the gymnasium of William Rainey Harper College just outside of Chicago in Palatine, Illinois. Vonnegut spoke for an hour and a half, using portions of articles and speeches that had been collected previously in *Palm Sunday*, as well as more timely material that spoke directly to political and cultural events from recent weeks (some of this material subsequently was collected and published in *Fates Worse Than Death*). Just as in his writing, Vonnegut's mannerisms and speaking voice helped create an environment of intimacy, of familiarity. Such an environment may strike some as odd, considering that many critics have labeled Vonnegut an indifferent philosopher of existentialism or a playful nihilist of comic futility, but it was quite obvious that the Kurt Vonnegut who spoke compassionately and directly about such issues as violence and war, love and respect, was exactly the Kurt Vonnegut that the audience had come to see. Here was the Midwestern sage at the town meeting speaking his mind; here was the town fool making the young laugh and the old-timers shake their heads. Here was a man who

took seriously the values he learned in his American Civics class at Shortridge High School and was holding his compatriots to those very values—as idealistic as they might be. Yet there was something different about this Midwesterner, something slightly out of kilter, something decidedly postmodern. For that reason, the speaking engagement, at times, more closely resembled a rock concert or political convention than a lecture given by a man of arts and letters. Several times throughout the evening, members of the audience shouted out encouragement or requests for the author to address certain topics, and, at all times, the crowd was attentive, laughing heartily at Vonnegut's pointed barbs that, for the most part, were directed at current political leaders and at all of humanity's ineffectuality in dealing with its daily enigmatic existence. It was clear that these readers—although entertained by narrative structures first developed by Vonnegut in his novels and more often than not punctuated by a joke—had come seeking guidance and understanding—or reassurance—on some very weighty philosophical issues in the wake of the Gulf War.

This sort of environment—one which in tone seemed more familial than scholarly, as members of the audience talked freely to one another concerning characters from the novels and even of Vonnegut himself as if they were old friends or relations—is, of course, the very kind of cultural setting that Vonnegut most believes in. In his books and lectures, Vonnegut consistently preaches about his experience growing up in Indianapolis and the relationship of this Midwestern experience to the theories of Dr. Robert Redfield, whose work Vonnegut was introduced to while studying anthropology at the University of Chicago. Redfield's theories contend that all human beings need to belong to extended families for physical and emotional well-being. But such communities have rapidly disappeared during the modern era, and in the fragmented and disrupted postmodern world are, for the most part, absent. As Vonnegut remarks, "It is curious that such communities should be so rare, since human beings are genetically such gregarious creatures. They need plenty of like-minded friends and relatives almost as much as they need B-complex vitamins and a heartfelt moral code" (*Palm Sunday* 204). Vonnegut, in his speaking and writing, has undoubtedly made progress toward the creation of these kinds of communities, and while this is a result he might not have foreseen, I suspect it is one with which he is quite happy.

Unlike other postmodern writers, like John Barth or Thomas Pynchon in whose company he is often placed, Vonnegut speaks openly about his commitment and responsibility to his readers. This commitment is inextricably bound with Vonnegut's view of literature, the work it may do. Although his stance remains unpopular in many scholarly and artistic circles (and understandably so, considering that it is a position similar to that taken by certain groups who wish to censor the arts), Vonnegut adamantly asserts that artists are agents of change, agents with the ability to do good or harm. As he explains in an interview with *Playboy* later collected in *Conversations with Kurt Vonnegut*, "My motives are political. I agree with Stalin and Hitler and Mussolini that the writer should serve his society. I differ with dictators as to how writers should serve. Mainly, I think they should be—and biologically have to be—agents of change. For the better, we hope" (57).²

In *Vonnegut in America*, Klinkowitz suggests that this sense of responsibility results from Vonnegut's early forays into journalism as a writer for student newspapers, first at Shortridge High School in Indianapolis and later at Cornell University (22). During his tenure as a writer for school periodicals, Vonnegut displayed great concern with the political and social issues of the day, with scientific progress heralded as the saving grace of the United States. Issues of scientific progress, of social commitment, of history's absurdly romantic relationship with war would continue to occupy Vonnegut not only in his writing but also in his study: Vonnegut majored in chemistry and biology at Cornell, and later at the University of Chicago pursued a master's degree in anthropology. For Vonnegut, issues of such significance demand that the writer be understood; the goal of the writer is to communicate as quickly and effectively—and quite often for Vonnegut, as ironically and humorously—as possible.³ While much of Vonnegut's writing maintains standards first established by his work as a student journalist and public relations writer for General Electric, these same standards that have helped him achieve a level of clarity that is seldom encountered in postmodern fiction have been attacked as simplistic by certain adversarial critics.

Roger Sale, in the *New York Times Book Review*, has berated Vonnegut's work (in this case, specifically *Slapstick*) by saying that "Nothing could be easier," while works by Thomas Pynchon take "stamina, determination, and crazy intelligence" (3). Although Vonnegut has had to weather this kind of criticism, he has not

stood alone. John Irving, among other writers, defends Vonnegut's craft, pointing to the sheer lunacy of asserting that "what is easy to read has been easy to write" (41). Irving claims that "Vonnegut's lucidity is hard and brave work in a literary world where pure messiness is frequently thought to be a sign of some essential wrestling with the 'hard questions'" (42). Undoubtedly, Vonnegut is wrestling with the "hard questions," and his ability to do so with grace and precision marks him not only as a fine literary stylist but also reveals his ultimate concern: that his ideas find their way to the reader. Vonnegut's own response to literary critics, included in *Palm Sunday*, takes the form of an understated diatribe: "It has been my experience with literary critics and academics in this country that clarity looks a lot like laziness and ignorance and childishness and cheapness to them. Any idea which can be grasped immediately is for them, by definition, something they knew all the time. So it is with literary experimentation, too. If a literary experiment works like a dream, is easy to read and enjoy, the experimenter is a hack" (320).

Whether one agrees that Vonnegut's work is aesthetically pleasing because of its directness, however, is not at issue here. Rather, his desire to enact change, to establish patterns for humanity that will lead to the construction of better realities for the world, will be the focus of this study.⁴ As Vonnegut has explained, "I've worried some about why write books when Presidents and Senators and generals do not read them, and the university experience taught me a very good reason: you catch people before they become generals and Senators and Presidents, and you poison their minds with humanity. Encourage them to make a better world" (Allen, *Conversations* 5).

It is Vonnegut's insistence that writing is an "act of good citizenship or an attempt, at any rate, to be a good citizen" (Allen, *Conversations* 72) that has led many critics to dismiss his work. Critics like Peter Prescott denounce Vonnegut for what Prescott calls "gratuitous digressions"; he characterizes Vonnegut's writing on race and pollution and poverty as "arrested," and the relationship of author to audience as "sucking up to kiddy grievances" (40). Prescott is outraged—or as he puts it in a review of *Breakfast of Champions*, "From time to time, it's nice to have a book you can hate—it clears the pipes—and I hate this book for its preciousness" (40)—I argue, for the simple reason that Vonnegut resists the rhetoric of modernist art. By Prescott's modernist

standards, a book like *Breakfast of Champions* is “manure, of course.” Raymond Olderman argues that Vonnegut’s work should be assessed by different criteria: “If we grant that he has designs on us and that he sometimes sacrifices fictive device for absolute clarity, often sounding more like a social scientist than a novelist, then we can forget his occasional failure to justify the literary tradition he half evokes, and judge him on the genuine quality of a passionately honest heart and mind working over the bewildering facts of contemporary existence” (192). While I agree with Olderman that any evaluation of Vonnegut by modernist, new critical standards is certain to find aspects of his work lacking, I do not agree that Vonnegut’s only contribution to American literature is a “passionately honest heart and mind working over the bewildering facts of contemporary existence.” The very nature of Olderman’s defense—one that attempts to excuse Vonnegut for sounding more like a social scientist than a novelist—is situated in modernist thought, using generic paradigms developed by the New Critics, among others.

The new fiction of our times, often labeled postmodern, may, as James M. Mellard suggests, be perceived as an exploded form. In some instances, notions of generic distinction have all but vanished. The writing of Richard Brautigan, William S. Burroughs, Vonnegut, and many others problematized the use of such descriptors and boundaries and helped literary theory to move beyond the work of genre-labeling into new territory. I argue that Vonnegut offers a new kind of fiction, a paradigm of postmodernity that allows the author to struggle with philosophical ideas concerning our condition in a form that reflects this very struggle. Unlike Auden’s claim that “poetry makes nothing happen” and the assertion of so many modernist critics that art is autonomous (art for art’s sake), Vonnegut is concerned not only with the form his writing takes—one that reflects postmodern convictions about the nature of reality and our ability to express that reality in language—but also with the positive work his artistry may engender. As Jane Tompkins explains in *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790–1860*, the novels of writers like Harriet Beecher Stowe were dismissed by modernist academics because such critics failed to acknowledge the kind of “cultural work” that Stowe hoped to bring about with her writing. Sadly, Vonnegut also has received the same treatment at times, neglected by critics and scholars alike because of his social vision, which he

claims grew out of his Midwestern upbringing. “That’s the story of my life, too. I went to a good high school, and everything was noise after that,” Vonnegut remarks in *Like Shaking Hands with God: A Conversation about Writing*. “I was always interested in good citizenship,” he continues. “It was just what I learned in junior civics class in school in Indianapolis, how important it is to be a good citizen” (70).

Vonnegut’s efforts to connect with his audience as an act of good citizenship, a connection he hopes ultimately leads to the construction of better realities for humanity, are rooted in the “big” questions. His work is philosophical in nature; his stories often take the form of parables; he struggles along with the reader, not in a position of author as omniscient creator but as one who also is wrestling honestly with the “big” question at hand. Arguably, Vonnegut’s appeal to college students since their discovery of his work in the 1960s and 1970s may be linked with his ability to explore philosophically profound questions in prose that is neither convoluted nor simply theoretical. Vonnegut explains his popularity with young people as the result of his insistence on probing the nature of our existence: “Maybe it’s because I deal with sophomoreic questions that full adults regard as settled. I talk about what is God like, what could He want, is there a heaven, and, if there is, what would it be like? This is what college sophomores are into” (Allen, *Conversations* 103).⁵ What distinguishes Vonnegut from other metaphysicians is his incredulity toward final answers and his unflinching determination to find pragmatic responses to profound questions. His admonitions to readers, based on the firm conviction that there are no longer “enormous new truths” to be discovered, are mired in what Vonnegut calls “the ordinariness of life, the familiarity of love” (Allen, *Conversations* 74).

While Vonnegut is willing to contemplate the existence of God, of His hand in the painfulness of life for some and the sweetness of life for others, he is not willing to allow theoretical debates to overshadow our need for action in our attempts to alleviate the suffering of others.⁶ The working-class pragmatism he inherited from the preceding generations of Vonneguts who lived in Indianapolis—among his ancestors were the proprietors of a long-running hardware store and the architects and builders of many buildings that still dot this Midwestern city’s skyline—will not allow Vonnegut to simply theorize. While intellectual inquiry and

philosophizing may be important, it will not directly feed those who do not have food or put a roof above the heads of those who sleep in the street. This split between intellectual theorizing and the pragmatic social consequences of such intellectual activity in the physical world, a split that is often not handled by scientists and political leaders to Vonnegut's satisfaction, may have contributed to his attempted suicide in 1984. As he describes it in *Fates Worse Than Death*, "I was carted off to the Emergency Room of St. Vincent's Hospital in the middle of the night to be pumped out. I had tried to kill myself. It wasn't a cry for help. It wasn't a nervous breakdown. . . . I wanted out of here" (181).⁷ This revelation, in *Fates Worse Than Death*, follows directly on the heels of a chapter devoted to Vonnegut's trip to Mozambique, where he witnessed the deaths by starvation of little girls about the age of his own daughter Lily, as well as a recollection of a trip he took to Biafra, a small republic in Africa that surrendered unconditionally to Nigeria on 17 January 1970, where he watched in horror as children were denied proper food because of a war blockade, and, as a result, they "all had red hair and their rectums were everted, dangling outside like radiator hoses" (174–75). Put quite simply in the ensuing chapter, Vonnegut explains that he had been "too pissed off to live another minute (absolutely apeshit)" (183).⁸

It is this kind of social awareness that produces such strong convictions in Vonnegut's prose, that allows him to urge others not to see their work in terms of mere word play or philosophical theorizing, that sounds his clarion call for each of us to examine our lives and to live in such a way that we minimize the harm we do to the earth or its inhabitants. Vonnegut is unwilling to accept a discussion of the situation in Mozambique or Biafra or wherever people suffer physically and emotionally that concentrates on the complexity of the political situation or the impossibility of raising financial support to bring supplies to the victims. By this, I do not mean to imply that Vonnegut does not recognize the nuances and labyrinthine nature of wars and poverty and racism. He, in fact, writes a great deal about the difficulty of determining who is a victim and who is an attacker, and, in typical Vonnegut fashion, we are told that seldom can such questions ever be answered. He does, however, conclude that conditions of daily life like those in Mozambique are "no more to be discussed in terms of good and evil than cholera, say, or bubonic plague" (*Fates* 169). In Von-

negut's mind, the physical needs of people can never be evaluated in terms of good and evil. No esoteric or theoretical debate, according to Vonnegut, should impinge upon our response to cholera or bubonic plague or starvation. Vonnegut is our leading literary pragmatist. Although he enjoys thinking through—or, at the very least, pondering with great energy and humor—the problems of our existence, including the politics of nations and the practices of religions, he ultimately is concerned with the physical and emotional care of humanity: the weak and downtrodden, first, and those more fortunate, second.

While Vonnegut has a deep respect for science and philosophy—he often proudly recites the accomplishments of his brother, Bernard, who graduated with a doctorate from MIT and was a highly respected scientist responsible for such discoveries as the effect of silver iodide in the artificial creation of rain or snow—at no time is he willing to place the study of either science or philosophy above the practical concerns of everyday life. It is human life, its dignity, that Vonnegut wishes most to preserve. In an address at MIT in 1985, Vonnegut warned future scientists of the danger in perceiving their intellectual pursuits as neutral.⁹ He illustrated this point with examples from history; perhaps the most horrific and tragic example concerns Hitler's hope to eradicate from Germany all Jews, Gypsies, Slavs, homosexuals, and Communists, a hope that might never have been accomplished except for the help of chemists who supplied Hitler's executioners with cyanide gas.¹⁰ Vonnegut's conclusion: "It can make quite a difference not just to you but to humanity: the sort of boss you choose, whose dreams you help come true" (*Fates* 118).

Some might criticize Vonnegut for such a facile statement. This way of thinking, however, actually fits quite comfortably with the philosophical thought of our age. Vonnegut, like other postmodernists, believes that claims for objectivity and neutrality no longer hold water; rather, he acknowledges that observations and inventions and actions of all sorts are subjective in nature, carrying ethical and political implications. Therefore, Vonnegut's conclusion, although seemingly naive, is couched in the discourse of postmodernity that believes it has exposed as a charade the modernist pretense to objectivity and neutrality, and, fittingly, he ends his speech by imploring the students of MIT to rewrite the Hippocratic Oath in order that it might apply to all scientists, "remembering that all sciences have their roots in the simple wish

to make people safe and well" (*Fates* 120). Vonnegut suggests the oath begin like this: "The regimen I adopt shall be for the benefit of all life on this planet, according to my own ability and judgment, and not for its hurt or for any wrong. I will create no deadly substance or device, though it be asked of me, nor will I counsel such" (*Fates* 120). Surely this kind of rhetoric would describe quite nicely the unwritten oath of Vonnegut's own work, the work of a postmodern moralist whose roots reach back to his youth in Indianapolis.

If I am, however, to represent the range of Vonnegut's philosophy, I cannot ignore what is often misconstrued as his devotion to a dark nihilism that impedes his morality or ethical position. Charles B. Harris, in an essay entitled "Illusion and Absurdity: The Novels of Kurt Vonnegut," contends that "Vonnegut's belief in a purposeless universe constitutes his main theme" (131), that his books, at all times, comment upon the "futility of human endeavor, the meaninglessness of human existence" (133). Harris's remarks are representative of a branch of Vonnegut studies that emphasizes the note of despondency, the hopelessness on which so many of the early novels end. While Harris's claim that Vonnegut's work fits nicely with absurdist philosophy seems plausible, he ignores the ethical frame that Vonnegut develops in conjunction with this philosophy. Like many of the French absurdist, who actively worked for political and social improvement, Vonnegut also wishes to create and promote an ethic that ennobles humanity. Unlike Harris, I contend that Vonnegut's ethical position constitutes his main theme, that he is more concerned with our response to existence than with the philosophical nature of that existence. Certainly novels like *Cat's Cradle*, with its understated apocalyptic conclusion thumbing its nose at God, and *Sirens of Titan*, with its absurd punch line explaining humanity's triumphs and sufferings as an elaborate tool for the Tralfamadorian messages concerning a repair part for a stranded spacecraft, suggest a purposeless universe, but that does not necessarily mean our grappling with futility is meaningless. Upon closer examination, what we find in Vonnegut's work is an appraisal of our current condition on the planet that leads him to conclude that the universe is indeed absurd.

Yet Vonnegut does not succumb to the darkness. His writing is prophetic; his stories of a bleak future prompt the reader to look at the current condition of the planet and its inhabitants while

offering an ethical position that gives meaning to human life. Vonnegut's belief that the universe is purposeless is not his main theme; it is his assumption. Vonnegut's main theme remains his call to common decency and his hope that we will learn to respect one another before we destroy ourselves and the planet. Therefore, in each novel, despite the sometimes disheartening sense of futility that pervades it, Vonnegut does offer suggestions for better living and hope for the despondent. In *Cat's Cradle*, Vonnegut actually works out the ideas of Robert Redfield in a fictional setting. This novel, which served as Vonnegut's master's thesis in anthropology, explores the very real physical and emotional needs of humans, needs that he claims may be met by the value structures found in folk societies. The positive example of religion offered by Vonnegut in *Cat's Cradle*, a religion called Bokononism and based on foma (or harmless untruths), exhibits characteristics similar to folk societies and proposes that religion—an institution that Vonnegut, while criticizing its historical practice, consistently praises for its potential to satisfy the needs of humans—may be founded on a floating center that acknowledges its own fallibility, its own constructedness, and the never-ending possibilities of life.¹¹ Bokononism differs from other established religions in its reluctance to claim an absolutist position; it is based on *The Books of Bokonon*, a religious text that is forever changing, expanding: "There is no such thing as a completed copy" (*Cat's* 124). It is, finally, the religion of science that drives the novel to its dark conclusion. Bokononism, the hopeful act of social protest at the center of the novel, is not ultimately responsible for the end of the world. Rather, the naiveté of science—its belief that the pursuit of scientific "truth" is neutral—establishes a space in which ice-nine, a substance more deadly in its consequence than any number of atomic bombs, may be created and then distributed to the family of its creator. Predictably, the different emotional needs of the family members, needs that their father, the man of science, could not satisfy, prevail, and the "pure" substance of ice-nine falls into the hands of those who do not care to see the world go on spinning. Although *Cat's Cradle* ends tragically, to claim that Vonnegut subscribes to a fatalistic view of the human condition, that he believes existence is meaningless, is to ignore a plethora of evidence to the contrary.¹² Similarly, in *Sirens of Titan*, although Malachi Constant discovers that human history is actually the story of the Tralfamadorian attempt to deliver a mechanical part

to Salo for the repair of his spacecraft, the “moral” of the story—a “moral” closely related to Eliot Rosewater’s pronouncement to Mary Moody’s twins: “God damn it, you’ve got to be kind” (*God Bless* 110)—seems to be embedded in Malachi’s belated revelation of the purpose of human existence: “It took us that long to realize that a purpose of human life, no matter who is controlling it, is to love whoever is around to be loved” (313).

It is true that Vonnegut often depicts the plight of humanity in brutally honest terms: He is unwilling to wear rose-colored glasses in order to pander to those who wish only to hear euphemistic sound bites about our future. As he sees it, the uncontained growth of population, the destructive and costly wars that enliven an economic machine that uses human flesh for fuel, our blithe response to the devastation of the environment, and our continued mistreatment of one another, does not bode well for the future. Vonnegut, however, does not see himself as fatalistic or pessimistic; as he explains, “When I’m engaged in any action I have to take into consideration that many of the people on either side of me don’t care what happens next. I am mistrustful of most people as custodians of life and so I’m pessimistic on that account. I think that there are not many people who want life to go on. And I’m just a bearer of bad tidings really” (Allen, *Conversations* 233). Vonnegut’s view of his own writing then may be construed as journalistic; he is reporting on the condition of the world and the failure of our current response to it; he is not advocating this response. Vonnegut, in a characteristically macabre one-liner, offers this epitaph for the Earth: “We could have saved it, but we were too darn cheap and lazy” (*Fates* 185). This bleak portrayal of the current situation does not preclude hope or necessitate despair on Vonnegut’s part. As indicated by the first clause in the above quotation, we do have the ability to save our planet, to make life better; it is our insistence that all is well or, at the other end of the spectrum, our self-loathing and despair that too often leads to inaction and an acceptance of the status quo.

Vonnegut’s career ought to be seen in terms of a fight against our inaction and our blunders that too often harm us, as well as the planet. Undoubtedly, there is a dark vein of ideas and images that run through the work of Vonnegut, and this vein, which he shares with the writer he most admires, Mark Twain, encourages some critics to characterize his work as despairingly nihilistic.¹³ Yet Vonnegut’s response to existence seems anything but despairing. In fact,

his determination to write toward some kind of action that might shift our paths toward something better, something worth giving to future generations, leads him to say, "I find that I trust my own writing most, and others seem to trust it most, too, when I sound most like a person from Indianapolis, which is what I am" (*Palm Sunday* 77). As a person from Indianapolis who was reared on the idealistic notions of freedom and liberty and justice for all peoples, Vonnegut's use of fiction becomes activist in nature; it is his hope that he may shock his readers into a moment of comprehension, a moment in which they may recognize the irrationality of our political or religious practices, our industrial or legal abuses, and move on toward a world that follows more closely the ideals of his youth.

Vonnegut moves beyond the recognition of our current condition as shockingly futile and begins to make attempts at alleviating the painful oppression of those circumstances that create the very futility he chronicles by composing fictions that serve as a mirror to our condition. Moreover, Vonnegut's movement toward action through the writing of fiction appears to transcend the modernist paradigm, recognizing the pluralist nature of reality and the postmodern deconstruction of metanarratives. The *petites histoires*—small localized narratives for living—that Vonnegut offers are based on traditional humanist values but do not operate within a grand narrative or a totalizing schema as such narratives once did. For Vonnegut, there is never a dogmatic claim to "truth." As a writer, he refuses totalizing structures and consistently reminds the reader of the constructedness of reality, of the textuality in the texts that he himself has written, of the limitations involved in his prescriptive postmodern morality. The postmodern move toward an understanding of the development of metanarratives and how such metanarratives have been used in the past to justify atrocities committed by Western culture brings to bear the issues of essence and value. Some postmodernists have abandoned any notion of the actual existence of essence or value, and, as a result, they have been criticized as immoral or amoral. Perhaps the most significant contribution Vonnegut has made is his example of postmodern activism in his writing and in his life outside writing, an activism that intersects repeatedly with powerful social concern and commitment to local and global conflicts. Vonnegut's social vision, rooted in a provisional morality and a pattern of local, relational, and contextual value, refuses to ignore the emotional and physical suffering of any creature.

Postmodern Possibilities

To define postmodernism is a harrowing project. In fact, the very act of defining seems to fly in the face of postmodernity: can there be any single, essential definition of postmodernism? If one accepts the theoretical principles of poststructuralist thought, the answer must be a resounding no. Interestingly enough, this contradiction certainly has not reduced the number of texts attempting to establish a static definition of postmodernism and produced by an academic industry that Fredric Jameson would undoubtedly see as an effect of late capitalism. What I propose, then, is to situate this study amidst the cacophony of competing voices, creating a context in which we may understand in what ways Vonnegut is postmodern. What postmodernism “means” cannot be found in unified or totalizing explanations. Rather, there are myriad postmodernisms: some describing postmodernity as a historical epoch; some focusing on the visual arts since World War II; some concentrating on the literary innovations of writers like Barth and Pynchon and Vonnegut. There is no consensus about postmodernity, only endless multiplicities. To acknowledge the pluralistic nature of postmodern discourse and to recognize that any one definition of the many possible definitions may only work at the local level within, in this case, the context of an academic community is to embrace the theoretical project of postmodernity: work is at all times relational. Therefore, although it is clear that much of the writing that has been done over the last forty years is quite different from that of the previous generation, any effort to form a static postmodern poetics must always remain just that: an effort, a gesture.

Perhaps John McGowan offers the most concise and least exclusive definition of postmodernism: “At the very least, postmodernism highlights the multiplication of voices, questions, and conflicts that has shattered what once seemed to be (although it never really was) the placid unanimity of the great tradition and of the West that gloried in it” (“Postmodernism” 587). A most significant feature of postmodernism revolves around its continued deconstruction of any unified or unifying image: the “reality” of postmodernity lies in its awareness of the constructed nature of “truth” and the ensuing efforts to allow voices, once silenced by the modern monomyth of one essential “truth,” to speak from the margins. Not surprisingly, Vonnegut has embraced this notion of

relative truth and speaks strongly about the need for education to introduce the voices of other cultures: "I didn't learn until I was in college about all the other cultures, and I should have learned that in the first grade. A first-grader should understand that his culture isn't a rational invention; that there are thousands of other cultures and they all work pretty well; that all cultures function on faith rather than truth; that there are lots of alternatives to our own society" (Allen, *Conversations* 104).

Following the example of many other theorists, perhaps the most effective manner in which to approach a definition of postmodernism is to place it in relation to our understanding of modernism.¹⁴ Because of Vonnegut's own interest in science and anthropology, it is fitting to begin by examining the dynamic changes in scientific study, changes that first affected the nature of investigation in biology, chemistry, and physics and later changed the way in which we view art and culture. James B. Miller argues that the prevailing images for the premodern world were organic while those for the modern world were mechanical and dualistic; he asserts that in the postmodern world the representative images are historical, relational, and personal (8). To be sure, the works of Darwin and other evolutionary theorists contributed to the shift from organicism to mechanism, and even though postmodernity uses certain evolutionary concepts, further suggesting the influence of Darwinian theory, their application is markedly different. While the modern perspective of science held that there was "objective knowledge which derives from detached, impersonal observation of the facts of nature," the postmodern perspective suggests that no amount or quality of observation can offer a full and complete description: "It suggests that at the core of reality is an unfathomable mystery" (James Miller 10).

Although we may in part understand evolution, we cannot apprehend what an entity may become or entirely understand what it has been. Moreover, judging by contemporary attempts to discern the state of our present development, the act of describing a species' current evolutionary condition would seem even more tenuous. The world is at all times in process; it is not a creation so much as a *creating* (James Miller 9). In addition to the influence of evolutionary theory, the development of Einstein's Theory of Relativity undermines the modern and premodern concept of essence. Existence is at all times relational; we cannot understand any part of life without first perceiving its participatory nature.

We no longer live in a Newtonian world in which absolute contexts were thought to exist. Moreover, quantum theory overturns any notion of a universe comprised of self-sufficient things; Miller contends that in the postmodern world “the universe does not seem to be composed of stuff or things at all but rather of dynamic relations” (9). These advances in scientific theory—advances that work naturally into Vonnegut’s own writing as a result of his undergraduate and graduate study and later professional interests—continue to disrupt and subvert not only the practices of biology, chemistry, and physics but also the traditionally humanist disciplines of literature and art. These significant and radical disruptions in scientific thought and the technology that has resulted from such advances have created an environment in which it is hard to imagine a reality or essence that might be comprehended outside of some context. With the information superhighway, ushered in by computer technology (the internet and e-mail, for example), satellite communications, and the seemingly endless number of channels offered on demand by contemporary television programming, an entire generation looks to a future where knowing what is happening in a neighborhood in Kenya or Iraq or Sri Lanka and knowing what is happening in one’s own neighborhood in Boston or San Francisco are commensurate. No longer can cultures be dismissed easily by a single set of criteria issued forth by some dominant Western ideology; the technological advances of postmodernity help establish a space for groups of people who once were exploited or, worse, destroyed, to assert the validity of local knowledge over universal knowledge.

Because of the amazing and, at times, frightening dispersal of information, contemporary generations may have difficulty imagining how there could have ever been a time where a small number of metanarratives controlled the ways a nation thought and talked about such issues as foreign policy or justice. When I speak of a time in history where as a culture we showed allegiance to several grand narratives, I do not mean to imply that all people responded in a like manner to these narratives because, of course, those at the margins who did not fit into the “truth” of certain grand narratives remained on the periphery, isolated by their “otherness.” It also should be noted that grand narratives continue to function in our culture today. Certainly since the tragedy of 9/11 and the ensuing war on terror we have witnessed a revival or a return to a reliance on a more monolithic narrative of American

righteousness and patriotism. In addition, while our culture continues to diversify into multiplicities, we still are controlled by what Jameson calls late capitalism. Our financial structures, the very ways we create commerce, are based on a particular grand narrative, and critics like Jameson who are frightened to think where our commodification of indigenous cultures, the generic exploitation of those very multiplicities we work hard to validate, will lead us, rally against some of the practices of postmodernism. These criticisms of the exploitation of local custom and knowledge watered down and packaged only to be fed to a consumer culture are more than fair, and we would be wise to heed such prophetic warnings. Although the information superhighway contributes positively to the characteristically postmodern move toward multiplicity and relativity, it should be noted that there are inherent dangers in what kinds of information may be disseminated, a problem we will return to later.

Jean-François Lyotard claims that the postmodern condition is a result of “the crisis of narratives” (xiii). In *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Lyotard explains that scholarly activity in the modern world may be defined as “any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse . . . making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative” (71–72). He briefly defines the postmodern as an “incredulity toward metanarratives” (72). Postmodernity refuses the authority of modern metanarratives, attacking their discourse on the grounds that they are logocentric, linear, and totalizing; such narratives claim to be scientific and objective while reaffirming modernity and its truth. The truth of modernity, of course, excludes most of the world, establishing as normative Western European and American ideas/ideals. Postmodernists argue against such metanarratives, claiming that reason, objectivity, and essential truth are merely effects of discourse. Pauline Marie Rosenau explains in *Postmodernism and the Social Sciences: Insights, Inroads, and Intrusions* that postmodernity sees truth claims as merely the “product of power games, manipulated into position by those whose interests they serve” (78). As this study hopes to suggest through readings of Vonnegut’s individual novels, the exposure of modern metanarratives and the subsequent deconstruction of the illusory but controlling discourse that helps to propagate their myths of essential truth remain a consistent target for Vonnegut throughout his career.

But where may we go after the deconstruction of grand narratives? How does a culture that has heretofore based its systems of socialization—its institutions of government, legislation, and religion—on the ideas of essence and value, ideas that have been shown quite convincingly to be effects of discourse, move into an era of multiplicity, of plurality, of “truths” not “truth”? Certainly this bold step into the postmodern frightens and unnerves many while disturbing others to such a degree that they fight even the smallest deviation from modernist presuppositions with tenacity and vitriol. One possible reason for the anxious resistance of some to postmodern ideas hinges on the nebulous position of those very theorists who boldly entered the fray, tearing apart the facade of modernism brick by brick with no clear notion of what would be rebuilt, if anything could be rebuilt. Many theorists who savagely destroyed the oppressive myths of the past were surprised to find that their own work, when scrutinized by Derridian principles, also fell into similar aporetic states; it soon became clear that all discourse harbors bias, that there is no place where one can speak neutrally or innocently. In the postmodern world, there is no position of universality from which to theorize; there can only be local philosophizing leading to micro-theory, and, paradoxically, postmodern theorists must admit that a position that insists upon the deconstruction of metanarratives and the singular possibility of small, locally based narratives is itself a totalizing position, perhaps the only metanarrative to which postmodernity subscribes. The space opened by these critics, however, should not be devalued; certainly the positive political action that results from this work, leading to the formation of new discourses like feminism and multiculturalism, owes much to the ideas posited by earlier postmodern theorists. The contemporary assimilation and reevaluation of the position of women and other minorities, the new turn toward indigenous cultures that infiltrates such diverse areas of our society as educational curriculum reviews from kindergarten through graduate school and corporate marketing strategies at the local, national, and international level, undoubtedly would never have appeared with such force and rapidity without the positive work of postmodern theory. If postmodernity is, in part, responsible for exposing the rhetorical nature of truth and value, two linguistic structures that have been appealed to in order to justify such heinous acts as the destruction of Native American culture and the enslavement of Africans, then why do critics of post-

modernity claim that it is morally and socially bankrupt? The early development of Lyotard's thought offers an excellent example of what many have attacked as the morally and socially bankrupt nature of postmodernism while his later career displays a modification of earlier positions and a new concern for justice, or what Steven Best and Douglas Kellner claim "comes close to liberal reformism, which he reconstructs, however, in a postmodern fashion" (*Postmodern Theory* 162).

The early work of Lyotard concentrates on the rejection of the primacy of text, refuting the textualist approach that privileges text over experience, the senses, and images. His hope was to validate new ways of knowing, ways that had been denigrated by Western culture's allegiance to the word. This insistence on the primacy of the text is, of course, not surprising, given the fact that the history of modern Western culture has its roots in the Judeo-Christian tradition, a religious tradition whose holy texts often inscribe its God as the word: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). In his endeavor to subvert this obsession with text, Lyotard, following the philosophical and linguistic line first established by Derrida, asserts that Western philosophy operates around a set of binary oppositions. Struggling against the tyranny of dichotomous valuation, Lyotard champions what has been neglected: the figure, the image, which may only be apprehended through the senses. Best and Kellner explain that from this position Lyotard develops a philosophy of desire based heavily on Freudian theory, celebrating "all desire (positive and negative) for providing intensities of experience, liberation from repressive conditions, and creativity" (150). For Lyotard, the function of theory is not only to understand or interpret but also to criticize, to overturn the established order that some may find intolerable. Best and Kellner contend that Lyotard was dissatisfied with the conventional boundaries of criticism: "Criticizing and negating, [Lyotard] suggests, is infinite and useless, never coming to an end" (153).

Out of these doldrums, Lyotard emerged to embrace what may be characterized as a "Nietzschean affirmative discourse within a politics and philosophy of desire" (Best and Kellner 153). It is within his philosophy of libidinal economy that Lyotard may be criticized for his lack of concern with justice or morality; at this point in his career the only goal was the cultivation of the circulation, flows, intensities, and energetics of desire. This cultivation

did not involve a judgment of positive or negative energies but rather focused on desire itself; it is a postmodern perspective that stresses “activities that produce intensities, that free and intensify the flow of desire . . . over modern politics which are concerned with such things as rights and justice” (Best and Kellner 155). Of course, if one is not concerned with such things as rights and justice and instead embraces all of life’s intensities, there is the danger that within the free flow of positive and negative energy conditions of an intolerable nature may be produced, conditions that disrupt any cultivation of the very desire Lyotard claims we most need.¹⁵ Best and Kellner suggest that Lyotard’s early work pursued a politics of bodily affirmation to its extremes, a position that he eventually saw as limited and limiting; after discovering this blind spot, Lyotard’s position modified and moved toward a politics of justice. While Lyotard’s early work embraces a desire that he claims exists outside of or beyond good and evil—a position that fails to recognize the danger in not distinguishing between desire that emancipates and desire that confines, between a fascist desire and a revolutionary desire—his later work addresses these very issues.

John McGowan represents the later Lyotard as a neo-pragmatist and suggests that in a work like *Just Gaming*, Lyotard, by focusing on the particularity of rules in language games, opposes any notion of universal rules in our use of language. Like Fish, Rorty, and other pragmatists, Lyotard asserts that language is at all times contextual and communal, and his conclusion about the nature of language games, a conclusion that emphasizes the singular justice of each game, implies “that nothing sets limits to the directions in which the game can go; localism becomes associated with endless ‘experimentation,’ a highly desirable situation” (McGowan, *Postmodernism* 183). Lyotard employs language games as a way of addressing the politics of justice. Language games are to be seen as representative of the nature of all games, and, of course, life itself, with all its possible realities, is seen as a game. Therefore, the principles of language games, principles that rest paradoxically on a sole prescriptive of universal value that insists on “the observance of the singular justice of each game such as it has just been situated” (Lyotard and Thebaud 100), may apply to other situations, and in this way it is possible to discern contextual justice not just in theory but in daily practice. In a conversation with Jean-Loup Thebaud, Lyotard explains that “Yes, there is

first a multiplicity of justices, each one of them defined in relation to the rules specific to each game. These rules prescribe what must be done so that a denotative statement, or an interrogative one, or a prescriptive one, etc., is received as such and recognized as ‘good’ in accordance with the criteria of the game to which it belongs” (100). Thus, within a game or a local community, there are rules or criteria that establish prescriptive norms or values in the use of language, and by applying this theoretical paradigm to issues of a fleshly nature—poststructuralists argue that we may only apprehend “real” issues like poverty or racism or gang violence through language—these norms or values that are valid at the local level may be used to define injustice or immorality.

But what of communities whose rules we find intolerable? What do we do when we witness a game outside of our own context whose rules call for racist behavior or fascist violence? Must we turn away, resigned to the operations of value and morality within our own community? Without a center of value on which we may base moral or ethical judgments, are we confined to our own communities, never to examine or judge the actions of other nations or cultures? Lyotard’s response, of course, would rest on the theoretical principle that postmodernity allows for the proliferation of stories, refuting any single claim to “truth,” and in this way protecting against any monomaniacal scrambling for control of others. In other words, if there are conditions a people find reprehensible, then they might simply create new stories, new “truths,” on which to base new community practices. While theoretically this appears to be revolutionary, it fails to acknowledge real principles of power, the workings of capital and war machines. Although Lyotard’s work empowers certain voices that have been neglected and celebrates multiplicity, it also exposes a weakness of the postmodern position: If there is no universal value, no center from which we can establish a set of criteria for the human condition, then how can we take political action against communities whose practices we wish to deem reprehensible? How do we condemn and combat such heinous acts as “ethnic cleansing” in Bosnia or female genital mutilation in various cultures in Africa? On what basis do we rebuke the terrorist whose leaders invoke a religious narrative that calls for a holy war to cleanse the earth of the infidel’s heresy.

This is perhaps most problematic today as we find our culture expanding into multiplicities that are at times disturbing to those

who remember the days when it “all made sense,” when there was (the illusion of) universal agreement concerning morality and value. Those who long nostalgically for such times—times that include the debacle of McCarthyism—reflect our need for order and consistency and reason, our desire for justice in a universe that too often seems unjust. It is far more simple to live in a world of black and white than one with muted shades of gray. It is much more comforting to believe that the United States is somehow divinely anointed for providential business, to perceive the nation’s leaders as somehow beyond reproach, than to recognize the limitations of our national vision and the existence of other national dreams. In the postmodern world, however, this illusion has been shattered and destroyed by a postmodern condition that indefinitely postpones any totality of meaning and produces a proliferation of stories, temporalities, and spaces. The domination of video and audio technology united with a computer industry whose innovations grow exponentially each year continues to produce and reproduce the proliferation of multiplicity that some postmodernists most desire. With television coverage of the House and Senate on C-Span and C-Span 2, for example, it becomes increasingly difficult to hide from the reality that there is no universal consensus on what the United States is or what its position in the world should be; the types of information provided to the consumer in America today are significantly different from those provided to the consumer of the first half of the twentieth century. No longer do we rely on a small number of newspapers or magazines to supply us with a decorous and static story of our nation’s hopes and dreams; our exposure to more and more information nudges us toward an epiphany that suggests truth is fluid and ambivalent.

Postmodern theory tends to frustrate our very natural and very real desire for clarity and orderliness. Ihab Hassan contends that “Poststructuralist theory, though full of brio and bravura, can only taunt our desire to make sense. It can only tease us into further thought, not anchor our meanings” (*The Postmodern Turn* 196). Our rather recent move toward a form of postmodern pluralism and the acceptance of relativism by some as a viable philosophical stance shakes the very foundations of our culture or, more exactly, the former foundations to which we look longingly but cannot embrace innocently. The historical and philosophical shifts from the premodern to the modern—characterized

by a move away from a universal and totalizing monotheism to a universal and totalizing humanist rationalism that replaced God with man and the miracle of the spirit with the miracle of science—did not prepare us for the disconcerting consequences of postmodernism's radical break toward multiplicity. There is a clear connection between this radical philosophical shift in the contemporary world and the increasing number of religious cults and the fervent new turn to fundamentalist religion—both Christian and Muslim—that we witness in the United States and the Middle East.

Although many postmodern philosophers see the effects of poststructuralism's critique of essence and centrality as an opportunity for negative freedom or endless play, there exists among the masses a reluctance to embrace the postmodern. Humanity does not appear to be in a state of euphoria over the postmodern condition, a condition that offers no facile answers, no clearly delineated lines on which to order existence. Instead we find large groups of people calling for a return to traditional morality, for a belief in the spiritual or mystical. Sadly, at times these groups find the clarity they seek in the company of fascists, racists, and warmongers. In our own country we have seen the tragic consequences of Charles Manson, Jim Jones, and David Koresh, while witnessing the growth of the religious right promulgated by such leaders as Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell. Not surprisingly, the New Age movement, including the growing furor surrounding angels and astrology and the practice of witchcraft known as Wicca, has been consistently exploited by tabloid television. The sweeping success of the likes of Bill O'Reilly and Rush Limbaugh—as they confidently tell their listeners in no uncertain terms what is right and what is wrong with the political and social spheres in the United States—certainly indicates the seductive appeal of the demagogue to those who wish to have, as Ihab Hassan puts it, meaning anchored.

Outside of the United States the corollary of humanity's desire for univocal meaning appears in the form of religions like Islam and Judaism, faiths practiced fervently in the Middle East, harboring, like Christianity, the potential for intolerance, as well as the ability to incite jihad. Certainly the horror of the destruction of the World Trade Centers on 11 September 2001 is the result of this very kind of desire. Roland Barthes, in an essay entitled "The World of Wrestling," argues that what we most desire is clarity of

justice and morality. Barthes examines what would now be called professional wrestling and suggests that such an event is no different than a religious ceremony or a Greek drama; "it is the spectacle of excess" (450). In such settings, it is exceedingly clear who is evil and who is just; the crowd uniformly acknowledges the grotesque and horrifying nature of evil by verbally haranguing the wrestler who plays the villain while cheering raucously as good triumphs. In America, professional wrestling events draw thousands of spectators and even more viewers by television pay-per-view specials: such events are in high demand in the postmodern world. Barthes explains that

In wrestling, nothing exists except in the absolute, there is no symbol, no allusion, everything is presented exhaustively. Leaving nothing in the shade. . . . What is portrayed by wrestling is therefore an ideal understanding of things; it is the euphoria of men raised for a while above the constitutive ambiguity of everyday situations and placed before the panoramic view of a univocal Nature, in which signs at last correspond to causes, without obstacle, without evasion, without contradiction. [It] unveils the form of a Justice which is at last intelligible. (53–54)

Events like wrestling represent in perfect detail what Lyotard has characterized as local knowledge. Professional wrestling creates a community of shared value; those who come together to watch the spectacle of excess exhibit a local, contextual, and relational understanding of good and evil, of just and unjust acts.

The gamut of sporting events that monopolize much of America's time and money appears to partly satisfy our obsession with clarity in ways, although repulsive to some, that do not pose the excessive danger we have witnessed in cults and other fanatical groups. But professional wrestling and other sporting events present that which life outside the arena does not: swift, unmitigated, rational results. Seldom do we find intelligible justice in the contemporary world. Therefore, we must return to the central question, one that resists facile dogmatism, demanding serious consideration because of its weighty effect on the way we conduct the business of living: can we have a source of value that does not totalize or essentialize—the point of critique of rational humanist discourse by postmodernists—with the potential to work beyond the local setting, or are we doomed to micro-poli-

tics, local value, which leaves open the possibilities of injustice in other communities that ultimately may destroy the communities we inhabit? Perhaps one viable answer to an ethical dilemma of such far-reaching consequences may be found in postmodern humanism, a position I argue Vonnegut establishes and modifies over the course of his career.

Postmodern Humanism: The Issues of Value and Essence

What does it mean to be a postmodern moralist? More to the point, as some critics of postmodernism have challenged, can there be a system of morality, an ethics, if there is no center or essence on which to base it? Such questions—often asked by critics of postmodernism and avoided by its advocates—expose the perplexing dilemma of postmodernity: if, as Zygmunt Bauman argues, “there are no longer any rules or norms to guide inquiry, no overall validity, no universal, unequivocal basis for truth or taste” (197), then how can one make decisions about daily living, an activity that will inevitably include moral conundrums?

Historically, in Western culture, our morality, the system of value on which we have based practices as banal as the removal of waste and as esoteric as the development of the spirit, has been based upon essence or a belief in an ultimate center, often called “God.” The very notion of value—entwined at first with the idea of God and, more recently in the modern age, with the idea of the essential goodness of humanity, the perfectibility of the race—undergirds many institutions that continue to control our actions in contemporary daily life. Many postmodernists, however, have moved away from any belief in essence or value, in part because of the radical contradictions found in twentieth-century history and the ensuing disillusionment of philosophers like Foucault, Lyotard, and Baudrillard. Modernist humanism, according to Pauline Marie Rosenau, failed postmodernists in a number of ways, including its justification of Western superiority and its significant role in cultural imperialism (47–49). Such events as World War I and World War II, the Holocaust, the Vietnam War, and Watergate damaged the credibility of humanist claims for the progress of our culture and the heretofore glorified scope of its achievements. How could one believe in humankind as rational in

the face of such threats as nuclear destruction and social injustice? Douglas Kellner explains that "the tradition of modern philosophy was destroyed by its vacuous and impossible dreams of a foundation for philosophy, an absolute bedrock of truth that could serve as the guarantee of philosophical systems" ("Post-modernism as Social Theory" 240).

While the destruction of humanism took place in diverse areas of thought throughout the academic community, the rejection of essentialism most notably occurred by storm in the humanities as the work of Paul de Man and Jacques Derrida proliferated. The theoretical project of deconstruction, at its height during the 1980s, has since fallen off; at present, it is recognized as an important step in our movement toward a greater critical awareness, and it is arguably the single most innovative alteration in critical theory in the past half century.¹⁶ Furthermore, this profound and varied infiltration of deconstructive ideas continues to influence our work in such a way that, as Linda Hutcheon explains in "Historiographic Metafiction: Parody and the Intertextuality of History," virtually all theory examining contemporary literature challenges "both closure and single, centralized meaning" (7). The notion that closure and single, centralized meaning must inevitably disappear in aporia certainly is no longer avant-garde; in fact, one need only glance at the many books that offer an overview of our critical field to see that deconstruction and other poststructuralist theories have continually attacked essentialist pronouncements, making it difficult, if not impossible, for the critic to argue for any kind of central meaning or value.

The project of deconstruction, however, is not neutral; the act of critiquing metanarratives and embracing local narratives is an ethical and political process, one of far-ranging consequences. Tobin Siebers, in *The Ethics of Criticism*, contends that deconstruction's "emphasis on the marginal . . . takes on moral overtones in its opposition to relations of power and systematic thought. Deconstructive marginalization has the ethical virtue of siding with the underdog" (98). Deconstruction and other poststructuralist positions attempt to combat all forms of theory, equating systematic thought with the violence of power; such decisive antagonism, however, is itself a political activity with the potential for the same kinds of aggressions and exclusions associated with totalizing metanarratives, and many would argue that deconstruction, in its deference to the marginal, continually

excludes numerous possibilities in literary studies, possibilities of potential meaning and connection (Siebers 98–99). Consequently, where does the work of Derrida or de Man leave us? Our position at this theoretical crossroads has not proven satisfactory to all. Ihab Hassan speaks hopefully of a future that may surpass our present devotion to fragmentation, our disdain for wholeness; he implores the reader to work toward a new understanding of creation: “I have no answer. Yet I believe that an answer must go beyond our current shibboleths: disconfirmation, decreation, demystification, deconstruction, decentering, depropriation, difference, etc. Perhaps we need to go beyond Irony (as Nietzsche sometimes did), beyond the current aversion to Wholeness and Meaning, to some working faith in. . . . What?” (*Paracriticisms* xv). This hope that we might transcend our current position—transform what is fragmented into reassociations constructed by the means of a working faith, not by a dogmatic proclamation of our possession of truth but rather by a pragmatic move toward a postmodern “wholeness” that emphasizes the fluid, mutable meaning of human existence—is the crux of postmodern humanism.

As discussed earlier, Lyotard offers one possible solution to Hassan’s shibboleths: value and morality may be established within local communities so that the daily questions of living may be addressed from a local center. But what of discourse between communities? How might communities live together in the same nation if their local systems of value are diametrically opposed to one another? Moreover, how might nations live together in the same world if their systems of value are in direct conflict? Lyotard’s answer to such difficult and consequential questions appears to ignore the nature of human relations. Lyotard does not tackle the human quandary of living with difference between communities; rather, he acknowledges that the problem exists, calling it the “differend,” which he defines as “a case of conflict between (at least) two parties that cannot be equitably resolved for lack of a rule of judgment applicable to both arguments” (*The Differend* xi). But where does the differend leave us? Lyotard does not agonize over this philosophical dilemma because in his purview good postmodernism is never tyrannical, never imposing; remaining within the confines of local communities, it is liberatory in its proliferation of multiplicities. Lyotard, however, appears to ignore the political nature of humanity, its desire for power, for material

gain, for control; he neglects the fact that many outside the academic community remain committed to an essentialist worldview. We must not forget that most nations do not embrace pluralism or democracy in any form; many cultures reject the theoretical project of postmodernism, and brutally and violently deter the infiltration of multiplicities. Even in the United States, in a nation whose governmental processes and legislation appear to embrace pluralism more radically than those of almost any other nation, there is an economic system, free enterprise, that simultaneously exploits and deters the proliferation of certain factions.

Clearly the economic control wielded by various American corporations as they move into markets in Mexico, Taiwan, or China, paying the native laborers a fraction of what they would have to pay American laborers, establishes a system of domination that curbs the proliferation of multiplicities. Many critics of postmodernity's consumer culture—building upon the work of Theodor Adorno, who argued that industrial societies, such as our own, undermine critical thought among the population in an effort to further the national economic machinery—claim that postmodernism is conservative in nature, reifying the productions of power that exploit and oppress by transforming that which is marginal into consumer goods; what at first appears to be the positive recognition of local cultures and the assertion that their knowledge is valid, quickly disappears into subtle marketing strategies, well-wrought cogs in the wheel of late capitalism. Fredric Jameson's work, which Haynes Horne argues is motivated by an unmistakably modernist impulse, recognizes the fallibility of Lyotard's position, its susceptibility to the movements of evil, to humanity's historically consistent abuse of power.¹⁷ Horne contends that Jameson wishes to contain the poststructuralist program described by Lyotard, that "the radical dissolution of meta-narratives which Lyotard describes can only be endorsed when this dissolution functions within programs" (272). Jameson acknowledges the lure of the poststructuralist critique. Although the deconstruction of metanarratives empowers the marginalized, it also strips them of any political power based on essence, and, for Jameson, who aspires to meld postmodernism with Marxism in an effort to battle late capitalism, this proves to be a devastating blow.

While I agree with Jameson's notion that the poststructuralist critique should be harnessed, I do not wish to suggest that this

must inevitably lead back to essentialist or totalizing narratives. Poststructuralism, if practiced without purpose, tenders little beyond the shibboleths of which Hassan speaks; left uncontained, such work only appears to lead to fragmentation and, perhaps, eventually to anarchy. If we are to accept Tobin Siebers's claim that "literary criticism affects the relation between literature and human life" (2), then, as we practice poststructuralist criticism, we should have an eye toward its effects on the human condition. The work of Douglas Kellner offers one possible paradigm by which we may approach the shibboleths of the postmodern condition, one that may bridge the divide that looms between modernity and postmodernity. In a lecture entitled, "Critical Theory vs. Postmodern Theory: Contemporary Debates in Social Theory," Kellner claims that in order adequately to address the needs of contemporary thought, we must use both modern and postmodern theory. Kellner, whose work derives in part from the Frankfurt School tradition, argues that we need both postmodernism's critique of meta-narratives and its subsequent attention to disunity and fragmentation, as well as modernity's hopeful attempts to create infinitely new unities or reassociations. The tradition of the Frankfurt School affords Kellner a normative base of value on which he grounds political and social action, while postmodern theory insists that these norms cannot be totalized. This balance between the need for a normative base and a rejection of essentializing or totalizing narratives has been key in opening areas of criticism, like multiculturalism or feminism, forms of criticism that use literature and criticism to effect physical and social change.¹⁸ Kellner's use of the modern and postmodern also points toward the paradox of postmodern humanism, a position that affirms humanistic values while maintaining a postmodern perspective.

Even though postmodernism calls into question the very idea of a unified, essential subject, the postmodern subject nonetheless lives pragmatically as if the grand narratives of the past remain firmly intact. When we speak of love or hate in our relationships, of the oppression of racism or the liberating freedom of tolerance, we do so using a modernist model of the individual subject; apparently, despite the claims of postmodern theorists, we continue to posit essence or value with the individual subject, a practice with clear benefits. Perhaps the best satiric example of "living" postmodern theory, an activity seldom encountered, may be found in *Nice Work*, one of several academic novels written by David

Lodge. In this novel, Lodge jabs humorously at the inane absurdity that postmodern theory can be translated directly into the physical actions of contemporary daily life.¹⁹ After Vic Wilcox, an industrial manager, and Robyn Penrose, an English professor whose work involves postmodern feminist theory, finish making love for the first time, Vic announces his devotion to Robyn. Robyn is shocked by his display and attempts to deconstruct a situation that she sees as merely the effects of language and biology:

“I’ve been in love with you for weeks.”

“There’s no such thing,” she says. “It’s a rhetorical device. It’s a bourgeois fallacy.”

“Haven’t you ever been in love, then?”

“When I was younger,” she says, “I allowed myself to be constructed by the discourse of romantic love for a while, yes.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“We aren’t essences, Vic. We aren’t unique individual essences existing prior to language. There is only language.”

“What about this?” he says, sliding his hand between her legs.

“Language and biology,” she says, opening her legs wider. “Of course we have bodies, physical needs and appetites. My muscles contract when you touch me there—feel?”

“I feel,” he says.

“And that’s nice. But the discourse of romantic love pretends that your finger and my clitoris are extensions of two unique individual selves who need each other and only each other and cannot be happy without each other for ever and ever.” (210)

In this passage, Lodge satirizes the totalizing claims of poststructuralism, while in the novel as a whole he seems to suggest that the essentialist world of Vic and the nonessentialist world of Robyn may be wed in such a manner that both parties benefit. The wedding of these worlds is the project of postmodern humanism. In *Deliberate Criticism: Toward a Postmodern Humanism*, Stephen R. Yarbrough contends that what we need in order to create a humanism for the postmodern world is a communal sense. Using the work of Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Irving Babbitt, Yarbrough argues that humanism does not always express a belief in the idea of a fixed human nature, a

point of contention for postmodernists. Rather, Yarbrough claims that “we must learn how to assert the center, for the center itself, unlike the concrete aims from which we choose our courses of action, must be willed into place. It is, in short, a master convention” (37). Yarbrough, however, remains unclear about exactly what may be willed into place. Like so many other postmodern philosophers who desire to ground their discourse, Yarbrough cannot point with any authority to the common ground of which he speaks longingly, a ground on which discourse between cultures may be built.

But Vonnegut is another matter. He offers a hopeful solution to the postmodern condition. In his novels, speeches, and essays, he presents the potential for reassociations, for creation, for a world beyond fragmentation. To understand Vonnegut’s propitious postmodern humanism, we must first briefly outline the major tenets of modernist humanism. Modernist humanism may be characterized best by examining the center of its discourse which is the human subject. According to Robert Merrill, in his foreword to *Ethics/Aesthetics: Post-Modern Positions*, modernist humanism draws all cognitive, aesthetic, and ethical maps to the scale of the individual subject who believes in the originality and individuality of a unified self (xi–xiii). The modern subject defines the rest of the world as Other and posits meaning in this Other only in its relation to the self. This had profound effects, of course, on the modernist subject’s apprehension of other cultures and what has been seen by many, in the postmodern era, as the oppression of those cultures unlike our own, as well as the unflinching destruction of entire ecosystems that at the time of their ruin seemed far removed from individual human needs. But, at present, to deny the value of the individual subject, given the nature of Western discourse, would also be ineffective. Even in the postmodern, or, perhaps, especially in the postmodern, the personal and individual continue to captivate.²⁰ Therefore, while postmodern humanism denies an essential individuality to the subject, it does not disregard the value of human life. Rather, postmodern humanism exalts all life, recognizing the global associations of humanity and its intricately delicate alliance with the earth; Vonnegut’s own vision has expanded over the course of his career to encompass such a delicate alliance, and his postmodern humanism offers Merrill a provisional answer—for any postmodern response must remain provisional—a possibility for an existence beyond

binary opposition, a morality that is negotiated on an operational essentialism in much the same way Stephen Slemon has shown post-colonial texts “working towards ‘realism’ within an awareness of referential slippage” (434). In other words, postmodern humanism works with an awareness of its own constructedness toward a symbolic construction of a better “reality.” This better reality, however, remains devoted to humanity, and some might argue that such a valuing of human life is actually no different from modernist humanism. The postmodern devotion to humanity, however, runs counter to modernist humanism in its motivation. While modernist humanism espoused its desire to improve or perfect humanity based on the idea of each individual’s unique and univocal self, postmodern humanism wishes to better the human condition because of the relative worth of all life and the potential that such life may hold in its proliferation of multiplicities. For the modern humanist, the focus was utopia, an end result based on the belief in the perfectibility of humanity; for the postmodern humanist, there can be no utopia, only endless play, endless affirmation of life. Unlike the modernist, the postmodernist does not believe in the perfectibility of humanity or a final, static position such as utopia; rather, the postmodern humanist concentrates on daily, local activity that may improve human life.²¹

Perhaps the most significant difference between modern and postmodern humanism is the transparency of postmodern humanism. Postmodern humanism openly acknowledges that, in the absence of a “given” center of value, it creates a center of value, that it constructs a position that reveres all life. Unlike historic Western European discourse that first placed value on human life because of its belief that humanity was created in the image of God, postmodernism feigns no assurance that “truth” may be founded on the knowledge of providence or science or any other grand narrative that wishes to establish itself as the essence or center on which discourse may be grounded. The differences between modern humanism and postmodern humanism finally boil down to the issue of essence: one believes in a fixed, essential reference while the other, dismissing this notion, offers only an operational essentialism.

In an interview, Vonnegut claims that “everything is a lie, because our brains are two-bit computers, and we can’t get very high-grade truths out of them. But as far as improving the human condition goes, our minds are certainly up to that. That’s what they were designed to do. And we do have the freedom to make

up comforting lies. But we don't do enough of it" (Allen, *Conversations* 77). In Vonnegut's terms, postmodern humanism is nothing more than a comforting lie, one more constructed narrative in the infinite range of narratives. Moreover, postmodern humanism confesses that it is entirely based on faith; it presupposes that human life is valuable, and it does so with no means to validate such a claim. As Vonnegut, who is the honorary president of the American Humanist Association, explains in *God Bless You, Dr. Kevorkian*, "If it weren't for the message of mercy and pity in Jesus's Sermon on the Mount, I wouldn't want to be a human being. I would just as soon be a rattlesnake" (10). And like his great-grandfather, Clemens Vonnegut, he doesn't have to have the rational or dogmatic proof that so many Enlightenment thinkers find essential. Vonnegut points to Clemens's assertion that "If what Jesus said was good, what can it matter whether he was God or not?" (10). Like his German freethinking ancestors who resided in Indianapolis, Vonnegut cannot rationally prove that mercy is the greatest good or that Jesus was indeed God made flesh. Instead he places his faith in a narrative that does not argue for the existence of God—he explains that "humanists, having received no credible information about any sort of God, are content to serve as well as they can, the only abstraction with which they have some familiarity: their communities" (11). Vonnegut's faith is rooted in the idea of mercy for fellow humans and for the planet itself. In short, the constructed center or provisional metanarrative of Vonnegut's postmodern humanism is the idea that life is precious, and every attempt should be made to improve the conditions of life in order to preserve it.

In a speech to the graduating class of Bennington College in 1970, Vonnegut both implored the new graduates to accept the program of postmodern humanism and displayed the constructedness of such a program: "I beg you to believe in the most ridiculous superstition of all: that humanity is at the center of the universe, the fulfiller or the frustrator of the grandest dreams of God Almighty. If you can believe that, and make others believe it, then there might be hope for us. Human beings might stop treating each other like garbage, might begin to treasure and protect each other instead" (Wampeters 163–64). As a postmodern moralist, Vonnegut centers his discourse on what I have called postmodern humanism, and from this vantage he applauds any action that enhances life and condemns any action that causes suffering or

destruction of life. Vonnegut is a self-proclaimed moralist, and, as such, he ardently works to get his message across: "So now when I speak to students, I do moralize. I tell them not to take more than they need, not to be greedy," Vonnegut explains. "I tell them not to kill, even in self-defense. I tell them not to pollute water or the atmosphere. I tell them not to raid the public treasury. I tell them not to work for people who pollute water or the atmosphere, or who raid the public treasury. I tell them not to commit war crimes or to help others to commit war crimes. These morals go over very well" (*Wampeters* 100). Vonnegut creates many possible answers, small narratives or "comforting lies," based on the overarching construct of postmodern humanism in response to the shibboleths of the postmodern condition. His work flies in the face of those who argue that postmodernity is at best vacuous and amoral and at worst immoral. By examining both the development of Vonnegut's postmodern critique of America's grand narratives and his moral or ethical system based on postmodern humanism, we will better understand his ever-growing oeuvre and the true importance of his work as a postmodern moralist.

Ethical Criticism: Inroads to Vonnegut's Postmodern Humanism

Wayne Booth, in his prodigious *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*, suggests that ethical criticism, because of its misuse in the past to censor and repress all kinds of literature deemed immoral by some, fell on hard times and was replaced by various formalist theories that ignored the very real ethical or political effects of literature. In recent decades, however, ethical criticism has made a comeback of sorts, motivated, in part, by the work of "feminist critics asking embarrassing questions about a male-dominated literary canon and what it has done to the 'consciousness' of both men and women; by black critics pursuing . . . question[s] about racism in American classics; by neo-Marxists exploring class biases in European literary traditions; by religious critics attacking modern literature for its 'nihilism' or 'atheism'" (Booth 5). Although much of the modern era denied the political or ethical nature of literature, claiming that in some mystical fashion art transcended the boundaries of politics or ethics, postmodern philosophy has demonstrated the folly in such a claim, argu-

ing that art is indeed political, a product of societal mores and power relations. The mispractice of ethical criticism has usually involved acts of judgment that in essence imply the work is somehow inferior because of its system of morality; such criticism, reductive in nature, often leads to censorship and produces no fruitful scholarship. What Booth, among others, wishes to establish is a form of criticism that examines a work of art in order to discover and make explicit the moral sensibility informing that work. In *On Moral Fiction*, John Gardner argued that moral criticism is absolutely necessary for the health of English studies, and, despite his often sweeping generalizations about the value of certain artists, *On Moral Fiction* must be acknowledged as an important precursor to the revival of contemporary interest in ethical criticism. Gardner's rage against the English academy was fueled by his belief that the study of literature had become morally bankrupt, completely uninterested in what is most human about literature. Before his untimely death in 1982, Gardner used his influence as a noted writer of fiction and as a professor of English in an effort to sway the tide of intellectual thought toward an affirmation of the mystery and beauty of life.²²

If we are to accept the proposition that literature reflects human experience while at the same time it affects human experience, that literature is both a product of the social order and helps establish and maintain that social order, it becomes clear that, in its desire to examine the moral and ethical nature of a work of art, ethical criticism establishes an important bond between the life of the text and the life of the reader. This bond, however, should never be viewed facily or reductively. Patricia Meyer Spacks contends that while fictional narratives offer opportunities for ethical reflection, they are not imperatives for behavior; rather, according to Spacks, "paradigms of fiction provide an opportunity for moral playfulness: cost-free experimentation" (203). While it is true that reading offers, above all, the possibility of experience, or what Spacks explains is the "experience of agency or its illusion" (203), one must never forget that those experiences acquired through the act of reading—although powerful and affecting—should not be feared or repressed. Rather, the act of reading may be understood as an activity that affords experimentation, the trying on of new possibilities without the finality or consequences of life outside of reading. To the detriment of ethical criticism, in the past too many critics have used this form of reading as a tool for censorship in

order to imprison works whose moral systems conflicted with their own. Reductive and confining, such behavior has no clear benefit in the discipline of literary studies. Moreover, what we have witnessed as a result of such censorious behavior is a backlash against ethical criticism, an attempt to constrain this kind of work in literary studies, to bar critics from engaging in an activity that tenders potentially profitable readings, readings that connect our study of texts with the physical world beyond the texts.²³

Robert Coles, a professor of psychiatry and medical humanities at Harvard University, argues with great passion for work that explores literature in an attempt to uncover issues of an ethical or moral nature. Suggesting that such study makes important contributions to daily living beyond the classroom walls, Coles contends that “Students need more opportunity for moral and social reflection on the problems that they have seen at first hand. . . . Students need the chance to directly connect books to experience” (A64). As Kenneth Womack and I suggest in our preface to *Mapping the Ethical Turn*, “to pretend that the ethical or moral dimensions of the human condition were abandoned or obliterated in the shift to postmodernity certainly seems naïve. Part of being human involves the daily struggle with the meanings and consequences of our actions, a struggle most often understood in narrative structures as we tell others and ourselves about what has transpired or what we fear will transpire in the future” (ix).

For the purposes of this study, then, ethical criticism offers unique avenues to the examination of Vonnegut’s postmodern humanism. The form of ethical criticism I wish to undertake has nothing to do with dogmatic judgments or prescriptive moralizing. Ethical criticism that attempts to censor, to limit the parameters of intellectual exploration, does violence not only to the literary work but to intellectual curiosity as well; it offers little more than the safety of stasis. By contrast, this study offers a form of ethical criticism that attempts to examine the ideas of value and morality—ideas that have long been neglected by formalist criticism to the detriment of the English academy—in ways that allow us to elucidate the patterns of Vonnegut’s ethical universe. The importance of such a study lies in the postmodern vision of Vonnegut himself, a way of seeing that presents the possibilities for the affirmation and creation of new life in an age that has too often embraced the shibboleths of deconstruction instead of the possible unities that lie beyond: the hope for a viable humanism in the postmodern world.