Screamingly Funny

A Critical Approach to the Comedic Anti-War Novels of Joseph Heller, Kurt Vonnegut, Tom Robbins and Tony Vigorito

Rosemary Gallagher, B.A., M.A.

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English
to the National University of Ireland, Galway,
College of Arts, Social Sciences & Celtic Studies.

Supervised by Professor Sean Ryder
SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES, DISCIPLINE OF ENGLISH

October 2016

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Declaration

I hereby certify that this thesis is all my own work and that I have not obtained a degree in this University, or elsewhere, on the basis of any of this work.

Signed: Rosemary Gallagher Date:

Abstract

This thesis investigates the use of humour in American anti-war novels in the second half of the twentieth century, through an analysis of joke-work in Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1961), Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), Tom Robbins' *Villa Incognito* (2003) and Tony Vigorito's *Just a Couple of Days* (2001). Though the earlier novels have been referred to as "Black Humor", work done by critics of this genre in the 1960s and 1970s over-emphasised the "black" and failed to account for the "humour". With recourse to Freud's work on humour as well as Jerry Palmer's *The Logic of the Absurd* (1987) the joke-work in these novels will be examined in depth, as well as the changes in comic technique from the earlier to the later examples. In consideration of the psychological release afforded by laughter, as described in Freud's comments on humour, the connections between biography and fiction will be examined, particularly with regard to the authors' own war experience. As the anti-war novelists' proximity to the traumatic war experience increases and their psychological burden lessens, this thesis will account for the lessening degree of acerbity in humour in the later examples. In short, through an analysis of joke construction this thesis will account for the way in which the comedic anti-war novel becomes less and less absurd throughout the second half of the twentieth century.

Q. How many Vietnam Veterans does it take to screw in a light bulb?

A. You don't know man, you weren't there.

Acknowledgments

This thesis is dedicated to my father, Seamus Gallagher, whose famous sense of humour instilled in me an abiding appreciation for the subtle cadences and nuances of a good joke, as well as the power of laughing at one's own punch-lines. Thank you to Anne for laughing with him, even though she's heard them all before. To my mother, Ann Dooley Gallagher, for always needing the joke explained, and for teaching me to "never ruin a perfectly good story with the truth". To P.E. Dooley, the Dooley family, and Charles Sterne for all their support. Thank you to my dearest friends and family, for their gallows humour even as the gallows were nigh; you made me laugh until I cried, and cry until I laughed. To Lee Vahey, for his endless patience and unbridled interest in humour theory, and for somehow managing to be entertaining to boot.

With special thanks to Sean Ryder, the most incredible, intelligent, patient and wise supervisor, for his encouragement even when it wasn't deserved, and for trusting in the scaffolding when the building was bare. Thank you also to my friends and colleagues in the English Department at NUI Galway, particularly to those who contributed to my Graduate Research Council over the years.

This study was funded by a Galway Doctoral Research Scholarship from the College of Arts, Social Sciences and Celtic Studies at NUI, Galway, as well as by a University Write-up Bursary, for which support I am very grateful. My gratitude also to the University of California Educate Abroad Programme, for allowing me to carry out research in the stunning University of California, Berkeley campus.

Finally, to my colleagues in the Irish Association for American Studies, especially Ron Callan, Philip McGowan, Jenny Daly and the inimitable Tony Emmerson, for their constant support, inspiration and belief. You made me hungry for knowledge, and you are infinitely fun to be around. Thank you.

Chapter 1: Introduction

In the introduction to *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), Kurt Vonnegut muses that there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre. Yet countless soldiers have tried. Returning from war to sit in front of their typewriters, they've hammered out memoirs, novels, poems and songs, the staccato rapid-fire of the keys like so many bullet holes in good cheer. When a top ten list of comedic war novels appeared in *The Telegraph* in 2015, humourist Jesse Armstrong included *War and Peace* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Yes, that *War and Peace*. Sure, he admits neither is a "laugh-riot", and he graciously concedes the latter isn't even a war novel (Armstrong).

However, in 1961 when Joseph Heller published *Catch-22*, someone finally said something intelligent and comedic about a massacre. Here was a war novel that reflected, in delicate balance, the horror of war and the reality of life for its combatants. In presenting the drunken revelry, the sexual high-jinks, the pranking and the comradely joking of the soldier, *Catch-22* does not make light of war, rather it heightens the horror by implicating the reader through shared laughter. While *Slaughterhouse-Five* is certainly less of a laugh-riot, it is inarguably a comedic novel, penned by a comedic author, and peppered with jokes and gags. In 1967 Bruce Jay Friedman named this type of novel "Black Humor", and Vonnegut lamented that a bell jar had been lowered (Vonnegut, Bellamy, et al. 156). The authors inside it felt around for a while, but with the parameters of the genre poorly defined, the edges began to crack and the bell jar shattered. We were left with no clear way to talk about these novels.

Then, after 9/11, something happened. The first key moment was the *Saturday Night Live* broadcast after the attacks on the Twin Towers: 29th September 2001. It opens with Mayor Rudolph Giuliani surrounded by members of the NYPD and FDNY. After a touching tribute, producer Lorne Michaels asks Giuliani "Can we be funny?" SNL considered all options for that night's host – Tom Cruise or some other giant of the entertainment industry – and eventually went with classic girl-next-door Reese Witherspoon. At a time, and in a place where humour and good cheer seemed impossible, it was *essential* that SNL go ahead that week. The second is a quotation from, again, Rudy Giuliani, delivered at a charity event in October 2001. He tells the people of New York, "I am here to give you permission to laugh. If you don't I'll have you arrested" (Stott 97). Late-night talk show host Jay Leno joined the conversation, identifying the accepted targets with an

acknowledgment of how carefully comedians criticised America: "We can't do Bush jokes anymore. He's smart now" (Kurtzman). Though Bush had heretofore been the target of countless dumb Texan jokes, many of which wrote themselves, after 9/11 it was no longer appropriate to call the Commander in Chief "stupid". *The Onion*'s coverage of the period arguably paved the way for network comedians and late-night talk shows. The 27 September 2001 edition carried such headlines as: "U.S. Vows To Defeat Whoever It Is We're At War With"; "Hijackers Surprised To Find Selves in Hell"; and "Not Knowing What Else To Do, Woman Bakes American-Flag Cake". Somewhere in here is the cornerstone of America's relationship to comedy. Laughter is a culturally accepted mechanism for coping with tragedy, provided it's directed at the right people, and the right (or wrong) institutions. Laughter is the common man's weapon against tyranny.

Both Tony Vigorito's *Just a Couple of Days* (2001) and Tom Robbins' *Villa Incognito* (2003) were in progress by 9/11, indeed Vigorito's novel had already been published and was limping along commercially as a vanity publication: it had not yet erupted, or earned its "cult" status. But Robbins had been writing for almost as long as Heller and Vonnegut. He had been selling his peacenik message wrapped up with a comedic bow since 1971. Robbins' humour is not normally described as dark. Nor is it Jewish, gallows, or even terribly 'American'. Robbins is playful.

Over the following chapters an attempt will be made to describe the joke-work of four American comedic anti-war novelists. Their personal combat experience will be considered, particularly in regard to Heller and Vonnegut whose experiences in World War II are well documented, in order to explore the psychological release afforded by laughter, as described in Freud's comments on humour. Representative examples of the joke-work in each of the novels will be examined in detail in an attempt to account for the humour in a type of comedic literature often referred to as "Black Humor". Finally, this work will view the changes and developments in how comedic novelists of war fiction used humour through the latter half of the twentieth century and into the opening years of the twenty-first, and will suggest that the moral qualities of humour make these novels a powerful vehicle for delivering an anti-war message to the masses. As the anti-war novelist's proximity to the traumatic war experience increases and their psychological burden lessens, and as readers become more acquainted with the use of humour to describe tragic circumstances, does this humour lose some of its "Blackness"?

1.1 The American War Novel

In *The American Soldier in Fiction* (1975) Peter Aichinger notes the relatively small output of war literature in American writing until the late nineteenth century, and a naturally corresponding dearth of critical material. He cites W.M. Frohock's *The Novel of Violence in America* (1950) but highlights a lack of specific focus on war literature, though the prevalence of violence in American fiction is interesting given the frequent accusations of brutality in American humour, as we will see below. War novels were not a significant American focus, while those that existed were not the most widely discussed works by prevalent authors; as Aichinger quips, "James Fenimore Cooper is not remembered for *The Spy* (1821)" (ix). Aichinger's book focuses on war literature from 1880 to 1963, noting that prior to this warfare was not a dominant element in American life, and as such largely absent from American literature. Walter Hölbling highlights the need for "literary sense-making" when conflict forces a nation to question the validity of its values, if they are to be considered worth dying for. He calls this process the "storifying of experience" (212). An increase in war novels in the late nineteenth century corresponds to the Western-most expansion of the frontier, a rise in U.S. involvement in overseas conflict, and the growth of the military establishment. These sentiments echo Frederick Jackson Turner in 1893 when he claimed that Western expansion, the United States' "manifest destiny," had succeeded by virtue of reaching the sea and that the U.S. would now need to look overseas to avoid stagnation (Quinn 175). According to Aichinger the First World War prompted a shift from American idealism to horror, which grew more sophisticated and less idealistic post-1945 as the aftermath of the atomic bomb awakened American audiences to the "fact of the own peril" (x). Quinn describes the early part of this process in a little more detail, charting the development of American writing on World War I from reportage, to atrocity novels, and a treatment of German Americans as the "enemy within" (177), which was to have significant impact on Kurt Vonnegut's early life. The U.S. "propaganda machine," Quinn claims, saw the war as a defence of democracy and a means to curb America's endemic "crass materialism," an idealistic vision that proved untenable even in the immediate post-war era (179). By the mid to late-1920s a "rich crop" of war novels began to emerge, particularly soldiers' accounts with a recurring theme of the personal journey within the combat experience (37). It is notable that Quinn does not mention a single humorous novel in his account of American World War I literature.

With the United States emerging as a great international power after World War II, the degree of physical and cultural remove from European enemies and allies alike prompted a turn inwards (Aichinger 25), while the comparatively longer U.S. involvement in World War II meant more developed attitudes in literature and an emerging "series of portraits" of the U.S. soldier in fiction (36). Noting the difficulty of discussing the war novel as distinct from other forms, as well as the prevalence of biographical elements even in ostensibly fictional novels, Aichinger underscores the tone of protest in American war novels, questioning whether many may be more appropriately termed anti-war novels (xi). He ultimately dismisses such terminological quandaries for unnecessarily confusing the matter, critiquing Leslie Fiedler's oversight of many pro-war novels in *Waiting for the End* (1964). I have chosen to persevere in referring to the novels under discussion in this study as "anti-war", as the subversive comedic elements ally them as much with novels of protest as with war fiction. At any rate, there is no concern that any of these comedic texts may be confused for pro-war novels. Hölbling explains how World War II American literature was born out of a more pragmatic, less idealised approach to this, compared to the First World War, claiming that there was "less ground for the disillusionment of great romantic expectations: war was seen as an unpleasant obligation rather than an opportunity for individual heroism or male initiation rituals" (212–213). Furthermore the U.S. emerged from this conflict as the dominant world power, largely unchallenged until the Cold War, and it was in this cultural condition that the process of literary sense-making occurred.

Hölbling classifies the novels in response to World War II into two fictional modes: the mimetic and the postmodern. The mimetic mode, exemplified by authors such as Leon Uris, echoed earlier writing with conventional chronological structures, a tendency to tell a "story" focussing on a battle or fate of an individual soldier, with characters representing the "tradition of psychological realism that encourages readers to identify with the protagonists" (214). A sub-set of this mimetic mode, represented by authors such as Norman Mailer and James Jones, expanded somewhat outwards, critiquing the military and its potential for corruption if allowed to run unchecked. Though such authors had their ideological basis in the liberal movements of the 1930s, they were ultimately traditional, supported the goals of World War II, but questioned its potential effects moving forwards: "no matter how severe their critiques these authors never attempted to discard basic American values" (216). In contrast, novels of the postmodern mode began to appear as the Vietnam conflict escalated, where war was no longer presented as a historic moment but an on-going state with all too infrequent moments of reprieve: "War

threatens to become a way of life, dominated by the business interests of global military-industrial corporations" (218). Aichinger argues that this process began much earlier, as mounting frustration with conscription for the Korean War forced soldiers to question the fairness of the military system (67). These postmodern novels challenged traditional linear structures and the use of realism for sense-making. Using *Slaughterhouse-Five* as an example, Hölbling argues that "cause-and-effect-oriented chronological language" has become ineffectual for making sense of war, and that understanding and closure prove elusive in this postmodern novel (219). He also suggests that this form forces the reader to participate in characters' attempts at sense-making (224); the power of humour to further implicate the reader in this process will be discussed in depth below. Finally, he highlights an important effect of this new vision of war as a ubiquitous state; the postmodern novel's "eerie anticipatory vision," which looks forward and abroad, echoing the historic reality of Vietnam and subsequent overseas conflict (219). It is important to note that Hölbling's essay also describes poetry, drama and the effect of the Holocaust on Jewish-American writing. American literary responses to World War II were by no means limited to the novel.

In the 1970s, spurred on by the twenty-five year anniversary of the end of World War II, critics began to gain some perspective on post-war literature. Jerry Bryant, in the introduction to *The Open Decision* (1970), discusses the outpouring of material related to post-World War II literature, noting a tendency to discuss individual authors, or themes, rather than to survey the state of literature in the last twenty-five years or "the broad issues of the modern intellectual climate" (3). Bryant intentionally seeks a broad overview, to the sacrifice of detail. He discusses *Catch-22* along with Norman Mailer, James Jones and George Mandel in a chapter on the socio-political war novel, focussing on the recurring theme of the military versus the individual (118), the "hero against apparatus" (149). Notably, he does not mention Heller in a later chapter, "The Moral Outlook", where he discusses Vonnegut at length. Bryant does place Heller in a later stage of socio-political war novel in which the hero is no longer "too patriotic", refusing to fight (149). Bryant marks Heller out as the positive conclusion to the developing theme of "survival through defiance" (156). He discusses the catch of *Catch-22* at length, and emphasises the catch's suppression of the individual to the greater "benefit" of society. Bryant concludes that Heller does not do enough to justify Yossarian's desertion, that he is not successful in making this more than "cowardice and selfishness" (159). Worse, Bryant argues that Heller's attempts to make this justification – in an argument between the flawed "hero"

and Major Danby – "saps Yossarian of all his zany vitality and destroys the comic tone of the book" (159).

While Aichinger's classification of the post-World War II novel has subtle differences to Hölbling's account, they largely correspond. However, Aichinger's chapters on the absurd and Black Humor as modes within the American war novel bear mentioning at this juncture, by means of prefacing a more thorough exploration of the comedic aspects below. It is worth noting that Aichinger's book, published in 1975, is more fully titled *The American Soldier in Fiction 1880-1963,* and does not claim to be primarily a work of literary criticism, but a means for understanding literary approaches within an historical context (vii). It does not handle comedic novels to a significant extent, or with great insight. Most likely this is indicative of a lack of comedic war fiction until this time, however, it is also plausible – based on Aichinger's attempts at engagement with humour within these genres – that it is simply not a dominant area of criticism. Certainly comedic war novels had been published by this time; it is more an issue of critics still struggling to understand them, as we shall see below. Thus Aichinger dedicates greater focus to what he describes as the absurd, and views Black Humor merely as a particular characteristic of the absurd novel rather than a comedic mode in its own right. He rather strictly limits absurd treatments of war in U.S. literature to the period 1957 (Mark Harris' *Something About a Soldier*) to 1962 (Kurt Vonnegut's *Mother Night*), describing their influence by and departure from writers such as Herman Wouk and Norman Mailer (81). He describes the absurdist features of these novels, including: an ambivalence toward warfare and military; a "loss of a sense of the ennobling aspect of combat"; and "a national realization that none of the wars in which the nation had engaged had ultimately achieved their long-term purpose" (84). While these characteristics certainly apply to *Slaughterhouse-Five* as much as to *Mother Night*, the later and drastically more popular novel falls outside the remit of Aichinger's historic focus.

Robert Scholes, who will be discussed in detail below, anticipates Hölbling's comments on the power of war to call into question individual and collective values (Hölbling 212):

> Certainly war brings the contrast between human ideals and human actions to the highest possible degree of visibility. In time of war the drums, the rituals, the rhetoric all collaborate to suppress reason and its ally laughter, to prevent any rational scrutiny of such an irrational process. But satirists and picaresque novelists have subjected these phenomena to their fierce scrutiny nonetheless. (Scholes 46)

The comedic aspects of the war novel, the use of humour in absurd circumstances, and the means by which laughter can force more radical insights in the American war novel will now be examined.

1.2 Humour in the American Anti-war Novel

It is commonly acknowledged that what we term a "sense of humour" varies from culture to culture. Jerry Palmer provides the example of the central-African Azande tribe who consider that which we call "coincidence" to be witchcraft: as such, they would consider hapless gags based on unfortunate timing and random chance – such as the slapstick of *Laurel and Hardy* – frightening or threatening (46). The question of what makes the humour in these comedic anti-war novels uniquely American thus merits consideration. What distinguishes the humour in Heller's *Catch-22* from, say, Spike Milligan's *Adolf Hitler: My Part in his Downfall* (1971)? Much has been done on the character (and characters) of American humour, including work by Arthur Power Dudden and Nancy A. Walker. Studies of the character of American humour often consider comic types, such as the country rube, or provide analysis of geographical differences in American humour, such as the famously droll South-western humour. Books have been dedicated to specific humourists, such as Scott Saul's *Becoming Richard Pryor* (2014) or Todd Nathan Thompson's *The National Joker: Abraham Lincoln and the Politics of Satire* (2015). Often, in studies of American humour, Mark Twain receives the most discussion and the highest praise. In the introduction to *What's So Funny* (1998), Walker claims that differences in a culture's history, values and geography can account for their sense of humour (6). She highlights a few key characteristics of American humour and their origins, such as the tendency towards exaggeration exemplified in the "tall tale" arising from the country's physical vastness. Walker underscores anthropologist Constance Rourke's belief that irreverence is the essential component of the American sense of humour (12), which is echoed by humour scholar Walter Blair. Time and time again, critics of American humour come back to the sharp edge of the comedic sword. According to Christopher Morley:

> There has always been something *sui generis* in the American comic spirit, though I don't know that it has ever been recognizably defined. A touch of brutality perhaps? Anger rather than humor? Various words rise to the mind—*sardonic, extravagant, macabre*—we reject each one, yet the mere fact that it

> suggests itself points to some essential hardness or sharpness of spirit. (qtd. in Dudden and Briggs xv)

Stephen E. Kercher corresponds with this brutality in his classification of the satiric mode prevalent in post-war American humour:

> By *satire* I refer specifically to forms of humorous expression that, by definition, deploy irony to criticize vice and raise awareness. Spurred often by anger or scorn and informed by serious moral concern, satire is humor with a social purpose—protest, as Ken Tynan put it, "couched in wit." I identify this satire as *liberal* because as a whole it corroborated the outlook and agenda of mid-twentieth-century liberalism and of the left wing of the Democratic Party in particular. (1)

Revel with a Cause focuses on non-literary humour, though Kercher does mention Black Humor in his introduction, acknowledging similarities in tone. Kercher argues that comedy with an underlying sense of brutality is a demonstrably (though by no means exclusively) American phenomenon. Though he uses the term "liberal satire" to define this type of humour his characterisation, as we shall see in the next section, is strikingly similar to critical attempts to describe Black Humor. He explains that liberal satirists' "sense of alienation … toward mainstream American life" drove them to seek "truth and authenticity" in existentialism (3), a defining tenet of Black Humor. Indeed, Morris Dickstein's jacket blurb for *Revel with a Cause* refers to Kercher's satiric mode by the familiar if less clearly defined term "Black Humor". Kercher places this satiric mode in the American context – its history, values and geography, as Walker puts it – locating it historically in the "long fifties" (4), claiming it was a revolt against "the *unreality* of postwar American life" (3), and that its popularity marked a change in political culture following the Eisenhower years and McCarthyism (9). The purpose of this humour was moral and didactic, as satire should be. It sought to expose the hypocrisy of the times, and unmask the underlying social injustice: "To reveal through humor the *truth* behind the politics, religion, social mores, and culture of the day served as an important, if not primary, motive for many of them" (3). Finally, Kercher claims that this type of humour was cathartic, that its popularity demonstrated the extent of political dissent, and that shared laughter – he quotes Roger Bowen of Second City – "increase[d] solidarity among the disaffected" (11).

1.2.1 Black Humor

The dominant critical framework thus suggests that the American comic mode in the post-World War II era is characterised by a sense of brutality, is akin to satire, arises from an increasingly liberal political climate and is largely concerned with how to make sense of the United States' seemingly never-ending involvement in overseas conflict. In general literary studies the phrase "Black" or "Dark" Humour is commonly understood to define a type of humour that treats tragic subject matter with bitter amusement (Baldick 27). It laughingly accepts the inherent tragedy of everyday life, thumbs its nose at a deterministic vision of the world, and even embraces truly tragic circumstances with a wry comment, a "heart-lifting observation," and a dry chuckle. Freud described this as "one of the highest physical achievements" (222). It became a defining label of Vonnegut and Heller's style of comedy. However, critics of Black Humor overlooked certain key issues in defining this literature, and the term fell out of favour around the mid 1970s. Today we may more readily associate Black Humor with black comedy, a term used to describe the work of African-American comedians, such as the stand up of Chris Rock, or the films of Eddie Murphy. The problem, for a humour studies scholar, is that the critics who defined Black Humor focussed on the "black" and ignored the "humour".

In William Rodney Allen's *Conversations with Kurt Vonnegut* (1988), the frequency with which Vonnegut is asked about Black Humor in interviews from 1969-1987 becomes a sort of running joke. Vonnegut laments the label, and his need to address it: "You asked it. One day in solitude on Cape Cod, a large bell jar was lowered over me by Bruce Friedman, and it said 'black humor' on the label; and I felt around a bit and there was no way I could get out of that jar – so here I am and you ask the question". He concludes: "The label is useless except for the merchandisers" (Vonnegut, Bellamy, et al. 156). By 1987, Allen responds to Vonnegut's raising the topic in the concluding interview in the collection: "We swore those two words would not come from our lips during this interview, so you can say them but we can't" (Vonnegut, Allen, et al. 285). Frustration with Friedman's pigeonholing is reasonable. The offending volume, *Black Humor* – a slim Bantam Paperback published in 1965 – draws together thirteen tangentially connected humourists, including Thomas Pynchon, Joseph Heller, Terry Southern and others. Friedman attempts, unsuccessfully, to define the genre: "It is called 'Black Humor' and I think I would have more luck defining an elbow or a corned-beef sandwich. I am not, for one thing, even sure it is black" (vii). Friedman goes so far to openly admit to the futility of

the anthology, acknowledging that the authors included therein may resist being "lumped together": "thirteen writers with thirteen separate, completely private and unique visions, who in so many ways have nothing at all to do with one another and would not know or perhaps even understand one another's work if they tripped over it" (viii). He goes on to say, still not having attempted to provide a definition, rather humorously pondering what other colours the humour may be (fuchsia, perhaps, or eggshell), that "the humour part of the definition is probably accurate although I doubt that the writers here are bluff and hearty joke-tellers who spend a lot of time at discotheques. Invite them all to a party and you would probably find a great deal of brooding and sulking" (vii). Thus in Friedman's estimation the humour exists, that is sure, but he does not offer the where's or how's. What Friedman does successfully identify as a connecting thread is the barbed edge to this humour, as well as a "fading line between fantasy and reality" (viii). Curiously, given his ire, Vonnegut is not mentioned in the anthology, though an extract from Heller's *Catch-22* is included. Friedman's book, however, was frequently cited, and having provided a collective sample, some work was required in defining Black Humor, since it was certainly not a corned-beef sandwich.

André Breton's *Anthologie de l'humour noir*, initially published 1945 and reissued in 1950, introduced the concept of Black Humor some years before the term came to be adopted by American critics. Breton's anthology was not translated into English until 1996, and was thus only accessible to a select scholarly community in the United States until relatively recently: critics such as Steven Weisenburger do mention Breton's work prior to its translation. While Friedman's *Black Humor* drew together twelve contemporary American Black Humorists (and Louis-Ferdinand Céline), Breton's anthology included such disparate examples of *humor noir* as Swift, Poe, Synge and Kafka, demonstrating a greater emphasis on the absurd rather than on humour. Adopted by American critics and spurred on by Friedman's anthology the term "Black Humor" – according to Google NGrams – arose from relative obscurity in 1960, reached its pinnacle in 1974, and has been petering out in increasingly subtle peaks and troughs since the 1980s. Coincidentally, given the accusations of merchandising levelled at Friedman by Vonnegut, it was financial distress that prompted Breton to begin work on the anthology, seeking a quick advance for a modicum of effort (Breton and Polizzotti viii). It was not the commercial success Breton had hoped for; thwarted by censorship boards and the beginning of World War II the anthology took many years to produce, though evidently he had been pondering the "genre" for some time. While serving in the army medical corps in 1915 Breton met

Jacques Vaché, who provided an early and typically vague definition of Black Humor: "a SENSE … of the theatrical (and joyless) pointlessness of everything" (vii). Breton expands on this with recourse to Freud, focussing on humour's "liberating element" and elevated status: "Obviously, what is fine about it is the triumph of narcissism, the ego's victorious assertion of its own invulnerability. It refuses to be hurt by the arrows of reality or to be compelled to suffer. It insists that it is impervious to wounds dealt by the outside world, in fact, that these are merely occasions for affording pleasure" (Freud qtd. in Breton and Polizzotti xviii). Polizzotti further emphasises Freud's influence in the preface to the English translation:

> The laughter, however, is always a little green around the edges, for as Breton is quick to point out, black humor is the opposite of joviality, wit, or sarcasm. Rather, it is a partly macabre, partly ironic, often absurd turn of spirit that constitutes the "mortal enemy of sentimentality," and beyond that a "superior revolt of the mind". (vi)

While Black Humor in the American context does tend to give more attention to the comic than its European predecessor, this may still be the most succinct definition of Black Humor available, and the idea that this type of humour is fundamentally antithetical to sentimentality may account for its power in the anti-war novel. Black Humor does not provide psychic insulation from the horror of war, rather it bares its chest leaving the horror defiantly exposed, and so providing more powerful anti-war commentary than any sentimental account could. Breton is suggesting that in order to be powerful, this humour must be ruthless: "Black humor is hemmed in by too many things, including stupidity, sceptical sarcasm, light-hearted jokes … (the list is long). But it is the mortal enemy of sentimentality, which seems to lie perpetually in wait..." (xix). Thus the concept of Black Humor originates from a European context and was not adopted by American critics until the 1960s when it came to be mobilised as a critical term. However, we are here concerned with defining Black Humor in the context of the American comedic sensibility, and so must consider the humour in Black Humor with recourse to American criticism.

Richard Boyd Hauck's *A Cheerful Nihilism* (1971) underscores American Black Humor novelists' emphasis on the comic in absurd fiction, in contrast with European *humor noir's* focus on the existential (he uses Camus' *Myth of Sisyphus* as the obvious example). American absurdist novelists, he argues, chose to laugh at the realisation that life is ultimately meaningless, and he charts the development of this tendency back to founding

principles: in considering America as a place versus America as an idea he determines that "America is an absurd creation" (xii). He offers that an attitude of defiance may be considered laudable, a refusal to accept the absurdist view as essentially pessimistic, and argues that rendering the absurd through art is itself a life-affirming act of creation:

> Out of defiance and determination comes the accomplishment of creating one's own meaning and one's own self. It is a process that allows a man to refuse to be defined by an easy acceptance of what the world mistakenly believes to be ultimate values. This creative process flourishes by exerting itself against the norm. Camus said: "War cannot be negated. One must live it or die of it. So it is with the absurd: it is a question of breathing with it, of recognizing its lessons and recovering their flesh. In this regard the absurd joy par excellence is creation. 'Art and nothing but art': said Nietzche; 'we have art in order not to die of the truth.'" (6)

With this awareness of the aesthetic nature of the absurd, he argues that the artist constructs a framework in which to place the absurd creation: "By this reasoning, no book can actually be meaningless or nihilistic; an absurd book is a book about the absurd, and the book itself is the absurd creation that was the author's response to the sense of the absurd" (7).

Boyd Hauck's argument has implications for the comedic anti-war novels, as these authors create an absurd framework that begins to dissolve as a possibility emerges that a non-absurd world can exist: a world without war or, at least, a world outside the warzone. Though Boyd Hauck argues that it is necessary to accept the universe's absurdity in order to be fully alive and fully conscious (3), in the context of these novels it may be that the emphasis is on accepting the delicate counter-balance between comedy and tragedy and thumbing one's nose at it, rather than acquiescing to fate. It is the American absurdist novelists' capacity to *laugh* at the absurd that dispels the tension created, through consciously acknowledging its existence:

> To the American absurdist, laughter is the creative response, and despair, though logical, the purely nihilistic response. John Barth's Joe Morgan coins a contradiction in his phrase "a cheerful nihilism." He has unwittingly described the American absurdist's achievement. The American absurdist postulates nihilism cheerfully and his cheerfulness automatically counters his nihilism. He

> knows that laughter is purely arbitrary. Were he to invent a Sisyphus, he would give him a colossal and cosmic sense of humor (8).

The distinction between European and American absurdist fiction is key here, and the distinction is the type of laughter they produce:

> The American absurdist has consistently refused to take seriously the absurdity of everything without postulating at the same time that this absurdity is also hilarious. He retains the full ambivalence of his absurd discovery: his humor is serious and his seriousness is humorous. Although he well could be, he never is a tragedian; he nudges his reader towards laughter instead of despair. He takes a cosmic delight in manipulating the absurd; his affirmation arises from his ability to see and re-create the joke of life. His comedy is ambivalent, but it is comedy. (9–10)

Boyd Hauck's statements are not in contrast to earlier assertions that the defining principle of American humour is its barbarity; he does not debate this. He simply asserts that it is a demonstrably American trait to choose laughter over despair.

Robert Scholes discusses Black Humor in *The Fabulators* (1967), in sections relating to Vonnegut, John Hawkes and Terry Southern – the latter two having been named in Friedman's anthology. Scholes expands on Friedman's "fading line between fantasy and reality", but also laments the term, describing it as "probably too clumsy to be of much use to criticism". He suggest that before "discarding it" to "milk it of such value as it may have in helping us to understand this new fiction and to adjust to it" (37). Scholes recognises that Black Humor is both a modern movement, and an existing tradition, and points to Swift and Voltaire as earlier examples (38). He emphasises their differences: as novels, they are "different" (in an unspecified way) from immediate predecessors such as Hemingway and Fitzgerald (40); as satires they are insufficiently realistic – he later claims they are "more playful and more artful in construction" (41). He later illustrates the difficulty in defining the distinction between traditional satire and the work of the Black Humorists by recourse to the (in)famous New Republic review by C.D.B. Bryan which critiques Vonnegut's failure to avail of the tools of great satire at his disposal:

> All the anger, the shame, the shock, the guilt, the compassion, the irony, the control to produce great satire are *there*. […] Why, then, does Vonnegut settle for such lovely, literate, amusing attacks upon such simple targets as scientists,

> engineers, computer technicians, religion, the American legion, artists, company picnics? (qtd. in Scholes 47)

Using satire and fable (the root of "Fabulator") as illustrative tools, Scholes assigns Vonnegut's work to Black Humor in the satirical tradition (here he means satire with a moral) and catalogues Terry Southern and John Hawkes in a picaresque (meaning, here, amoral) tradition. The satire, here, is not cutting. According to Scholes:

> Fabulative satire is less certain ethically but more certain esthetically than traditional satire. This causes the special tone that the phrase Black Humor so inadequately attempts to capture. The spirit of playfulness and the care for form characteristic of the modern fabulators operate so as to turn the materials of satire and protest into comedy. […] They have some faith in art but they reject all ethical absolutes. Especially, they reject the traditional satirist's faith in the efficacy of satire as a reforming instrument. They have a more subtle faith in the humanizing value of laughter. (41).

What Scholes is indicating here is the counter-argument to C.D.B. Bryan's suggestion that Vonnegut *fails* to produce satire. Satire, as we know, is fundamentally moral, and the type of satire we call Black Humor isn't so sure. James Nagel makes the case that *Catch-22* is essentially a Juvenalian satire, and methodically catalogues the features of that genre pointing to select examples in the novel. However, Nagel gets into the nitty-gritty of the matter when he describes how the novel deviates from traditional satire, quoting W. H. Auden:

> Satire flourishes in a homogeneous society with a common conception of the moral law, for satirist and audience must agree as to how normal people can be expected to behave, and in times of relative stability and contentment, for satire cannot deal with serious evil and suffering. (W. H. Auden 'Note on the Comic' qtd. in Nagel, '"Catch-22" and Angry Humor' 51)

Black Humor, he claims, was not born out of a homogenous society, and is, as Scholes says, less certain ethically. It is an aesthetic exercise in fictionalisng the moral standards of liberal writers, and enjoyed by a young, left-leaning and often radical audience. According to Nagel, "the social implication of this device is to call into question the prevailing ethical structure of the society, rather than to use its norms as a point of reference" ('"Catch-22" and Angry Humor' 51). The distinction between Black Humor and traditional satire lies in

the quality of its moral instruction. Therefore it is not incorrect to classify these novels as satire; it is simply insufficient.

Scholes' reference to the "humanizing value of laughter" is significant as it implicates the reader in the text, forcing them to share in the author's experience: to empathise. Though both traditional satire and Black Humor are moralistic, Black Humor is less didactic. Rather than barbed satiric attacks at persons or institutions it aims to use laughter to humanise these targets. Scholes indicates that the art itself changes the reader (its "aesthetic certainty"), rather than the satire. I would argue that that the mental energy required to interpret this type of humour affords the reader the ability to fully comprehend the co-existence of laughter and tragedy. This "mental energy" will be discussed in greater depth in relation to Tom Robbins' crazy wisdom and koans, as well as in relation to Freud's *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*.

Scholes goes on to argue very eloquently that the satire in Black Humor is "not concerned with what to do about life but with how to take it" (43). He ties this to existentialism but highlights that the difference is between "seeing the universe as absurd and seeing it as ridiculous – a joke" (43). Schulz will later refer to the Black Humorists' inability to take their own moral stance seriously (Schulz, *Black Humor Fiction of the Sixties* 13). So, while satire offers scorn for the subject of the satire (be it progress, government etc.) the Black Humorist offers instead laughter. In order to "take a joke" the Black Humorist turns the joke back on the joker, or the human situation: the 'cosmic joke' (Scholes 46). Scholes argues that Black Humorists excel in the "satire" of war, by subjecting the ritual of war to scrutiny, by critiquing the human desire in times of war for form (beating of drums, ritual, bureaucracy): that which generally suppresses reason and laughter (46). He ultimately rejects satire's ability to "cure" the human condition, and the notion that satire is somehow "better" than comedy. The Black Humorists, he claims, do not offer "the rhetoric of moral certainty" as the satirist does, and instead of "fixed ethical positions" (55) allows intellectual comedy itself to provide moral stimulation.

Max F. Schulz's *Black Humor Fiction of the Sixties* (1973) aims to define the "black" part, though Schulz, by his own admission, does not address the "humour":

> I have shied away from the "humor" in Black Humor. Most efforts to come to terms with the comic over the past two thousand years have drifted into the shallows of laughter and foundered on the submerged rocks of psychology's attempts to explain why we chuckle. Hence my timidity. Secondly, to give equal

> value to humor in any consideration of this literature is possibly to let oneself be trapped by a term that came into being somewhat capriciously[1] and may not accurately describe that literature. (x)

The title of Schulz's text, furthermore, confines Black Humor to the 1960s. Considering Schulz's existentialist approach this is perhaps true in this context. However, other aspects of the genre, such as the presence of truly comic elements in tragic texts, persevere far beyond the Summer of Love. Schulz explains that he will allude to the comic in terms of, "the Black Humor concept of the cosmic labyrinth, which is more ironic than rib-tickling in its inferences about man's pitifully inadequate efforts to comprehend […] the 'divine disorder of the cosmos'" (x). With regards to the non-humorous aspects of Black Humor, Schulz highlights the difficulty of choice, the "consequence of a shift in perspective from the self and its ability to create a moral ambience through an act to emphasis on all the moving forces of life which converge collectively upon the individual" (*7*). In spite of this, the Black Humorist does not despair, but remains dissociated, "coolly presenting individual efforts to realize oneself in relation to the outer world, with the focus less on the individual than on the world of experiences, less on the agony of struggle to realize self than on the bewildering trackless choices that face the individual" (*7*). Black Humor "condemns man to a dying world" offering neither release nor reconciliation (8), but rather an acceptance of life's pain:

> The Black Humor protagonist is not, like these satiric foils, an authorial lens for analyzing the real, corrupt object of the satire. Nor does detachment mean for him withdrawal from the world [...] He is at once observer of, and participant in, the drama of dissidence, detached from and yet affected by what happens around him. ... His – and the author's – gaze is more often than not concentrated on what Conrad Knickerbocker has called the terrors and possibilities of the world we have brought into being in this century, and of the self-knowledge that this leads us towards. (12)

Recalling Walker's comments on that which defines a culture's sense of humour, Schulz here is assigning Black Humor to a particular post-war period, an anathema to a particular post-war mood. I will argue, later, that Black Humor did not remain confined to the 1960s, rather it adapted, changed, and developed. However, Schulz's determination to remain

[1] Schulz is referring, of course, to Friedman's anthology.

fixated on the "black" at expense of the "humour" means that his *Black Humor Fiction of the Sixties* has clearly defined parameters, and cannot be adequately used to describe later comedic anti-war fiction, or even the later fiction of some of the authors he discusses.

By 1974 Jerome Klinkowitz declared Black Humor "dead and gone" ('A Final Word for Black Humor' 273), though his frustration may have had as much to do with the inadequacies of Schulz's tome as with the genre itself. Klinkowitz emphasises Black Humor's waning fashion and accounts for its downfall: "The only writers to develop into major talents did so by violating the traditions of Black Humor, which included an accommodation by laughter to the world's insanity and a deliberate refusal to find any new forms in fiction appropriate to the strange new worlds they described" (271). Vonnegut, according to Klinkowitz, developed beyond Black Humor through his "daring structural innovation combined with a sharper-edged, yet more complex, vision" (271–272), though I would question the extent to which structural developments in Vonnegut's later writing could be termed "daring": 1963's *Cat's Cradle* and 1973's *Breakfast of Champions* essentially employ the same episodic structure. Klinkowitz claims the genre peaked too early, became mired in conservatism, and "never rose above its own sick jokes" (273), as a result of publishers' reticence to publish the works as the humorists intended. Klinkowitz is damning of Schulz's book, pointing out his many over-sights (274) and errors (275), and accuses him of grossly misinterpreting Vonnegut (275). Klinkowitz suggests, as a counterpoint to Schulz's belief that the books are "inconclusive", that this may be intentional: "to create not a reordered presentation of reality but instead a piece of art which stands for nothing but itself" (275). This would certainly reinforce the notion put forward by Scholes that the texts are less certain ethically than they are aesthetically. However, I would challenge Klinkowitz's assertion that the Black Humorists violated their own "tradition", causing its downfall. The rules were never clearly defined; there was no road map, no manual, and no direct instructions to violate. If the writers of Black Humor developed it was the critics' job to find new ways to read them, not to throw out the baby with the bathwater.

Much energy can be expended in claiming Black Humor doesn't matter, and in doing so, one of course *makes* it matter. Vonnegut lamented the term for twenty odd years not just because Vonnegut can be a bit of a grump, but because it was used to label fifteen or so writers of a particular era who had very little in common, a concern echoed by Scholes, Schulz, Klinkowitz and others. According to Vonnegut: "it obviously has some meaning or Friedman wouldn't have gotten away with it. It wasn't quite nonsensical – we were all

about the same age, and none of us is a patriot: we are social critics" (Vonnegut and Clancy 55). Black Humor defined, loosely, a mode of literary expression that was the subject of newfound critical attention some time between the late 1950s and early 1970s. In depicting tragedy in comic terms, Black Humor presented an incongruous disparity between content and form: "the contents provide the blackness, and the style mitigates that blackness with humor" (Winston 33). The potential for horror and humour must co-exist within the text, and though Winston claims it is not necessary for these elements to exist in the same moment (36–37), I will argue that the most powerful Black Humor does just this. The consensus, insofar as one exists, is that Black Humor accepted the tragedy of everyday life with a sort of dry humour, and that such a response was the only psychologically manageable approach to the "cosmic labyrinth" of post-World War II America. However, critics of Black Humor overlooked the jokes in deference to "cosmic futility", and paid insufficient attention to the simple fact that writers like Kurt Vonnegut and Joseph Heller can be really damn funny. With Schulz's categorical failure to define the humour in Black Humor (and other scholarly shortcomings), and Scholes' focus on satirical elements and the macro level of this fiction's moral comic value, it may be prudent to take our lead from Breton, and turn to Freud's remarks on gallows humour to more precisely define the comic element in this writing.

1.2.2 Gallows Humor

Vonnegut, lamenting Friedman's "bell jar", directs readers to Freud's work on gallows humor, which he considers to be the type of humour Friedman really meant to refer to. Gallows humor is "a response to hopeless situations," and, according to Vonnegut, is referred to as Jewish humour in America: "Jewish jokes are middle European jokes. And the Black Humorists are gallows humourists, as they try to be funny in the face of situations which they see as just horrible" (Vonnegut and Clancy 55–56).

Freud's comments on humour form a very short section within *The Joke and its Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), which he expanded upon in a second essay, "Der Humor", in 1927. He holds humour in high esteem, separate from the tendentious (language dependent) and innocent (independent of language) jokes discussed earlier in the text, deeming it "one of the highest physical achievements [that] also enjoys the special favour of thinkers" (Freud and Crick 222). He describes the distinction between comedy and humour: comedy is a rush of pleasure obtained from watching someone else in an unpleasant situation, the

pleasure arising from the release of a tension; humour, however, pertains to the person *in* the unpleasant situation, their pleasure obtained "in spite of the distressing affects that disturb it; it acts as a substitute for this emergence of affect, it takes its place" (222). In other words, humour is the deployment of a joke in lieu of the experience of pain.

Notably, in instances of humour, the comic process is completed in a single person, and is not dependent on an audience to succeed as comic – one can experience humour entirely on one's own, without the need to communicate it. Shared instances of humour are "appreciated sympathetically": it is our understanding of the humorous person that allows us to share in their humour (223). This is likely more pronounced in narrative forms: in considering humorous remarks by a character in a novel, the audience can experience the same kind of humour as the comic, since the novel has created a deep understanding in the reader of the comic's situation: empathy. This may account for the effectiveness of this type of humour in the semi-autobiographical war novels we will discuss in chapters two and three.

Freud refers to gallows humour, "the most crass instance of humour", for an illustrative example: "The rogue who is being led to execution on a Monday exclaims: 'Well, that's a good start to the week'" (223). We are meant to feel pity, but our pity is inhibited by our admiration for the humourist who takes such a glib attitude to such tragic circumstances. Our pleasure is derived from the absurdity of the situation, and according to Freud this pleasure is specific to the humourist, not the audience. Humour is what is required to ignore the other implications, and focus alone on the great misfortune of it being Monday: it is the exclusive pleasure of the humourist. The audience's pleasure is derived from the inhibition of pity we *should* feel towards the humourist in the desperate situation; the release comes from the humourist's ability to make light of the situation. The effort required to produce the feeling of pity becomes unusable, so we laugh it away (224). Freud claims that it is admiration for the humourist that makes this type of joke-work so laudable:

> … there is something like greatness of spirit hiding in this 'blague', in clinging so fast to his normal nature and disregarding everything that was meant to cast him down and drive him to despair. This kind of grandeur in humour makes an unmistakable appearance in instances where our admiration is not inhibited by the circumstances of the humorous figure. (223).

Freud's comments have their limitations. His explanation's recourse to the unconscious dulls the focus on joke-work, which he had described in such depth in relation to tendentious jokes. What is of value is the assertion that attempts to create humour in tragic circumstances can be considered laudable, or the remit of high thinkers.

Freud did expand on his comments on humour at the end of *The Joke and its Relation to the Unconscious* in his 1927 essay, "Der Humor", in which he offers some insight into the process by which pleasure is obtained through humour, and importantly the process by which someone other than the humourist – a listener or reader – can obtain pleasure, which is of particular relevance to comedic novels:

> We have an instance of the second way in which humor arises when a writer or a narrator describes the behavior of real or imaginary people in a humorous manner. There is no need for those people to display any humor themselves; the humorous attitude is solely the business of the person who is taking them as his object; and, as in the former instance, the reader or hearer shares in the enjoyment of the humor. To sum up, then, we can say that the humorous attitude – whatever it may consist in – can be directed either towards the subject's own self or towards other people; it is to be assumed that it brings a yield of pleasure to the person who adopts it, and a similar yield of pleasure falls to the share of the nonparticipating onlooker. (Freud 161)

The reader's experience of humour is simply a copy of the humourist's (162). The process by which the humourist protects himself from mental anguish echoes the way the conscious and unconscious mind processes humorous jokes. In jokes a preconscious thought is momentarily revised in the conscious mind (165), a matter which Freud discusses at length in *The Joke and its Relation to the Unconscious*. The comic behaves as an adult towards a child, laughing at the child's trivial displeasure, and deriving amusement from it. Jokes obtain pleasure, or place yield of pleasure in service of aggression (163). Humour, on the other hand, places the humourist simultaneously in the child and adult role. As Critchley describes it "in humour I find myself ridiculous and I acknowledge this in laughter" (94). In laughing at oneself, the humourist takes pleasure in *their own* trivial problems, just as the comic takes pleasure in the pain of others (Freud 164):

> The grandeur in [humour] clearly lies in the triumph of narcissism, the victorious assertion of the ego's invulnerability. The ego refuses to be distressed by the provocations of reality, to let itself be compelled to suffer. It insists that it

> cannot be affected by the traumas of the external world; it shows, in fact, that such traumas are no more than occasions for it to gain pleasure. This last feature is a quite essential element of humour. (162)

The process is transferred from the conscious and unconscious mind, to the ego and super-ego: the humourist withdraws the mental process of coping with tragic circumstances from the ego, and places it with the super-ego – the inflated super-ego views the ego's problems as trivial, and suppresses its possibility of reacting with a humorous remark. This displacement saves the ego from serious mental anguish, which may otherwise lead to madness (164) – humour is a means for preserving one's sanity in tragic circumstances. Describing this process in terms of the super-ego may account for why the humorous laugh is never hearty; the super-ego, according to Freud, is a "severe master", and condescends to allow the ego only a "small yield of pleasure" (166). Relief or release theory as touted by Freud may provide the key to why we laugh in tragic circumstances, and Freud demonstrates here that an ability to laugh in such states has powerful psychological benefits – a theory supported by later studies such as psychologist George Bonanno's empirical observations on laughter during bereavement (21).

Reading these Black Humor novels in terms of Freud's comments on humour seems to be an effective approach, particularly given the autobiographical element in the writing, the type of laughter they produce, and Breton's emphasis on Freud's importance. Regrettably though, after 221 pages on the taxonomy of joking, the final section of *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious* is all too brief, and the later essay focussed much more on the psychic process than the mechanics of the humorous comment.

Let us turn briefly to eminent humour theorist John Morreall, who outlines the basic pattern of humour as follows:

> 1. We experience a cognitive shift – a rapid change in our perceptions or thoughts.
> 2. We are in a play mode rather than a serious mode, disengaged from conceptual and practical concerns.
> 3. Instead of responding to the cognitive shift with shock, confusion, puzzlement, fear, anger, or other negative emotions, we enjoy it.
> 4. Our pleasure at the cognitive shift is expressed in laughter, which signals to others that they can relax and play too. (Morreall 50)

The construction will be familiar to readers of Freud, and he employs much the same terminology to explain the processes of the comic in the earlier part of *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*. Morreall goes on to discuss the inherent discomfort in the cognitive shift – the disequilibrium and disorientation of a rapid change in perception and understanding. With non-tendentious word play this cognitive shift is temporary and switching into the play mode comes easily. For more dangerous modes of joking – laughter at tragedy or physical pain – it is easier for us to switch to the play mode if the pain is fictionalised or if we are distanced from it in some way (such as time) incurring Henri Bergson's "momentary anaesthesia of the heart" (qtd. in Carroll Ch. 1). This is perfectly illustrated by Mel Brooks' famous quip, "Tragedy is me cutting my finger; comedy is you falling down a manhole and dying" (qtd. in Morreall 53). The third phase, enjoyment, the "pleasure in humour" is, according to Morreall, "social, exhilarating, and liberating" (54), and results in the fourth phase, laughter. Laughter has a physiological purpose; per Max Eastman, "we come into the world endowed with an instinctive tendency to laugh and have this feeling in response to pains presented playfully" (qtd. in Morreall 66). According to Morreall there is a physiological reason for our enjoyment of humour:

> The contrast between amusement and negative emotions is found even in their physiology: emotions are centered in the brain's limbic system, while humor is centered in the more rational cerebral cortex. Humorous laughter reduces heart rate, blood pressure, muscle tension, and stress chemicals (epinephrine, norepinephrine, cortisol, DOPAC) in the blood, which increase in fear and anger. And while negative emotions suppress the activity of the immune system, humorous laughter enhances it. (66)

This process may account for the comic insulation Black Humor affords us, and lends more modern – and it would not be unkind to suggest more scientific – reasoning to the insulation and relief humour provides from mental anguish. Furthermore in emphasising the incongruity, Morreall provides the perfect segue to Palmer's *Logic of the Absurd*.

1.2.3 The Logic of the Absurd

In *The Logic of the Absurd* (1987), Jerry Palmer focuses on the micro level of joking in film and television comedy, which is to say he focuses on instances of joking, rather than over-arching comic narratives. The crux of Palmer's exposition of the mechanism of joke-work is a set of twin syllogisms – one logical, one illogical – in which humour is derived

from the realisation that the illogical syllogism in fact has a kind of logic after all[2]. It is this foregrounding of the second, fundamentally illogical syllogism that gives the theory its name, and the emphasis on absurdity is what makes it an ideal partner to an existential reading of the "black" in Black Humor as Schulz suggested. Palmer's definitions of the absurd gag are illustrated using silent film comedy, most prevalently the work of Laurel and Hardy. His formulation is wonderfully applicable to Black Humor fiction of the sixties (to borrow Schulz's title) in that these films undoubtedly influenced the writers of so-called Black Humor. Palmer's logic of the absurd is a formulation consisting of a Peripeteia, and a set of juxtaposed syllogisms:

Peripeteia: Classically defined as the moment of change in the fortunes of a character, Palmer describes the peripeteias of comedy as "the construction of a shock or surprise in the story the film is telling" (Palmer 40). There are two forms:

1. the 'discourse of social formation': that is the manner in which a culture orders society, thus the joke is dependent on the viewer or reader sharing the same set of social values as the author presenting the gag
2. 'narrative expectations': a set of expectations that can logically be inferred from the narrative thus far.

Syllogism: The system of reasoning in traditional logic, as employed by Socrates, in the comic mode is constructed of two contradictory syllogisms:

1. a logical conclusion based on the evidence presented
2. a contradictory line of reasoning, which presents an alternative implausible outcome, which upon reflection is plausible after all. (42)

Palmer illustrates this formula with examples first from Laurel and Hardy, and then from one-liner gags or puns. He argues his theory exhaustively, accounting for existing theories of comedy and explaining why an approach that focuses on the minimum unit of comedy (the gag itself) is necessary. He demonstrates how earlier theories (he refers to work by Freud, Suzanne Langer, and Gerald Mast amongst others) were flawed or circular, or

[2] Arthur Koestler describes a similar process in *The Act of Creation* employing the term 'bisociation': "The sudden bisociation of a mental event with two habitually incompatible matrices results in an abrupt transfer of the train of though from one associative context to another. The emotive charge which the narrative carried cannot be so transferred owing to its greater inertia and persistence; discarded by reason, the tension finds its outlet in laughter" (Koestler 59). However for our purposes Palmer's terminology is more suitable, given his extensive commentary on the micro-unit of comedy.

accounted for other forms of construct to the joke, or concentrated on the maximum comic unit – predominantly narrative shape or the nature of the hero – and failed to account for the minimum unit (28). He criticises Freud's formulation for being equally applicable to riddles (31), and points to the circular nature of Freud's remarks about sense and nonsense. Palmer's theory is convincing because it is specific to joke-work, because it takes into account existing theory, and because it is argued on exceedingly solid logical ground.

Key to the application of the logic of the absurd to discussions of comedy in a tragic context is Palmer's notion of "comic insulation". Palmer uses the example of *Tom and Jerry*: we are able to laugh when Tom is hurt because we know that he will be fine (55). In this case laughter can only be allowed if the viewer has seen Tom and Jerry before, or understands the formula (social formation), which raises the question as to the source of our emotional certainty. Palmer explains this as follows:

> We know that what we see on the screen is funny in so far as it is simultaneously plausible and implausible, but more implausible than it is plausible, absurd, in short; it is precisely because it is absurd, more implausible than plausible, that we 'don't take it seriously', that we have the emotional certainty that all will be well immediately after. In other words, it is not a question of feeling free to laugh at something that might otherwise be nasty because we are 'emotionally insulated' from it by some mechanism that is separate from what we laugh at: it is the very mechanism of humor itself that insulates us. (56)

Palmer here echoes Freud's argument that the construction of a humorous response to tragic circumstances insulates us from painful emotions, or mental anguish. Mary Douglas argues that for a comedic utterance – be it a joke or event, intentional or unintentional – to succeed it must be funny; and furthermore, it must be permitted to be funny. Humour can occur in inappropriate circumstances (consider a dirty joke told at a funeral), fulfilling the first part of the construct but failing on the second. Palmer elaborates on Douglas:

> …within this framework it is clear that humour is something negotiated rather than an immanent property of utterances, and that this negotiation has two fundamental axes: in the first place, whether such-and-such a topic and/or occasion is appropriate for humour ('Do you mind! There are ladies present', etc.); in the second, whether such-and-such an utterance, intended as humorous, succeeds in creating mirth; the bad pun or banal joke greeted with stony silence,

> the elaborate, recondite witticism that meets blank incomprehension – both are examples of something permitted as humour but failing. (21)

Analysis tends to ignore these considerations, focusing instead on plot, character, or aesthetic quality. Furthermore the latter half of the construct is rarely at issue in the more common objects of critical attention: critics tend not to critique humour in everyday life (and let's not encourage them), and the comedic texts they do critique are formally designated sources of comic entertainment (21). However, it does have relevance for Black Humor, and in particular early responses to comic utterances in Black Humor novels. Though it is difficult to imagine someone attending a Richard Pryor show expecting an academic lecture and then failing to be clued in by the other laughing audience members, it is conceivable that encountering instances of Black Humor in novels more readily understood as war literature may be jarring. Coupled with the cognitive effort required to appreciate such humour – recall Freud's assertion that it "enjoys the special favour of thinkers" – the second half of Douglas's construct does have some bearing here. Thus it is possible that in classifying these novels as Black Humor, mechanisms are established that allow us to laugh. The first is that "Black Humor" as a term used to describe a sort of existential or cosmic ironic joke is humorous by definition. The second is our narrative expectations: the idea that the audience can laugh more readily if it knows that laughter is an appropriate or at least possible response. This includes the designation of a particular mode of delivery as comic (such as going to see stand-up comedy) or reading a novel by an author praised for their wit (such as Kurt Vonnegut): such "branding" grants the audience permission to laugh.

We have seen, repeatedly, that the humourist has the admirable capacity to laugh at his or herself, and that the Black Humorist laughs at the self's impossible condition within the universe. Scholes, as explained above, argues that Black Humorists satirise war so effectively by subjecting its rituals to scrutiny, by exposing as absurd the mechanisms normally designed to "suppress reason and laughter" (Scholes 46). This is the power of humour in war fiction: the act of joking provides comic release from circumstances that would otherwise be too painful to bear, but it does not dismiss them, it does not negate their reality, it simply accepts them, and chooses to laugh anyway. Furthermore, according to Palmer, in order to accept a joke we must accept that the joker has chosen the right moment to create a joke, to surprise their audience (the perepeteia), and that this surprise is more implausible than plausible (89). Thus, for these novelists to create successful jokes

about war, the joke must be carefully timed in terms of narrative structure, and the audience must believe that the jokes make sense in an absurd context. Palmer also addresses the delicate balance between the twin syllogisms, and claims that an imbalance here can account for comic failure. If an audience places too much emphasis on the implausible syllogism the effect is excessively absurd, or merely silly. If too much emphasis is placed on the plausible syllogism the joke can be perceived as excessively abrasive, too "Dark"(57), or to borrow Freud's term, too real (Freud 162). Palmer applies his theory of comedy to everyday situations as well as comedic films.

However, the comedic anti-war novelists centre their humour in absurd and traumatic situations: war, PTSD, cosmic futility and, where a further degree of comic insulation is called for, allegory such as science fiction. Perhaps the unsettling nature of the gags in comedic texts about war comes from the larger, absurd context of Black Humor – that these texts are concerned broadly with the idea that war is an illogical state, that the beings operating within it are no longer operating within the social formation. I'm going to suggest that in these comedic war novels, the logic of the absurd is occasionally inverted. Many jokes are constructed on the premise that everything about war is illogical, that language itself is a snare, and that in order free oneself from the absurdity of war, one must opt out of the military system of logic. Is it possible, then, that in an illogical universe (the war zone), the joke's construction is reversed? Instead of the illogical syllogism holding the balance of power, instead of the moment of realisation that the illogical syllogism has a kind of logic after all, these jokes are constructed in such a way that foregrounding the logical syllogism creates the punch-line. If a joke in "normal" circumstances arises from the delicate foregrounding of the illogical syllogism, can a joke in "absurd" circumstances arise from the delicate foregrounding of the logical syllogism? Palmer argues that this would normally result in comic failure. However, in an absurd universe, perhaps the triumph of the logical provides comic release, and the triumph of the illogical – chaos, absurdity, whatever you wish to call it – is frightening, and tragically unfunny. Furthermore, we will explore the lessening degree to which this kind of joke-work occurs in the later novels: with increasing comic insulation, further degrees of remove from the combat zone, the lessening mental anguish of the comic (in this case the author), the increasing degrees of fabulation, does the strain of the absurd lessen, changing the tone of the jokes?

1.3 Critical Approaches to Heller, Vonnegut, Robbins and Vigorito

1.3.1 Joseph Heller

Due, no doubt, to the phenomenal reputation of *Catch-22* within a few short years of its 1961 release, it did not take terribly long for critics to take notice of Joseph Heller. While critical approaches to Kurt Vonnegut tended to focus on his whole oeuvre, Heller had written only one book when the first scholarly articles began to appear in the mid-1960s. Given the novel's setting it is categorically a war (or anti-war) novel, so criticism of Heller focussed more on the war theme than that of Vonnegut, whose critics made broader assessments of thematic concerns.

The earliest major reviews of *Catch-22* in 1962 vacillate between praising the novel's subversiveness and criticising its vulgarity. When the novel first began appearing in critical texts (including works by Podhoretz, Wincelberg, and Kostelanetz) Heller was at first critically aligned with writers such as Norman Mailer, Thomas Pynchon and Philip Roth. Quickly, Heller's value as a generational spokesman became apparent, with criticism focusing on the tone of protest gaining traction very early (Frederick Karl) as well as the question of representing American *un*reality in post-war fiction. Early attempts to characterise the humour in the novel suggested parody, with Denniston claiming *Catch-22* parodied the romance genre. However, when an extract from the "Milo" chapter appeared in Friedman's *Black Humor* (1965), Heller's new style of comedic novel was tarred with that brush, a classification he found just as frustrating as Vonnegut, responding: "No, don't classify me as a writer of black comedy either, [...] I don't want to be grouped with *those* writers" (*Conversations with Joseph Heller* 48). *Catch-22* is referenced frequently though not prominently in Schulz's *Black Humor Fiction of the Sixties* (1973).

In 1969 two small articles mentioning *Catch-22* serve as evidence of the novel's importance as a radical text, and mainstay of the social protest movement. In "Current Reading Tastes of Young Adults" Gottsdanker and Pidgeon note that young men with high aptitude test scores are more inclined to read fiction, and speculate for the reasons behind this, suggesting perhaps the "contemporary mood of alienation" and "evidence of fascination with social change" (384). In "What They're Reading," the journal *Change in Higher Education* asked campus bookshop managers for the best-selling non-course books in eight universities. The list perfectly reflect the atmosphere of social change on college

campuses, and mention repeatedly Herman Hesse, J. D. Salinger, Philip Roth, Tom Wolfe and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Notre Dame, Charleston, and Columbia universities all list *Catch-22* (9).

From the late 1960s onwards critics like Stern, Solomon, Bryant and Blues focussed on the hero or anti-hero figure, absurdism, and protest, with increasing focus on the military establishment and the tricky question of desertion. J.P. Stern's "War and the Comic Muse" compares *The Good Soldier Schweik* and *Catch-22*, a comparison that would arise frequently in future criticism,[3] and attributes Heller's absurd treatment of the effect of the military machine on the private individual to Hašek's influence (204). The novels intersect in their belief that war is meaningless and contrast in the degree to which they treat the subject with humour, Heller being more relentless in his absurd approach (207). In 1971 Blues questions the morality of desertion, with Tanner continuing the conversation into individual freedom in face of the military complex. At the same time new attempts to classify the comedic aspects of the novel emerge, as Black Humor is shown to be wanting. Harris characterises both Heller and Vonnegut as absurd, with Boyd Hauck giving *Catch-22* consideration in *A Cheerful Nihilism* (1971). Olderman and Kazin discuss the novel as war, or anti-war, literature and explore its allegorical properties. *A Catch-22 Casebook* (1973), the first edited volume dedicated solely to Heller, collected early interviews and essays. The *Casebook* reveals emerging trends in structural approach with essays by Burhans, Thomas, and Sniderman. A second dedicated critical collection, Nagel's *Collected Essays* (1975), immediately followed the publication of *Something Happened* (1974) concluding approaches to Heller as a single-book author, and drawing critical attention away from *Catch-22* for much of the rest of the 1970s. Nagel's collection summarises critical themes to date, demonstrating a major focus on the absurd and morality. The publication of a second edited collection by Nagel almost a decade later, this time entitled *Critical Essays on Joseph Heller* (1984), is a fitting commentary on the development of critical approach after *Catch-22*, even while later novels failed to captivate audiences to the same degree.

From the late 1970s Heller begins to feature prominently in general approaches to the American novel, sealing his reputation as a major American literary figure. He is named a "social fantacist", along with Vonnegut, Ken Kesey and Nathanael West, in Miles

[3] See, for example, Tony Tanner and Jerry H. Bryant, below.

Donald's *The American Novel in the Twentieth Century* (1978); a modernist in *The Exploded Form* (1980), in which Mellard rejects postmodernism, describing Heller, Faulkner and Brautigan as late or third-phase modernist (pre-post-modernist?); while in *The Modern American Novel* (1983) Malcolm Bradbury goes right ahead and reapplies the "postmodern" label. Robert Merrill, who also worked on Vonnegut, published a monograph on Heller in 1987, dedicating two chapters to *Catch-22*, with chapters also on the plays, *Something Happened* (1974), and the "Jewish novels": *Good as Gold* (1979) and *God Knows* (1984). Stephen W. Potts contributed two monographs in this decade, *From Here to Absurdity: the Moral Battlefields of Joseph Heller* (1982, revised 1995) and *Catch-22: Antiheroic Antinovel* (1989), indicating the on-going preoccupation with anti-hero, absurdity, and morality in the work. David Seed's *Against the Grain* (1989) is a keystone work of this period, looking at Heller's career to 1989, including the plays and autobiographical work *No Laughing Matter* (1986), with a particular focus on Heller's use of humour.

The critical field thus established, the nineties were a slightly quieter period for Heller criticism, though he is continually referenced in works examining cult fiction and postmodern fiction. Noteworthy is Craig's *Tilting at Mortality* (1997), which has the dual objectives of exploring mortality as a major thematic concern, as well as Heller's structural techniques. Laura Hidalgo-Downing's *Negation, Text Worlds and Discourse* (2000) considers *Catch-22* from a linguistic perspective, and attempts to determine to what extent "current discourse theories can provide the analytic tools necessary for the study and interpretation of negation as a discourse phenomenon" (3). By negation she is referring to a type of joke-work; however this is a corpus study, not a literary study. Woodson's *A Study of Joseph Heller's Catch-22: Going Around Twice* (2001) considers *Catch-22* in light of the Gilgamesh myth, and views absurdist or Black Humor aspects of the novel as effects of Heller's attempts to replicate the epic.

Though to a lesser extent and with less immediacy than Vonnegut, Heller's death in 1999 prompted a slew of retrospective works from the late 2000s, including edited collections by Harold Bloom (*Joseph Heller's Catch-22* (2008)) and Dedria Bryfonski (*War in Joseph Heller's Catch-22* (2009)). The latter collection is significant in that it forms part of a series of works in this later period focussing on war in the novel, with a move away from earlier attempts to parse the war aspects of *Catch-22* in terms of Heller's biography, towards analysis of *Catch-22* as a war novel, with Coker's *Men at War* (2014) serving as another example. Sanford Pinsker's *Understanding Joseph Heller* (2009) was published as part of the "Understanding Contemporary American Literature" series, which includes one

of the few book-length critical works on Tom Robbins, and demonstrates *Catch-22*'s prevalence on undergraduate reading lists. Finally, Tracy Daugherty's excellent biography *Just One Catch* (2011) and Erica Heller's nostalgic offering, *Yossarian Slept Here* (2011), celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of *Catch-22*.

Thus, broadly speaking, it may be said that critical approaches to Joseph Heller address his comic technique, his status as a war novelist, questions of absurdity and Black Humor, and moral concerns. As with much comedy criticism, it is fair to say that the majority of approaches tend to focus on joking on the macro rather than micro level. However, there is one very notable exception to this rule, and it provided the inspiration for the application of Palmer's Theory of the Absurd to the comedic war novel in this study: Daniel Green's "A World Worth Laughing At" appeared in *Studies in the Novel* in 1995, and was reprinted in Bloom's 2008 edited collection on *Catch-22*. Green briefly outlines early critical approaches to Heller's comedy, makes a case for Palmer's logic of the absurd, and applies Palmer's schema to select examples from the novel. Unfortunately, at only ten pages, Green's brilliant essay is all too brief, and is limited to a single author, and a single text. However, it does provide an excellent basis for a study of theories of comedy in relation to *Catch-22*, and the American anti-war novel in the late twentieth century.

1.3.2 Kurt Vonnegut

Certainly the most written-about of these four authors, Kurt Vonnegut experienced a boom in critical attention during his lifetime that is almost without precedent; Robert Merrill counts 265 critical studies, including eight books, based on the 1987 *Kurt Vonnegut: A Comprehensive Bibliography* (3). At least forty book-length studies of the author or his work have appeared since 1987, with this extremely modest estimate based just on material collected for the purpose of this present study. As a result, a literature review becomes an extremely unwieldy task, and broad commentary on critical themes almost comically vague.

Early criticism of Kurt Vonnegut was largely concerned with establishing avenues to discuss his work, and a number of labels are tried only to prove improper fits. Though Vonnegut's first novel, *Player Piano*, appeared in 1952, scholars did not really take notice until 1966 when Delacorte re-released his back catalogue ahead of the publication of *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), at which point interest truly exploded. Merrill rightly points to C. D. B. Bryan's "Kurt Vonnegut on Target" (1966) as the genesis of this explosion, and

the questions Bryan raises about the tone of Vonnegut's satire was to dominate discussion for years. Scholes labelled Vonnegut a Black Humorist and fabulator in 1967, and this term was applied with varying degrees of success until around 1974 when Jerome Klinkowitz said enough was enough. Klinkowitz's *The Vonnegut Statement* (1973) marks the earliest collection of essays dedicated solely to the author, and betrays critics' difficulty in finding the right vocabulary with which to discuss his work. This and many other book-length studies of Vonnegut and his work tend to include biographical sections, highlighting the influence of the author's life on his work, but also indicating that his critics were often members of his *karass*: either friends or fans. Perhaps as a result scholarly criticism of Vonnegut can, at times, be more complimentary than analytical. Meanwhile the rising cult of Vonnegut prompted some critics to confuse commercial appeal among young audiences with insipid sentimentalism (Merrill points a finger at Leslie Fiedler and Benjamin DeMott, for example (4)). Questions of aesthetic form, moral stance, comic mode and thematic implications dominate this period of criticism, which pretty much covers everything.

From 1973, starting with Stanley Trachtenberg's essay on *Cat's Cradle*, critics begin to move on from Black Humor and try other ways of discussing Vonnegut's comedy. Ethical concerns vacillate between fatalism and man's personal responsibility within the absurd universe, but are largely focussed – as the novels themselves – on humanist questions of how best to live, and countless critics weigh in on their perceptions of Vonnegut's moral stance. As the thrust of criticism moves on from Black Humor the science fiction label appears with greater regularity, particularly in relation to *Sirens of Titan* (1959). Generally speaking the thrust of such critical attention is directed towards *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and the Tralfamadorian plot-line of this novel is perhaps over-emphasised in the service of science fiction readings. Robert Nadeau, author of one of the most significant scholarly articles on Tom Robbins, tackled science in Vonnegut's work in "Physics and Metaphysics in the Novels of Kurt Vonnegut, Jr." (1980).

A slight drop-off in scholarly material after the late 1970s corresponds with a fallow period in the Vonnegut oeuvre. Though the later novels continued to feature on bestseller lists, they never received the same degree of critical attention as the novels published between *Cat's Cradle* (1963) and *Breakfast of Champions* (1973). Vonnegut himself marks a change in his work at this time; "crossing the spine of a roof – having ascended one slope" (Vonnegut, *Breakfast of Champions* 4) he declares *Breakfast of Champions* a fiftieth birthday present to himself. In the preamble to the novel, he promises to throw out all the junk, to

stop recycling characters, and to essentially conclude a phase – and this may account for a shift of focus in the subsequent novels. Postmodernism, liberalism and technology crop up as frequent critical themes in the early 1980s, with Klinkowitz's *Kurt Vonnegut* (1982) charting his career from genre writer, to experimentalist, to postmodernist (Merrill 17). Kathryn Hume emerges as a major voice in the cacophony, with essays focusing on myth and fantasy. Merrill concludes his analysis of literature up to 1987 by remarking upon his eager anticipation of Loree Rackstraw, Leonard Mustazza and Lawrence Broer's books.

With most of his good work behind him and an increasing tendency to capitalise on reputation with collections of essays, the 1990s mark a period of retrospection in Vonnegut criticism, underscored by the publication of Marc Leed's *Encyclopaedia* in 1995. Mustazza's *Critical Response* (1994) as well as Merrill's own *Critical Essays* (1990) collect some of the most important essays on Vonnegut's work, and an increase in the publication of accessible single-subject texts on Vonnegut and his novels (including several edited by Harold Bloom) likely indicates an increase in his appearance on campus syllabi, as P. L. Thomas' *Reading, Learning, Teaching Kurt Vonnegut* (2006) confirms. Also notable in this period is Reed's work on Vonnegut's short fiction, the first book-length study to take focus away from the novels. Broer's *Sanity Plea* (1989 and 1994) compares the earlier and later novels, suggesting a move from existential angst to a more optimistic outlook from *Slapstick* (1976) onwards, which may account for the move away from Black Humor in later criticism of Vonnegut's humour. Criticism tackling war in the novels increased after 2001, including Broer's *Vonnegut and Hemingway* (2011) as well as essays by Simmons, Kunze, Jarvis, and, well, me.

Following Vonnegut's death in 2007 a number of key collections were re-issued, alongside some nostalgic tomes. Rackstraw's *Love as always, Kurt: Vonnegut as I knew him* (2009) is certainly guilty of the aforementioned kowtowing, and her intimate relationship with the author is almost embarrassingly obvious. Finally, Sumner's *Unstuck in Time*, Shields much-anticipated biography *And So it Goes*, and Wakefield's *Letters* all released 2011/2012 serve as fitting tributes to the enduring affection of audiences and critics towards Vonnegut.

1.3.3 Tom Robbins

The first phase of criticism on Tom Robbins emerging in the late 1970s focussed on the juxtaposition of physics and spirituality in his work, as well as ideas of new consciousness

and new social models. With almost a decade to ponder the radical change in social consciousness in the late 1960s, and with recourse to a writer once described as the "quintessential" author of that era, this is hardly surprising. Nor is the focus on ideas of style versus content, the aesthetic experience, avant-garde language use and art for art's sake, which foregrounded both Robbins' thematic interest in style as well as the quality of his writing.

With the publication of Mark Siegel's 1980 monograph the focus shifted more towards societal critique in Robbins' work. Siegel considered Robbins a Western writer, and explored ideas of personal freedom versus social responsibility. In this new Frontier literature the integrated hero is no more, and the outsider, misfit hero gives rise to the anti-hero. Questions of individualism would continue to emerge in criticism for several years and would resurface in later essays, expressing hope that individual change may give rise to institutional change, and that the anti-hero must necessarily be an outsider, remaining alienated from an undesirable society. In this phase of criticism Robbins began to be mentioned alongside Vonnegut and Heller as a kind of generational spokesman, praised for his 'Black Humor', ironic world vision, and ability to find humour in all things, including war. These comments by Roger Sutton in "'Grokking' the YA Cult Novels" (1983) are a surprising nod to the now out-moded Black Humor, and come almost ten years after Jerome Klinkowitz's "final word" on the genre.

By 1990 Robbins is accused of waning subversiveness and even misogyny in more recent work, and the question of whether his powers diminish over the course of his career haunt reviews for some time. Meanwhile criticism of his earlier work began to offer new perspectives with the benefit of hindsight. Thomas R. Whissen points to the Kent State Shootings as a moment of change in the mood of social protest. With anger no longer seeming appropriate, bitter satire gave way to absurdism, and "lampooning laced with gallows humor became the tone of protest" (14) as exemplified by Robbins. Whissen's comments, without referencing Black Humor, do use familiar terminology in prescribing the use of laughter as an act of defiance against the world's meaninglessness. However, he also uses "fun" and "lampooning", suggesting a subtle change in the timbre of this type of humour. This may suggest that instead of being "dead and gone", Black Humor has developed in keeping with a change in the tone of protest in society at large. More recent criticism has continued in this vein. In 2002 Brian Kent claimed that Robbins used comedy to break down the dimensions of modern life that suppress individuality and creativity. Themes of individualism and the New Left emerge again in the mid-2000s when recalling

Robbins early career, and he is again labelled a Western writer, the cowboy figure being a hero of the New Left.

The publication of *Conversations with Tom Robbins* (2011), and his memoir *Tibetan Peach Pie* (2014) may mark a new phase of criticism, though of course this remains to be seen.

1.3.4 Tony Vigorito

To date, no peer-reviewed academic criticism has been published on Tony Vigorito's work. However, a few reviews and awards bear mention, particularly those linking Vigorito with other comedic anti-war novelists. Originally self-published in 2001 by Bast Books, and promoted by Vigorito at music and arts festivals ('Just a Couple of Days'), the novel was reissued by Harcourt in April 2007 ahead of the release of his second novel, *Nine Kinds of Naked*. In 2002 *Just a Couple of Days* won the "Visionary Fiction" category of the *Independent Publisher* awards (Anonymous).

The *Midwest Book Review*, an online review site edited by Wisconsin-based librarian James A. Cox, prescribed *Days* as recommended reading for "anyone with a literary interest in the surreal and metaphysical" ('Midwest Book Review's Review of Just a Couple of Days'), thus equating Vigorito's novel with earlier fiction by Tom Robbins. Furthermore Robbins offered high praise for the novel, claiming that it "may be the most unusual, the most original novel I have ever read..." (Vigorito, *Just a Couple of Days*). A Kirkus Review reprinted on Tony Vigorito's own website references the earlier author too, describing Vigorito's "linguistic acrobatics" as reminiscent of Robbins. Possibly a Harcourt-supplied marketing blurb, the review praises Vigorito's "consistently dazzling wordplay" and dubs *Days* an "underground cult classic". It names Vonnegut as an influence, but quotes Vigorito's claim that he did not discover Tom Robbins until he was some way into writing the novel: "Obviously, it was a joy to discover, especially because here was someone else that was horsing around with language. If anything, Robbins's writing gave me permission to push the boundaries of language and storytelling" ('Just a Couple of Days'). However, the fiction review section of the same issue of the same publication offers a markedly different review: "Shades of Tom Robbins, but the author's talent for wordplay is not quite enough to sustain a full-length novel" ('Just a Couple of Days').

Both *Library Journal* and *Kirkus* reference Kurt Vonnegut, the former praising the climatic twist – "The final apocalyptic vision is a twist not seen since Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's*

Cradle" (Cohen) – and the latter dubbing the novel "a madcap adventure of a sinister government plot and an apocalyptic vision worthy of Kurt Vonnegut" ('Just a Couple of Days'), though the conspicuous repetition is unlikely to be purely coincidental.

A review by *Minneapolis Books Examiner* reprinted on Vigorito's own website touches on the essence of how the comedic anti-war novelists discussed weighty issues: "A master of contradiction... displays a talent for tackling serious matters, like biological warfare and human communication, and making them absurd and funny in a way that seems to release the reader from the weight of the issue" ('Just a Couple of Days'). Notably, the reviewer considers the humour in *Days* a form of release – while laughter as release is certainly explored in depth in the novel, laughter as horror is explored in depth too. And, while the reader certainly laughs heartily, it will be argued that this laughter contributes to the weightier aspects of the novel, rather than washing over them.

Incidentally, Tony Vigorito interviewed Tom Robbins in 2013, and the interview is notable in that Robbins offers a lot of new material, perhaps spurred on by their shared interests. They discuss the nature of language and meaning, Wittgenstein, Terence McKenna, and the idea that the universe does not exist outside of our ability to articulate it, or, as Robbins describes it: "language lends reality to reality" (Vigorito, 'The Syntax of Sorcery: An Interview with Tom Robbins').

1.4 Objectives of this Thesis

The failure of the Black Humor critics to adequately address the humour in these novels has, by now, been well established. This is not to suggest nobody talked about the comic value of these novels, simply that much of this work focussed on humour on a macro level, rather than providing a fruitful analysis of the jokes. Furthermore, while critics were indeed talking about the American inclination towards comedy as a response to tragic circumstances, much of this criticism looked at film and stand-up; Lenny Bruce's barbed liberal satire and Stanley Kubrick's brilliantly caustic absurdist films have been widely discussed by critics such as Stephen E. Kercher. Treatments of war literature seemed to crop up separately, with a tendency to focus on realistic accounts, drama, or indeed melodrama, and tend to avoid the difficult task of discussing comedy in tragic circumstances. As such, criticism considering the humour fails to focus on the war novels, and criticism of war novels fails to focus on the comedic ones. Certainly criticism on the

work of Joseph Heller and Kurt Vonnegut was prevalent, but rarely are both aspects addressed in balance.

If Palmer's Theory of the Absurd can provide a fruitful framework with which to consider the micro-level of the joke-work in these Black Humor novels, in the following chapters I will apply it to Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Tom Robbins' *Villa Incognito* and finally to Tony Vigorito's *Just a Couple of Days*. Palmer's discussion of joke and metaphor will be explored in greater depth in relation to the later humourists, in which metaphor itself is often a complex source of humour. We shall see that lessening degrees of acerbity in humour are connected to increased comic insulation: the passing of time, or lessening degrees of personal trauma (in this case participation in combat). In evaluating the cathartic power of humour in the war novel it is helpful to consider the author's own cathartic experience inherent in the writing process, and thus the author's real war experience in such cases as applicable. Both Kurt Vonnegut and Joseph Heller served in World War II, and later fictionalised, to varying degrees, that experience. Tom Robbins served, albeit in a non-combat capacity, in the Korean War. In the case of the two combatants – Heller was in the Air Force and Vonnegut an infantrymen – the biographical element in their works displays a sense of immediacy, as well as a tendency to foreshadow the absurdity of the experience. Both authors have pointed the way in interviews and letters to critics and reviewers seeking to draw comparisons.

As the context of these narratives changes over time – as readers become more accustomed to the use of humour in war novels, and the illogical nature of these novels – the balance between the congruous and the incongruous syllogism, and the logical or illogical narrative, changes the effect of the jokes. In short, through an analysis of joke construction this thesis will account for the way in which the comedic anti-war novel becomes less and less absurd throughout the second half of the twentieth century.

Chapter 2. Joseph Heller

Both Joseph Heller and Kurt Vonnegut have stated in interviews that they believed World War II to be a just war, a war worth fighting. Yet *Catch-22* is seen as one of the seminal counter-culture novels of the 1960s, beloved of the anti-Vietnam movement and hailed as one of the most important anti-war novels ever written. The novel is sometimes criticised for its late-stage cop out, for Heller's need to morally justify Yossarian's desertion or, by more conservative critics, for Yossarian's desertion at all. However, it is repeatedly established throughout that the enemy is not Hitler or Mussolini, Germany, Italy or Japan. The enemy is the concept of war itself, as embodied by the military-industrial complex and more specifically by military bureaucracy. Yossarian claims again and again that his true enemies are Lt. Scheisskopf, Col. Cathcart and the men in charge; his fellow Americans are the ones who want him dead and the only real threat to his personal safety or freedom. The weapons these figures fight with are not guns, dangerous missions or court-martial: they are words.

In *Catch-22*, words are weaponised. In order for Yossarian to succeed against his oppressors – the U.S. military machine – he must rebel against a war on language. In opting out of the absurd universe embodied by the kind of language that can create a catch as elegant as catch-22, the "greatest catch there is", he succeeds, and earns his freedom. *Catch-22* is lauded not as an anti-World War II novel, but as an anti-Vietnam novel, and Yossarian is no deserter; he is a conscientious objector. To the campus audiences that embraced Heller's novel Vietnam was not a good war, it was not a war worth fighting, and the true threat to these readers was not North Vietnam, but the U.S. government which sent their contemporaries to fight in this unjust war. Hence the significance of Heller's moral justification for Yossarian's final act: World War II, he labours to emphasise, no longer needs to be fought, Hitler and Mussolini are no longer a threat, and the war will be over in Japan within a few months of Yossarian's desertion. In this sense, *Catch-22* far more accurately describes the anti-Vietnam movement's case than it does Heller's own experience.

In the absurd universe created on the fictional island of Pianosa, where men are made to march and determine to march backwards, where uniforms are cast off along with the horrors they represent, where the U.S. military machine is so villainised a mess officer can bomb his own squadron, Yossarian and his friends are subject to the ambitions of their

commanders; and the true enemy, Colonel Cathcart, is a symbol of the fools in charge who repeatedly raises the number of missions required to complete a tour of duty, so that they must fly until they die. However, as the novel repeatedly proves, death is not a foolproof means of escape. This chapter will attempt to argue that laughter is.

2.1 Heller's World War II

Joseph Heller was born in Coney Island on 1 May 1923, making him just six months younger than Kurt Vonnegut. The child of Russian Jewish immigrants, Joey (as he was called) had a mostly happy childhood despite the early loss of his father. Heller's own autobiography, *Now and Then*, and Terry Daugherty's 2011 biography, *Just One Catch*, both seem to indicate this and other family events went largely unanalysed, or at the least unremarked upon at the time. The family, including Joey's two half siblings by his father – a trivial detail he did not learn until the rabbi let slip at his brother's wedding (Daugherty 46) – shared a four room apartment on West 31st Street, near Surf Avenue (Heller, *Now and Then* 3) on Coney Island. Heller's father, Isaac Heller, died of a lacerated stomach ulcer when Joey was just four years old. He had been a delivery driver for Messinger's Bakery, and was roughly forty-two when he died. His origins are somewhat hazy, though the 1920 United States census indicates that his place of origin was Russia, and that his native Language was Yiddish, and Daugherty concludes that he travelled to the United States on the *Lapland* on 29 September 1913 from Antwerp, having left Tshschonovitz, Russia, and was born in Gulanowie, Russia – a few hundred miles west of Moscow. Once in the United States, Isaac declared himself a Jewish agnostic, a socialist, and a refugee from Czar Nicholas II (Daugherty 29). Heller's memories of his father are scant, the most distinct being when he was left alone in Coney Island Hospital after having had his tonsils removed (32). Of his father's passing, he says: "I didn't realise then how traumatized I was. As a boy in school I used to say my father was 'deceased.' I was aware without being aware" (qtd. in Daugherty 41).

Following the death of Isaac, Lena moved the family to Railroad Avenue, Coney Island, to a cheaper but otherwise similar apartment (Daugherty 34). Lena spoke very little English, but was a kind mother and avid reader. As Joey grew up, he spent his time with his many neighbourhood friends on the beaches and playgrounds, and later the social clubs of Coney Island. He grew restless and frustrated in school, developing an anxious nail-biting habit and finding it difficult to engage with a class he was too advanced to be in

(39). Joey's brother, Lee, was fourteen years his senior (31) and not an active presence in his early life, even running away from a home for a summer when Joey was young. By the time Joey was four Lee was often out of the house, working long days. He married when Joey was 15, and lived with his wife Perle in Crown Heights (49). He remained a mentor to Joey, abandoning dreams of college to help support his family (45). Sylvia, born 1914 (31), was working in Macy's department store in Manhattan by the time Joey was in High School (51) – she would continue to do so for forty years (Heller, *Now and Then* 6) – and supported his love of literature by bringing home magazines so he could read the contemporary fiction therein (Daugherty 52).

In his teens Joey began working for the Western Union, based in the General Motors complex, but was let go just before his High School graduation in 1941 (Daugherty 61). By then many of Joey's friends from the neighbourhood had been drafted (61). He took a job with Manhattan Mutual Automobile Casualty Company (62) – his boss there was a Miss Dunbar (Heller, *Now and Then* 148) – but when three colleagues received their draft notices (Daugherty 63) Joey began looking for work that might help him avoid a similar fate. Through a friend at a Coney Island social club Joey procured a letter of reference to work at the Norfolk Navy Yard in Portsmouth, Virginia, leaving in summer 1942. He lasted only fifty-six days (65). The work was hard, and it became increasingly clear that it would not serve its intended purpose. After FDR lowered the age of conscription from twenty-one to nineteen, Joey decided that it would be better to go to war on his own terms, and choose his form of service, than continue to fear the inevitable (66). On 19 October 1942 he enlisted along with a group of friends, having "had nothing better to do" (Heller, *Now and Then* 172). He later recalled this naiveté:

> After Pearl Harbor, I smugly took for granted, along with a few million other innocents, that once 'we' were in it, the war would soon be over, before I could be called up. 'Those Japs must be crazy,' I remember saying to the friends I was with on the afternoon of Pearl Harbor day. 'We'll wipe them right out.' (Heller, *Now and Then* 102)

Heller received basic training at Miami Beach, Florida, moved from there to Lowry Field in Denver, Colorado for further technical training and then to Santa Ana, California, for aviation cadet training (Daugherty 69). While Heller was stationed at Santa Ana, back home in Coney Island, Lena fell and broke her hip. She would walk with a cane and a perceptible limp for the rest of her life. Heller recalls the efficiency with which the army

released him for furlough at the time, a sentiment he does not echo in recalling his return to U.S. soil later on:

> On emergency leave after my mother's accident, I was appreciative of the benevolence with which the various bureaucratic desks of the army joined to secure my furlough in what seemed a matter of minutes, certainly less than an hour. I was midway through my preflight training at the Santa Ana Army Air Base in California; a huge installation in which thousands, perhaps tens of thousands, of aviation cadets were received, examined, evaluated, and assigned to classes for preflight training as pilots, bombardiers, and navigators. The telegram had been sent by my sister. My orderly room referred me to the office of the chaplain, which on the spot arranged a loan to me from the Red Cross to pay for the railroad tickets procured for me by the transportation office, which also awarded me a priority rating for the train. (Heller, *Now and Then* 156)

In California he was trained in the use of the Norden bombsight – although he did not use it at all overseas (Heller, *Now and Then* 176) – in preparation for his deployment as a bombardier. He learned, also, that each mission pivoted on the bombardier's skill, and that their life expectancy in heavy combat was only three minutes (Daugherty 73). The personnel loss per mission in 1943 was a disheartening 5%, and members of the Corps acknowledged that as the number of missions required for a tour of duty rose, the chances of return to American soil sank (74). As Daugherty explains, this "theoretically meant they would all be dead after twenty flights" (74), yet by late 1944 fifty to seventy missions were required to complete a tour of duty (93). The odds were against survival.

Heller completed bombardier training on 13 November 1943, and was appointed to the rank of Second Lieutenant (Daugherty 75). By 27 April 1944 he was in transit overseas, reaching Alesan Air Field, Corsica, on 21 May 1944 by a circuitous route. Heller kept a diary of each mission he flew, and in Spring 1945 when he was back in Goodfellow Field in the U.S., waiting to clock up enough points for a discharge and killing time writing PR copy, he took advantage of a tent-mate's typewriter to write up his chronology (12). Thus, the events recalled in *Catch-22* have a basis in reality, the absurd and surreal narrative formed around the true account of Heller's experience in the 488th Bomb Squadron of the 340th Bombardier Group, "the best damn group there is" (80). He told the Simon & Schuster lawyers in 1961 that "the people, places, and events in his novel were 'extensions of the possible into the fantastic'" (qtd. in Daugherty 217).

Upon arrival in Corsica, Heller discovered that the base had recently been bombed by a Luftwaffe attack, a Trojan Horse operation in which the German bombers were preceded by a British Beaufighter dropping flares (Daugherty 81). This incident manifested in *Catch-22* in Milo Minderbinder's mercenary attack on Pianosa (295–297). Heller's tent-mate was recently deceased; an Oklahoma man named Pinkard who had been shot down over Ferrara and whose cot had not been touched since (Daugherty 80). Pinkard inspired the 'dead Okie' whom Yossarian bunks with, and to whom he grows feverishly attached – he is shot down over Oriveto two hours after he arrives in Pianosa, and before his arrival papers have been processed (124-125). Another tent-mate, Edward Ritter, moved in shortly after Heller, and was an amateur handy-man and tinkerer; he was to inspire Orr, even echoing the character's "poor luck", as Ritter crash-landed on at least three occasions (Daugherty 82). Heller recalls Ritter fondly, and indicates his inclusion as a tribute to the pilot's bravery:

> Remarkably, through all his unlucky series of mishaps the pilot Ritter remained imperviously phlegmatic, demonstrating no symptoms of fear or groaning nervousness, even blushing with a chuckle and a smile whenever I gagged around about him as a jinx, and it was on these qualities of his, his patient genius for building and fixing things and these recurring close calls in aerial combat, only on these, that I fashioned the character of Orr in Catch-22. (Heller, *Now and Then* 184)

In a neighbouring tent Francis Yohannan, a Philadelphian whom Heller had met in South Carolina prior to deployment, shared with Joe Chrenko, an amateur photographer with a penchant for capturing attractive women (Daugherty 82). They would inspire Yossarian and Hungry Joe, though Yossarian was based in name alone on Francis 'Yo-Yo' Yohannon: in all other respects he mirrored Heller himself (218). Col Willis F. Chapman (group commander, aka Colonel Cathcart), Captain. Vincent 'the Chief' Myers, 'Doc' Marino (whom Heller had also met in South Carolina), and Chaplain James H. Cooper rounded out Heller's list of source material (82) along with the group mess officer, Mauno Lindholm (218). Cooper bore a physical resemblance to his fictional counterpart, and would eventually recognise himself in Chaplain R.O. Shipman. In May 1962 he wrote to Simon & Schuster outlining the physical and familial similarities. He was, he claimed, embarrassed by the description, and wanted his name removed from subsequent editions and reprints (236). For the sixth and subsequent printings Shipman became Tappman,

and the matter was considered resolved. Heller reassured the real Mr. Shipman, then the assistant Dean of Columbia's Graduate School of Journalism, that he had "received but two queries regarding the change of name, which proves my fears that legions of Ph.D candidates would be thrown into confusion, were groundless" (qtd. in Daugherty 237). Though as my own copy of the novel, the British 1994 Vintage Paperback edition, bears the name Shipman, I beg to differ – admittedly the same tome uses American spelling, so who knows.

By 22 June 1944 General Knapp confirmed that the number of missions required for a tour of duty was seventy, having increased from the fifty required when Heller arrived in May; the War Diary reported that this news was not "going over too big with the boys" (qtd. in Daugherty 83). By the time of Heller's arrival the group was operating behind the front, and as a result did not encounter German fighters, though they did have to contend with anti-aircraft fire (84). He was issued a flak suit and flew his first two missions on 24 May, over Poggibonsi and later Orvieto (86). Daugherty reports a 15 July mission to Ferrara, on which Heller encountered his first serious flak; the War Diary reports the death of a Sergeant Vandermuelen from a flak wound (Daugherty 87). Heller confirms this as one of several sources for the Snowden story:

> On another mission to Ferarra, one I don't think I was on, a radio gunner I didn't know was pierced through the middle by a wallop of flak […] and he died, moaning, I was told, that he was cold. For my episodes of Snowden in the novel, I fused the knowledge of that tragedy with the panicked copilot and the thigh wound to the top turret gunner in my own plane on our second mission to Avignon. (Heller, *Now and Then* 185)

The second mission to Avignon, mentioned here, took place on 15 August. The War Diary reported "Flak: Heavy" (Daugherty 88) with pieces piercing Heller's plane, seriously injuring the gunner, Carl Frankel, and taking down three other B-25s. Heller attended the gunner, who, like Vandermuelen, kept complaining that he was cold:

> With a wounded man on board, we were given priority in landing. The flight surgeon and his medical assistants and an ambulance were waiting to the side at the end of the runway. They took him off my hands. I might have seemed a hero and been treated as something of a small hero for a short while, but I didn't feel like one. They were trying to kill me, and I wanted to go home. That they were

> trying to kill all of us each time we went up was no consolation. They were trying to kill *me.* (Heller, *Now and Then* 189)

This was Heller's turning point, the point at which he became obsessed with his own mortality. He continues, "I was frightened on every mission after that one, even the certified milk runs. It could have been about then that I began crossing my fingers each time we took off and saying in silence a little prayer. It was my sneaky ritual" (189). His fear of flying would persist for seventeen years (178).

Other, less prominent, real-life events also manifest themselves in the novel. The death of McWatt may have been inspired by a dare-devil stunt gone wrong, which occurred just before Heller's arrival on base, resulting in two pilots crashing into a mountain (Daugherty 87). A mission to Pont-Saint Martin on 23 August successfully met its target, though there were civilian casualties when some bombs fell in the town centre (88). A pilot, 2nd Lt. Clifton C. Grosskiopf, committed a "pilot error", his bombs falling far wide of their target (89) – echoing Dunbar's washing his hands of the heinous mission to create a roadblock in an unsuspecting Italian village, dropping his bombs far past the target (Heller, *Catch-22* 379). On 4 June 1944 American troops march in to Rome, followed by Major Cover, squadron's executive officer, who rented two apartments for officers and enlisted men (Daugherty 90), just as Major – de Coverley does in Rome (Heller, *Catch-22* 152). Finally, on 15 October, with sixty missions, Heller was done. He spent a month more on Corsica, awaiting shipping orders. Two new pilots, Hy Tribble and Emmit Hughes, were assigned to Heller, Ritter and the deceased Pinkard's tent (Daugherty 94): Heller was horrified by their boyishness, as Yossarian is by his new "roomies," who "reminded him of Donald Duck's nephews" (Heller, *Catch-22* 399).

Heller took a short R&R in Cairo with Tom Sloan and Hall A. Moody, where he was struck by a vision of child beggars with sores and flies in their eyes (Daugherty 94). Then, a week later in Naples, a young boy tried to sell Heller his sister (94). Yossarian's feverish experience in the Eternal City was likely inspired by these events, as well as Heller's growing desperation to return to U.S. soil. The only obstacle was transportation; weighing his urgency to return home against a desire to never fly again, he decided on balance to take the slower route: "Given the choice of returning by air or sea, I expressed unequivocal preference for the sea, because it had become my furtive and sacred resolve never to go up in an airplane again" (Heller, *Now and Then* 178).

Back in the United States, Heller requested he be taken off flying status, in spite of the opportunities for significant additional pay for just four hours per month of flight time (Heller, *Now and Then* 179). He spent some time in a Grossinger's, a Jewish vacation resort in the Catskill Mountains, at the suggestion of his brother Lee (Daugherty 15), where he courted Shirley Held and recuperated. Stationed at Goodfellow Field, Texas, Heller killed time writing PR copy for the base, typing up his recollections of his time in Corsica, and monitoring the ever-changing points system for discharge. In April 1945 he took a milk-train to New York to win back the waning interests of Shirley Held, and secure her hand in marriage. Joseph Heller was discharged on 10 June 1945, at Fort Dix, New Jersey; Daugherty speculates that some medical dispensation may have been given, as he seemingly fell just short of the points required (100). Regardless, on 14 June 1945, Heller was granted Honourable Relief from Active Duty.

2.2 Heller's Joke-Work

The earliest reviews and critical responses to *Catch-22* struggled to agree on the relative success or failure of Heller's revolutionary use of comedy in the anti-war novel. In a *Sunday Times* review Richard G. Stern claimed Heller "wallows in his own laughter and finally drowns in it" (qtd. in Heller, *Catch-22* 3). Heller complained about this slight repeatedly: in a 1970 interview with Richard B. Sale, describing it as a "single-column attack" (82); in his "Impolite Interview" for *The Realist* (Krassner and Heller 7); and prominently in the 1994 preface to the Vintage edition, in which he quips parenthetically "I am tempted now to drown in laughter as I jot this down" (3). Stern's review really is amusingly rotten, and he rails not only against Heller's qualifications to write a war novel (though he does not trouble to learn if Heller is a veteran of World War II or Korea) but to write at all: "Mr Heller's special genius is for selecting not the wrong word but the one which is not quite right…" (qtd. in Smith 23). In contrast, Kenneth Allsop's pre-publication review in Britain's *Daily Mail* heaped praise on the novel, describing it as, "anti-war, anti-militaristic, anti-organisation, anti-slogan, anti-chauvinism. It spoofs uniform, duty, and the Uncle-Sam-right-or-wrong outlook. It is a great demented belly-laugh at the concepts of unquestioning obedience and sanctioned killing" (qtd. in Daugherty 232). Philip Toynbee for the *London Observer* described it as "the greatest satirical work in English since Erewhon" (qtd. in Daugherty 233), and in the *Manchester Guardian* W.J. Weatherby praised the novel's realistic approach to contemporary Cold

War issues, and for the breakthrough it provided satirists trying to get away with "real war jokes" (Weatherby and Heller 31). By October 1962 *Newsweek* had declared "The Heller Cult", highlighting the "evangelical fervour in those who admire [*Catch-22*]" (Newsweek and Heller 3). Robert Brustein, writing for *New Republic*, rates *Catch-22* an "explosive, bitter, subversive, brilliant book" (Brustein 8). On the other hand, Douglas Day in the *Carolina Quarterly* dubbed the novel a "mass of tastelessness and vulgarity," a "blowzy, careening, cliché-ridden, fly-specked sort of monstrosity" (qtd. in Nagel, *Critical Essays on Catch-22* 176). It seemed critics were starkly divided between love and hatred of Heller's brand of humour.

Broadly speaking, critical approaches focusing on the moral implications of *Catch-22* (particularly that concerned with the critique of rampant capitalism) classify it as a satire, and critics approaching it as an anti-war novel treat it as a novel of the absurd. In 1974 James Nagel claimed that while *Catch-22* was oft-discussed in studies of the comedy of horror, Black Humor or "angry" humour: "There [had] not yet been published a single substantial article which specifies precisely what is funny about it, what the implications of such humor are, and what generic associations are implicit in its form" ("*Catch-22* and Angry Humor" 48). As we have seen in Section 1.2.1, Nagel argues that *Catch-22* is a satire, and explores the novel very much in terms of satire's generic associations and form. Nagel is guilty of the same crime he levels at earlier critics: he does not address the humour, merely the satirical nature of the over-arching thematic concerns. In so doing he highlights the ways in which *Catch-22* conforms to satire's traditional techniques, but fails to look at the gags: "What pure 'comedy' exists, is patently superficial, if enjoyable, and serves only as a surface for the underlying thematic foundation of the novel" ("*Catch-22* and Angry Humor" 49). Frederick Karl does refer to the novel's humorous language: "Clearly, *Catch-22* is not simply a comic novel full of puns, high jinks slapstick, witty dialogue, and satirical asides. It has these in abundance – perhaps, on occasion, in overabundance – but its purpose and execution are fully serious…" (Karl 25). He argues that the true targets of this humour are: "religion, the military, political forces, commercial values" (26). Unfortunately, without focusing specifically on the gags, Karl concludes that:

> The war or the military (not the enemy) provides the conflict, makes anything possible. […] Unlike the fixed roles that people assume in civilian life, in war they hide behind masks (uniforms) and redefine themselves, like the protean creatures in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Here, Yossarian – the ancient Assyrian, the

> modern Armenian, but really a wandering New York Jew – can give vent to his disgust and revulsion, and through laughter show us that our better selves may still turn up in Sweden. (Karl 27)

He touches on the ideas that will be explored below regarding the transformative power of laughter, however Karl says little of the novel's humour, except to note that it is present, and evidently causes laughter. As discussed in the introduction to this study, the tendency in discussions of Black Humor is to focus on what makes such fiction black, rather than its humour, as Max Schulz famously laments (*Black Humor Fiction of the Sixties* x).

A dominant theme in criticism dealing with the macro-level of *Catch-22*'s joke-work is the discussion of comedic types, particularly the hero or anti-hero figure. Constance Denniston's essay on *Catch-22* and James Purdy's *Malcolm* considers them parodies of the Romance Genre (64), describing the hero as a lonely figure, and the satiric hero as a weakling. David G. Galloway's views the war as a secondary villain to the day-to-day frustration of existence, and discusses Yossarian as an untraditional hero figure for his persistence in taking a stance against bureaucracy, just skirting being branded 'insane' due to the rationality of his goal: to stay alive (52). John W. Hunt, in a similar vein to Denniston, opens with a discussion of the possible reasons for the novel's mixed reception upon publication, concluding that "absurdity [is] established as a premise rather than a conclusion" (130). Hunt offers a reading focusing on the novel's humour, and touches on the anti-hero theme prevalent in the criticism produced in this era, describing Yossarian as a moral anti-hero rejecting an immoral society (127). Max F. Schulz's "Pop, Op, and Black Humor" takes an unusual stance in the focus on Colonel Cathcart, a character equally consumed with anxiety as Yossarian, and compares his role to earlier heroes in fiction, and the dehumanising effects of the mechanical world, citing the Soldier in White and Doc Daneeka as examples (233). Shulz's discussion of Black Humor anticipates his seminal *Black Humor Fiction of the Sixties* (1973). William Schopf argues that the New Left hero is not pitted against society, but rather passively opts out: "The novels, as congenial as they are to New Left protest, actually circumvent confrontation politics" (90). Schopf claims that Orr, not Yossarian, becomes the true "bemushroomed" (read: counterculture) hero of the novel, in choosing a non-confrontational form of protest (90). Yossarian, in polarising himself against authority, can never win; but Orr can, through "non-violent subterfuge" (96).

Howad J. Stark's work bears echoes of Schopf in discussing Orr's mythic counterculture qualities. Stark's essay addresses the question of how to survive in an absurd world and concludes that disappearing in any way is to be defeated by catch-22, and that Orr and his protégé Yossarian are victims in the same way that Dunbar and Major – de Coverley are. Ultimately, Stark claims, the only way to survive in an absurd universe is to accept absurdity, and to plug your nose at it, either through rebellion or laughter. Sweden, he claims, is a myth, and non-confrontation is not triumph. Thus the only true hero in the novel is the Chaplain, who resolves to stay and persevere. Stark also raises some very interesting ideas along the theme of Orr instructing Yossarian in the manner of a Zen master and student through riddles (135), and various forms of surrender as represented by Orr, Colonel Korn and the old man in the bordello, highlighting that these are among the few who do not have dedicated chapters, as they act more as philosophical guides than as characters (136–137).

David Simmons' *The Anti-Hero in the American Novel* (2008) considers the role of the anti-hero in novels of the 1960s, arising from a "reassessment of hegemony involve[ing] a critique of heroic figures thought to embody the values of the state" (11). Simmons situates this literary focus in the period of rapidly changing social values following World War II, and the rise of the counterculture. Simmons' definition of the anti-hero is well-informed, benefits from hindsight, is rigorously situated in the 1960s, and will be considered the gold-standard for the purposes of this study. In contrast to the Romantic hero – an essentially selfish character whose rebellion "stops at the level of the self" – the anti-hero figure "exorcises his inner torment through an act of humanitarian rebellion", entering into a "dialogue with the mainstream" to affect societal change (6). Simmons rejects critics who view the anti-hero as a hapless pawn, acquiescing to deterministic forces, though admits this may well be the case regarding the anti-hero figures of Billy Pilgrim and Yossarian: "pitiable victims whom the reader is able to empathize with, but not admire" (2). I will challenge this in my discussions of these figures. With reference to Louis D. Rubin Jr.'s comments on incongruity as central to the American experience, Simmons highlights an incongruity embodied by the American anti-hero: "there is no better embodiment of this conflict between 'the ideal and the real' than that which exists in a figure essentially directed toward foregrounding 'the incongruity between mundane circumstance and heroic ideal'" (4).

Thus, the anti-hero in these novels bears consideration from the perspective of a humour studies reading, and it may be more useful to consider the anti-hero as a type of

comic hero, with consideration of the subversiveness inherent in the form. Morreall discusses the interplay between wisdom and humour in the final chapter of *Comic Relief*. Quoting Robert Nozick, he claims that, "in cultivating our sense of humor, we develop our knowledge of how to 'live well and cope with the central problems and avoid the dangers in the predicament(s) human beings find themselves in'" (qtd. in Morreall 140). Morreall demonstrates this with reference to historically dominant comedic characters and situations, particularly the 'butts' of comedy:

> Comedy teaches lessons not just through its comic butts but through the protagonists we laugh *with*, instead of *at*. Like tragic heroes, they have to handle big problems. But unlike tragic heroes, they are able to solve most of their problems because they have a different approach in which intelligence trumps emotions. [...] To reinforce this contrast, comedies often present melodramatic and heroic characters as comic butts. (143)

The comic hero demonstrates the capacity to think their way out of difficult situations, much in the same way that jokes themselves function, by presenting alternative outcomes: "Comic protagonists are role models for mental flexibility, and comic butts, as Bergson said, are role models for mental rigidity" (143). He concludes that "the overall comic strategy for living well is versatility. [...] Often with 'bad news' there's nothing to do to improve the situation – except to disengage from it emotionally so that it's funny rather than tragic" (145). Curiously, in making this case, Morreall argues that the unit of tragedy is the individual, and the unit of comedy the group, emphasising human interdependence and reinforcing the egalitarian nature of comedy; I would suggest that this may not be the case in Black Humor, where comedy brushes shoulders with tragedy, and where the comic hero is alone in his tragic experience, just as Freud's gallows humourist is.

Tony Tanner emphasises issues of identity and disguise (74), citing the concealed Soldier in White and the metamorphosing Milo Minderbinder. Like critics before him, such as Jerry H. Bryant, Tanner considers the novel's significant ending: "the world of experience is seen to be so unmitigatedly horrifying that the innocent hero cannot assimilate the experience, he can only flee from it" (78). To solve this problem, he returns to a discussion of language, and the traps language plays in *Catch-22*. Conventional language is the remit of the controlling figures in the novel, who turn it into a weapon, and the anti-hero must engage its true enemy on this front: "in this world negatives may be required to make a positive statement" (81). Tanner's comments on the hero's paralysis at

the hands of a weaponised language system are a suitable point at which to turn to discussion of the micro-level of joke-work in the novel.

Daniel Green argues for bringing a bit of levity to discussions of *Catch-22,* and it was his essay that prompted me to turn to Jerry Palmer's *The Logic of the Absurd*. As Green states, "*Catch-22* is first and foremost a comic novel whose primary structural principle is the joke and whose design and execution are most appropriately construed as the vehicles of mirth" (185). As much as some literary scholars may choose to ignore the fact, *Catch-22* is an extremely funny novel. Green points out that in these studies the "comedy and humor are seen as necessarily in service of something ostensibly more worthwhile, more identifiably meaningful" (184). Though *Catch-22*'s gags accumulatively contribute to the novel's absurdity, the immediate effect, Green emphasises, is laughter, and that the novel's "primary narrative strategy" is in drawing these moments together (186). The idea that comedy is not worthwhile, not meaningful, flies in the face of Freud's assertions that humour is the "greatest physical achievement", and Green is here arguing against readings of the novel which denigrate its importance.

Kate McLaughlin locates *Catch-22* (and to a much lesser extent *Slaughterhouse-Five*) in a cross-genre history of war literature, and discusses the effectiveness of literature to "depict and evoke" laughter (188). She emphasises the darkness of laughter in the war situation, referring to Philip Glenn's 'indexical' nature of humour: laughter in linked to a referent – the 'laughable' – which "uncovers death on a mass scale, appalling injury, incalculable loss" in the war situation (164). McLaughlin discusses the incongruity between the larger goals of the military machine, and the smaller goals of the individual – victory versus vitality – and the frustration the individual experiences as a result: frustration which can be dispelled, to an extent, through laughter. She states that the Absurd posits a Godless universe, but in the war zone the war machine *is* God: "The war machine ensures not only that the war zone makes no sense, but that it makes *more* no sense than does nonsense outside the zone" (168). She argues that the war zone is not governed by comic logic, or illogic: "rather, it is characterized either by a *failure* or *absence* of logic (hypologic) or by an *excess* of logic (hyperlogic)" (168). The resulting laughter, she argues, rejects order: it is nihilistic rather than resigned to its fate. McLaughlin briefly discusses the carnivalesque, and while she situates this argument in reference to the "Thanksgiving" episode in *Catch-22* and the revelation of Snowden's big secret – that man is matter – she ultimately rejects a carnivalesque reading in favour of the Absurd.

McLaughlin outlines what Jerry Palmer indicates; namely that the application of logic

in a fundamentally illogic state, such as the war zone, changes its tone. She bases this assumption in Jonathan Shay's comments on the nature of hyperlogic, which bear obvious relevance to a discussion of *Catch-22*:

> Consisting of ordinary logic applied without appreciation of the ordinary, hyperlogic has no 'normal comparator' and therefore lacks a sense of its own ludicrousness. Jonathan Shay lists some of the by-products of this hyperlogic: unfair distribution of risk; equipment failure; deconstruction of the familiar and safe; vitiation of the sense of 'what's right'; a sense of spiritual abandonment; friendly fire; fragging; suffering of the wounded; and civilian suffering; to these could be added wrongheaded orders; failure to abort initiatives obviously destined to be fatal failures; and the myriad humiliations of regimental life. (176)

That which is logical in the "grander military situation", McLaughlin explains, becomes illogical in the "local" situation: the individual soldier (177). It becomes impossible for the soldier to cope with the break between their individual need, and their function as part of the military machine, resulting in hysterical, maniacal laughter. McLaughlin mentions the effect of this disconnect on language itself, and language's attempts to keep up with this spiral of logic, resulting in the kind of hyperlogical language used in *Catch-22*; she refers to some sample dialogue, though she does not elucidate on their function as jokes. She does refer to the ability of certain individuals to thrive in this war zone, and her comments on the function of the *gelotopoios* (laughter-maker) bear relevance to the discussion below of Yossarian's increasing victory in the language games. McLaughlin, referring to Robert H. Bell, describes the *gelotopoios* as the "self-appointed creator and butt of jokes": "an avatar of comic energy that disrupts events, complicates issues, eludes closure, and generates enquiry" (178). Furthermore, the *gelotopoios* can survive in the war zone precisely because of the function they fulfil – their "innocent folly" is in step with the illogical war zone, and therefore immune to its damage: in matching the war zone's literal-mindedness, neither the military machine nor the literal-minded individual will be destroyed (181). This may account for Yossarian's need to escape the war zone as he begins to triumph over the language games – in losing innocence, in gaining a fuller understanding of the logic of the war zone, he is no longer insulated from its hyperlogic; and so to survive, he must escape.

In referring to Camus' Sisyphus, McLaughlin argues that the inhabitants of the war zone are denied the (existential) knowledge of a Godless, random universe, and in their universe the war machine is God (182) – thus to view the war zone as random, one must

reject the war machine's God-like status. The simplest way to reject the war machine's omnipotence, in the context of *Catch-22*, is to desert. Ultimately McLaughlin concludes that laughter in the war zone resolves our discomfort at incongruity: "so the hyperlogic of the war zone, impervious to imagination and reason, is rejected by the mind and makes the body laugh" (188). While this may serve as an explanation for soldier's laughter in the true war zone, and even certain depictions of hysterical laughter in war literature (she refers to Spike Milligan, who is representative), it does not account for the reader's response to a funny joke in a book about war, and for a deeper understanding of joke-work in *Catch-22*, a further exploration of the Absurd gag with recourse to Freud's comments on gallows humour would be more fruitful.

The novel's jokes are undoubtedly clever, and Heller's approach is to build comedy on a series of reversals – what Charles B. Harris terms "comic reversals" (45) and which Potts calls "deflations" – and the related techniques of direct contradiction, oxymoron (Potts 15) and tautological dialogue (Harris 43). The constant subversions of expectation, of language, and their function as jokes make *Catch-22*, at its most fundamental and simple language-based level, a protest novel. The writing itself is a protest, and in untying the Gordian knot of language with an awareness of the function of jokes we can come to understand the novel's larger goals. Much criticism has dealt with time and structure in the novel, and the jumbled narrative's distorted reflection of the major thematic concerns. According to Doug Gaukroger:

> The unorthodox treatment of time in *Catch-22* is both parallel to, and prepares the reader for, the unorthodox treatment of the subject matter. It is only fitting that a novel which deals with an apparently absurd and confused world should be written in an apparently absurd and confused style (qtd. in Potts 11).

It is also fitting that a novel that deals with the subversion of military control should be written in subversive language, and there is no more subversive language than the comic reversal. Even the novel's repetitiveness, which so irked its earliest reviewers, echoes the endlessly circumlocutory military bureaucracy. Major Major Major Major's mind-numbingly menial memorandum mission is relayed again and again, until he stops signing his name four times (it was becoming monotonous) and begins signing Washington Irving, or Irving Washington (Heller, *Catch-22* 107), just to break the tedium – and complete the joke. It is the moments where the novel disentangles from these comic reversals that the truth is revealed. Catch-22 keeps *Catch-22* in a holding pattern, endlessly circulating

situation, language, theme, story and always Snowden's repeated entreaties, "I'm cold, I'm cold." In order to escape, the hero – or anti-hero – Yossarian, must triumph in the war on language by refusing to participate. According to Potts, Yossarian, Clevinger et al. are:

> …at the mercy of a system that brutally manipulates language – and thus thought itself – in order to retain hegemony. Hegemony in *Catch-22*, as elsewhere, means controlling the parameters of discourse, reorganizing "facts" to suit predetermined conclusions, and then preventing a rational challenge to these "facts." (Potts 20)

This is the true reason why the final chapter cannot be funny. The comic reversals and repetitions must be broken down for Yossarian to triumph over the military's tautological snare, to escape, and to be free. It is not a failure on the author's part to maintain the comedy, it is not a case of Heller drowning in his own laughter (Heller, *Catch-22* 3); it is an intentional abandonment of a comic technique which has served its purpose as a coping mechanism for the horrors of war. Demons exorcised, hysterical laughter can subside; the absurd world has been left behind, and the task of living can resume.

The view of this study is that the book is an anti-war novel, and considering its focus on the joke-work in the novel, drawing on Jerry Palmer's in-depth definition of the logic of the absurd, it is situated very firmly in the Absurd comedy camp. Like Daniel Green, this study takes its lead from the jokes, rather than the broader strokes. In foregrounding the existential questions of Black Humor and the broad analysis of satire, what is often overlooked is the novel's playfulness, and to ignore the jokes is to overlook the capacity of joke-work, outlined in Section 1.2, to provide release from psychological pain. It is also to ignore some veritable groaners in Heller's terribly funny novel.

2.3 Close Reading of *Catch-22*

The focus of this section is to demonstrate the function of the logic of the absurd in some of the key comedic moments in *Catch-22*, and the breakdown of this logic resulting in Yossarian's eventual desertion. This section will argue that Yossarian is a conscientious objector against the war machine's use of weaponised language. In breaking down the war on language, in dropping out, Yossarian's desertion is not only the moral choice; it is the *only* choice. *Catch-22* is fundamentally concerned with the bureaucratic nature of the military machine. Its ultimate heroic act, Yossarian's desertion, is the novel's greatest trick

(and it is a novel abundant in narrative trickery). The joke is that the definitive act of cowardice is the only sane, logical, and heroic response to the absurdity of the warzone. Yossarian is not deserting in the face of the enemy; he is deserting in the face of his own military. To quote Bryant:

> When his commanding officer, Colonel Cathcart, sends him into skies filled with flak, the Colonel is as much an enemy as the Germans. In Yossarian's eyes, the apparatus obscures its status as enemy by justifying its use of individuals on the grounds of its own values. It is like writing a book of laws to legalize one's behavior, then citing that book as proof of the behavior's legality. The only way that the circular justifications of *Catch-22* can be dealt with is by breaking out of the circle. Yossarian moves towards that break with his question, Important to whom? He completes it by deciding to desert. (Bryant 159)

Through a convoluted narrative structure the novel demonstrates that the only means of escaping the horror of war are death and desertion, and even death is uncertain. The slapstick humour described elsewhere in the novel, the laughter, drunkenness, frivolity and sexual hijinks of the men, are merely methods of escapism, not escape.

John Wain describes the narrative method of the novel in terms of an Elizabethan "anatomy": "Instead of taking you in a straight line from one point in time to another, the story zigzags considerably, ending up only a very little further on from where it began" (14). Wain goes on to highlight the example of Yossarian appearing stark-naked on parade day to accept his medal of honour. The incident is related to the audience numerous times in, what Wain describes as, "comic pseudo-explanations", such as the following example:

> [The officers and enlisted men] were free, as Colonel Cathcart was free, to force their men to fly sixty missions if they chose, and they were free, as Yossarian had been free, to stand in formation naked if they wanted to, although General Dreedle's granite jaw swung open at the sight and he went striding dictatorially right down the line to make certain that there really was a man wearing nothing but moccasins waiting at attention in ranks to receive a medal from him. General Dreedle was speechless. Colonel Cathcart began to faint when he spied Yossarian, and Colonel Korn stepped up behind him and squeezed his arm in a strong grip. The silence was grotesque.
>
> […]
>
> At last General Dreedle spoke. "Get back in the car," he snapped over his shoulder to his nurse… (Heller, *Catch-22* 250)

We eventually learn, half way through the novel, that Yossarian is in a state of shell-shock having emerged from the mission to Avignon covered in Snowden's blood and guts. He removes his uniform, and resolves never to wear one again. We can also see here Palmer's "disruption"; the absurd logic that Dreedle's most pressing concern is his nurse's modesty. We hear the story of Yossarian's nakedness in the parade line many times, in many comic turns, before learning the full weight of the revelation, the reason he has appeared naked. By this technique of continued repetition Heller deliberately ruins the joke, eventually exposing the un-funny version; rather than alienate his audience, he gives us permission to *pity* Yossarian. This permission becomes essential later in the novel, when we are required to sympathise with Yossarian's desertion.

Death and desertion, generally, are final acts, and in the interim the soldiers and enlisted men act out or escape through hedonism, complete surrender to insanity (meaning here revelling in the war), or desertion. The desire to win the war in *Catch-22* is incidental to the soldiers' desire to survive it. The characters are more concerned with liberating themselves from their impossible circumstances than triumphing over the Axis. The two most frequently described methods of escapism are furloughs on the Italian mainland (which are inevitably fuelled by sex and alcohol) and Yossarian's frequent hospital visits. It is the removal of these two modes of escapism that helps build the rationale for desertion. Thus as escapism becomes impossible, escape becomes plausible.

In the case of the hospital it is the appearance of "The Soldier in White" which destroys the sanctuary. Previously it had been a place to relax, avoid flying bombing missions, and play with the nurses. In a scene reminiscent of a *Carry-On* film Yossarian and Dunbar, in jarringly humorous language, rape Nurse Duckett. Just as in the Snowden incident, it is a serious scene in which Palmer's implausible/plausible disruption is again demonstrated as the two men are reprimanded by a Colonel, who demands to know if they are crazy:

> "Yes, he really is crazy, Doc," Dunbar assured him. "Every night he dreams he's holding a live fish in his hands." The doctor stopped in his tracks with a look of elegant amazement and distaste, and the ward grew still. "He does what?" he demanded.
>
> "He dreams he's holding a live fish in his hand."
>
> "What kind of fish?" the doctor inquired sternly of Yossarian.
>
> "I don't know," Yossarian answered. "I can't tell one kind of fish from another."
>
> "In which hand do you hold them?"
>
> "It varies," answered Yossarian.

> "It varies with the fish," Dunbar added helpfully.
> The colonel turned and stared down at Dunbar suspiciously with a narrow squint. "Yes? And how come you seem to know so much about it?"
> "I'm in the dream," Dunbar answered without cracking a smile. (339)

In invoking discussions of insanity the matter of Nurse Duckett's rape is glossed over, and Dunbar's attempt to convince the doctor that he is insane is aptly demonstrated by his employment of such an absurd comic reversal: logically if Dunbar is somewhere he may understand the events taking place therein; logically someone can be in someone else's dream. Therefore, according to the logic of the absurd prefacing the illogical syllogism over the logical, Dunbar can understand events in Yossarian's dream.

The appearance of the Soldier in White forms a premonition of despair among the men. He is bandaged entirely from head to toe, with just a ragged opening where his mouth should be. The other residents live in fear that he will begin moaning, "resenting him malevolently for the nauseating truth of which he was bright reminder" (193). They attempt to rationalise his appearance, wondering if anyone is really inside, or if the bandages had been sent as some kind of joke. In another comic reversal it is not the Soldier in White but rather an irritating Texan who initially drives the men from the ward and back onto flight status. When the Soldier in White reappears later in the novel he causes hysteria, as Dunbar declares "There's no one inside!" This absurd idea is repeated by patients and nurses until Dunbar's paranoia causes widespread panic:

> Yossarian felt his heart skip a beat and his legs grow weak. "What are you talking about?" he shouted with dread, stunned by the haggard, sparking anguish in Dunbar's eyes and by his crazed look of wild shock and horror. "Are you nuts or something? What the hell do you mean, there's no one inside?"
> "They've stolen him away!" Dunbar shouted back. "He's hollow inside, like a chocolate soldier. They just took him away and left those bandages there."
> "Why should they do that?"
> "Why do they do anything?" (419)

The idea that nothing is as it seems is embodied in the Soldier in White, a physical manifestation of the kinds of word games the military machine has been playing all along.

Just as the Soldier in White destroys the sanctuary of the hospital, so are the sexual hijinks and *Animal House* antics of the men's furloughs in Rome are put to an end in the pivotal "Eternal City" episode. In this passage, notably almost devoid of humour, a shell-

shocked Yossarian wanders the streets of Rome having taken absence without official leave. The once boisterous city has been transformed to a scene of horror and despair, where grotesque imagery pervades, and Yossarian's horror is heightened until the climactic scene in which he happens upon Aarfy's crime: the murder of the maid. Until now, the maids in the Officers' quarters had been an object of the men's desire, with one described as:

> …the most virtuous woman alive: she laid for everybody, regardless of race, creed, color or place of national origin, donating herself sociably as an act of hospitality, procrastinating not even for the moment it might take to discard the cloth or broom or dust mop she was clutching at the time she was grabbed. Her allure stemmed from her accessibility; like Mt. Everest, she was there, and the men climbed on top of her each time they felt the urge. (154)

Aarfy's rape and murder of one of the Officer's maids at the conclusion of the "Eternal City" episode is the final hideous revelation and perversely results not in Aarfy's arrest, but Yossarian's for being on leave without papers. We know that *Catch-22* is a satire. Yet each cleverly constructed misunderstanding, reversal, negation and *reductio ad absurdum* contributes to an over-whelming feeling of claustrophobia from which the reader wishes to escape, just as Yossarian does. Each quip poking fun at one of the individuals in power, their brilliantly rational irrationality, confirms for the reader that Yossarian's only available option is desertion, as you cannot reason with unreasonable leaders. Further, the many examples of laughter in the novel generally emerge from these gags and hijinks, which are the small rebellions that keep the men sane in insane times: instances of drunkenness, lasciviousness, and practical joking. In a novel constructed of such intricate tricks of language that the title itself has come to mean "a dilemma from which there is no escape," it is the broader narrative trick that convinces the audience that the only logical response is to opt out of this illogical world.

Regarding the lack of humour in Yossarian's desertion at the end of the novel, Nagel claims that it is in keeping with the Juvenalian tradition in satire, "whose works move from comic to tragic satire when the protagonist is left alone as the enemy becomes increasingly more powerful" ("*Catch-22* and Angry Humor" 55). However, Nagel overlooks the important fact that the desertion scene is still humorous. The excitement of Yossarian's few surviving friends at the prospect of his desertion is infectious: they are giddy, playful, and hopeful. Certainly, though, it is a different kind of comedy than that

which pervades the rest of the novel. Instead of the plausible/implausible disruption outlined by Palmer, it is with a more playful *joie de vivre* that Yossarian declares:

> "So long, Chaplain. Thanks, Danby."
> "How do you feel, Yossarian?"
> "Fine. No, I'm very frightened."
> "That's good," said Major Danby. "It proves you're still alive. It won't be fun."
> Yossarian started out. "Yes it will." (519)

The kind of humour that characterises the rest of the novel is absent from this final scene because it is no longer required. If humour is a coping mechanism for the horrors of an illogical war in *Catch-22*, at the point of Yossarian's desertion it is no longer necessary.

2.3.1. Clevinger as Yossarian's Alter: Sanity and Insanity

Clevinger provides a point of reference for a number of interesting contrasts with Yossarian, as well as commentary on the interplay between sanity and madness, and a prime example of the use of reversal as a comedic device. Clevinger serves as a sane and seemingly educated counter-point to the increasingly frantic Yossarian, and his comparatively early exit from the novel's action (in contrast with his continued presence throughout the text) can offer some insight into Clevinger's rationality. Clevinger's chapter is only the second, textually following Yossarian's flight from the hospital due to the first appearance of the Soldier in White and chronologically following the doomed mission to Ferrara and the death of Snowden. At this point, chronologically, Clevinger has already disappeared. Though the reader is not yet fully aware of the novel's disjointed structure or the true timeline of events, Clevinger's imminent disappearance is foreshadowed: "Even Clevinger, who should have known better but didn't, had told him he was crazy the last time they had seen each other, which was just before Yossarian had fled the hospital" (Heller, *Catch-22* 18). Clevinger is established as someone with an equal or greater grasp of the absurdity of the larger circumstances, in suggesting that he is expected to know better, and that he is exceptional in this expectation: "*Even* Clevinger…". The seemingly innocuous turn of phrase, "the last time they had seen each other," holds two meanings: that this was simply the most recent time they spoke, or more significantly that this was the moment they spoke for the last time. This is clarified, somewhat, in describing the tents in Yossarian's vicinity: "On the other side of Havermeyer stood the tent McWatt no longer shared with Clevinger, who had still not returned when Yossarian came out of the

hospital" (20). Though Yossarian is slow to realise, the language indicates Clevinger will not be returning.

Clevinger is the first to attempt to reason with Yossarian's persecution complex. He tries to reassure his friend, albeit with belaboured frustration, "clawing the table with both hands" and shouting (18):

> "No one's trying to kill you," Clevinger cried.
> "Then why are they shooting at me?" Yossarian asked.
> "They're shooting at *everyone*," Clevinger answered. They're trying to kill everyone.
> "And what difference does that make?" (18)

Similar logical fallacies are repeated numerous times throughout the course of the novel, such as in the conversation about death and justice during the second hospital visit (195-198). However, it is uttered first by Clevinger, when attempting to explain to Yossarian that these attacks are not personal. As variations on this trope are repeated we learn that it is personal: that although the war must be fought it is a matter of personal concern for the individual participant who its victims should be. As Clevinger and Yossarian debate the logical fallacy that everyone is trying to kill everyone, and that nobody in the war is trying to kill any particular individual, Clevinger grows comically frustrated, described at various degrees as "shrieking", "crying" and "shouting vehemently, his eyes filling with tears" (22). He accuses Yossarian of having "antisocial aggressions" (21) and a "Jehovah complex" (22). Eventually Yossarian wins the argument, claiming he must be right because "to the best of his knowledge he had never been wrong" (23). It is, however, worth noting that Clevinger is one of the few characters seen to side-step Yossarian's diligence to logic in his illogical situation; in an attempted reversal Clevinger "skirts the trap" Yossarian's rhetoric creates (23). Thus Clevinger is established as equal or greater to Yossarian's intellect, an important characterisation as he, along with Orr, is one of the only named characters to "disappear".

Clevinger's status as a person of intelligence is further established in Chapter 8, when we learn that he is a Harvard graduate, a prize-winning scholar, an activist and student committee organiser. The justification for calling Clevinger a "dope" speaks more of his ability to function in the illogical society on Pianosa than his intelligence:

> Politically, he was a humanitarian who did know right from left and was trapped uncomfortably between the two. He was constantly defending his Communist friends to his right-wing enemies, and his right-wing friends to his Communist enemies, and he was thoroughly detested by both groups, who never defended him to anyone because they thought he was a dope […] Girls he took to the theatre had to wait until the intermission to find out from him whether or not they were seeing a good or a bad play, and then they found out at once. He was a militant idealist who crusaded against racial bigotry by growing faint in its presence. He knew everything about literature except how to enjoy it. (78)

It is Clevinger's "dopish" tendencies, his earnest desire to highlight a more logical way of conducting military operations and his inability to grasp the fundamental illogic of that mechanism which results in his Court Martial and subsequent trial:

> Clevinger had a mind, and Lieutenant Scheisskopf had noticed that people with minds tended to get pretty smart at times. Such men were dangerous, and even the new cadet officers whom Clevinger had helped into office were eager to give damning testimony against him. The case against Clevinger was open and shut. The only thing missing was something to charge him with. (81)

The pun here on 'smart' does more than indicate Clevinger's intelligence; it suggests that Lietutenant Scheisskopf views intelligence as threatening, subversive and undermining, which necessitates Clevinger's trial and eventually his disappearance.

The question of where the comedy ends in *Catch*-22 is debated among critics, with many citing the final chapters as a comedic failure: an abandonment of values. If we view the final chapters not as a failure of comedic writing but rather a triumph of the power of comedy to successfully break through the horror of war, we can dismiss this criticism. However, Brian Way sees the breakdown of the novel's more comedic aspects into seriousness much sooner, as early as Clevinger's trial, where the novel's comic quirks are turned "into a weapon" (qtd. in Potts 18). Accusations of seriousness, as we have seen, are not necessarily anathema to comedy. While comedy does prevail throughout the novel in various formats, Way may have a point regarding the more serious, threatening, military undertone, which becomes impossible to ignore after Clevinger's Trial.

The perception of military power exists only in language and symbol, and logic prevails when these symbols break down. In shedding his uniform after Snowden's death,

Yossarian is refusing to be a soldier, refusing to fly, refusing to be either a perpetrator or a victim. He is dropping out. In Chapter 33 a drunken rescue party – Yossarian, Dunbar, Nately, Hungry Joe and Dobbs – attempts to liberate Nately's whore from a party of "middle-aged military big shots" (404), including a general and a colonel. Dunbar, who along with Clevinger and Yossarian appears wise to the language games in the novel, throws out all their discarded clothing immediately upon entering the room. Stripped of their clothing, and with it the symbols of their superiority, the rescue party treats these big shots without deference. Though this is initially presented as joking, playful or an act of randomised chaos (accompanied with childlike repetition of everything the naked Colonel says), it is the general's admission that Dunbar's horseplay is a "splendid tactic" (407) that renders the middle-aged men powerless, with a splendid joke hidden in his admission that, "We'll never be able to convince anyone we're superior without our uniforms" (407).

2.3.2. Milo Minderbinder: From Free-Agent to Agent of Destruction

In a novel that is fundamentally concerned with the bureaucratic nature of war, an interesting contrast can be seen between the freedom of movement of war-profiteering Milo Minderbinder, the group Mess Officer, with the moral, emotional and physical stagnation of the men on combat status, their methods of escapism, though not escape, and the only fool-proof way to get out of the war: desertion. We are told that the war will not be won by strength, prosperity, or the superiority of the 'American fighting man.' What, then, will win the war? If we are to believe the preoccupations of those who are running it, victory will be on the side of whoever files the most paperwork. In the view of Milo Minderbinder the war is a business, and profits are victory. Robert Brustein described Milo Minderbinder as "a paradigm of good-natured Jonsonian cupidity":

> The Minderbinder sections – in showing the basic incompatibility of idealism and economics by satirizing the patriotic cant which usually accompanies American greed – illustrate the procedure of the entire book: the ruthless ridicule of hypocrisy through a technique of farce-fantasy, beneath which the demon of satire lurks, prodding fat behinds with a red-hot pitch-fork (Brustein 6).

We shouldn't really *like* Milo, but we do. In part because he so admires Yossarian, and in part because of his constant reassurance that his syndicate is fundamentally egalitarian, that "everyone has a share". He is, indeed, a highly moral man, refusing to take anything

from the syndicate for himself; except, of course, large sums of money. Milo is not constrained by the red tape that inhibits characters such as Major Major, rather he is empowered by the war, travelling fluidly throughout Europe, the Middle East and Africa. In the "Milo the Mayor" chapter, Milo takes Yossarian and Orr on a seven-day journey. Related in a kinetic stream, the energy builds just as Yossarian and Orr's exhaustion mounts with the passage eventually climaxing in the hilarious revelation that Milo is Mayor of Palermo. The object of humour here is not Milo the character, but the aggressive capitalism he represents. James Nagel argues that the jokes, gags and hijinks in the novel are merely on the surface, and that the underlying thematic foundation of the novel is the truly comic part, however Nagel over-simplifies the function of the joke-work in service of a satirical interpretation.

Milo, in lauding the free market, in succeeding in business, is quintessentially American. The absurdity of this patriotism, the broad brush strokes with which this satirical figure is painted, swell in absurdity throughout the novel – at one point Milo even begins to rhyme: "'The cork?' 'That must go to New York, the shoes for Toulouse, the ham for Siam, the nails from Wales and the tangerines for New Orleans'" (Heller, *Catch-22* 428). Eventually, Milo's extreme loyalty to American capitalist ideals turns him, quite literally, into his own enemy. In order to secure a tidy profit he allies with the Germans to bomb his own squadron:

> "[…] the Germans are not our enemies," he [Milo] declared. "Oh I know what you're going to say. Sure, we're at war with them. But the Germans are also members in good standing of the syndicate, and it's my job to protect their rights as shareholders. Maybe they did start the war, and maybe they are killing millions of people, but they pay their bills a lot more promptly than some allies of ours I could name. Don't you understand that I have to respect the sanctity of my contract with Germany? Can't you see it from my point of view?"
> "No," Yossarian rebuffed him harshly. (294)

When Milo forms allegiances with Colonel Cathcart he too becomes Yossarian's enemy. How then can Yossarian liberate himself from the liberators?

2.3.3. Desertion: The Only Way to Win the War on Language

When John Chancellor interviewed Joseph Heller for the *Today* show in 1962 he presented the author with a packet of stickers he had printed, which read, "Yossarian

Lives" (Heller, *Catch-22* 4). The technique by which Heller uses the subversive power of humour to present the un-heroic, un-American act of desertion in a palatable way is *Catch-22*'s greatest trick. Death is no guarantee of escape in this novel as we see repeatedly: Mudd, the dead man in Yossarian's tent, cannot officially die because he never officially reported to the squadron. The only person in the squadron with the power to remove Mudd is Yossarian, and Yossarian refuses to do so. Doc Daneeka, though alive, is officially dead having appeared on the pilot's manifest as a passenger when Mc Watt crashes: Doc Daneeka lives because he was not on the plane, he was not on the plane because he is afraid of flying. Of course Doc Daneeka's not dying is of little comfort to Mrs Daneeka, when she receives a telegram from the War Department notifying her of his death, and Doc Daneeka must "remain out of sight as much as possible until some decision could be reached relating to the disposition of his remains" (392). Most torturous, however, is Snowden, whose death is protracted for the entirety of the novel: he is laid to rest during the apex of Yossarian's madness in Chapter 24, but only truly dies around twenty pages from the end. Snowden is the catalyst that sets Yossarian free – the madness he descends into following Snowden's brutal death is where he finds the strength to defy his commanders.

The desire to win the war in *Catch-22* is incidental to the soldiers' desire to survive it. The characters are more concerned with liberating themselves from their impossible circumstances than triumphing over the Axis. Numerous times throughout the novel Yossarian and his friends ponder the illogical "system of rewards and punishment" (196), of living and dying, the futility of their existence, and their irrelevance to the war effort:

> It was a vile and muddy war, and Yossarian could have lived without it – lived forever, perhaps. Only a fraction of his countrymen would give up their lives to win it, and it was not his ambition to be among them. To die or not to die, that was the question, and Clevinger grew limp trying to answer it. History did not demand Yossarian's premature demise, justice could be satisfied without it, progress did not hinge upon it, victory did not depend on it. That men would die was a matter of necessity, which men would die, though, was a matter of circumstance, and Yossarian was willing to be the victim of anything but circumstance. But that was war. Just about all he could find in its favour was that it paid well and liberated children from the pernicious influence of their parents. (77)

It is interesting that Yossarian's view is never particularly classified as cowardly. It is referred to as such certainly, however the audience sympathises with Yossarian, grows frustrated as he does with his lot, and the repeated assertion that Yossarian's admittance of his insanity is acknowledgment of his sanity (the eponymous catch-22) rationalises his fear, and helps make it palatable. As he explains to Major Major:

> "I don't want to fly milk runs. I don't want to be in the war any more."
> "Would you like to see our country lose?" Major Major asked.
> "We won't lose. We've got more men, more money and more material. There are ten million men in uniform who could replace me. Some people are getting killed and a lot more are making money and having fun. Let somebody else get killed."
> "But suppose everybody on our side felt that way."
> "Then I'd certainly be a damned fool to feel any other way. Wouldn't I?" (119)

Hints regarding the possibility of desertion are, like all else, laid early in the novel. Clevinger's "death" is hinted at frequently, and revealed as desertion fairly early on, in Chapter 10. Thus Clevinger's desertion foreshadows Yossarian's own. As Clevinger is presented as one of the more rational characters in *Catch-22*, it creates the impression that desertion is a rational, if not *the only* rational act:

> Clevinger was dead. That was the basic flaw in his philosophy. Eighteen planes had let down through a beaming white cloud off the coast of Elba one afternoon on the way back from the weekly milk run to Parma; seventeen came out. No trace was ever found of the other, not in the air or on the smooth surface of the jade waters below. There was no debris. Helicopters circled the white cloud till sunset. During the night the cloud blew away, and in the morning there was no more Clevinger.
> The disappearance was astounding, as astounding, certainly, as the Grand Conspiracy of Lowery Field, when all sixty-four men in a single barrack vanished one payday and were never heard of again. Until Clevinger was snatched from existence so adroitly, Yossarian had assumed that the men and simply decided unanimously to go AWOL the same day. (120)

Why, then, is Yossarian's desertion not revolting to us? In a novel constructed of such intricate tricks of language that the title itself has come to mean "a dilemma from which

there is no escape," how does Heller fool us into considering the definitive act of cowardice less disagreeable to us than Milo's act of patriotism? Robert Brustein claims:

> Contrary to the armchair pronouncements of patriotic ideologues, Yossarian's obsessive concern for survival makes him not only not morally dead, but one of the most morally vibrant figures in recent literature – and a giant of the will beside those wary, wise, and wistful prodigals in contemporary novels who always accommodate sadly to American life. (Brustein 8)

Yossarian, throughout the course of the novel, attempts various methods of pleading, subversion, and outright defiance, to avoid flying more missions. His frequent hospital visits are a convenient diversion, and an act of defiance his friends willingly partake in, even, eventually, the Chaplain. As the moment of Yossarian's desertion approaches, the Chaplain provides, in the reversal of language and manipulation of logic that characterises the novel, a moral rationale for the act. The Chaplain tells a lie to get into hospital:

> The chaplain had sinned, and it was good. Common sense told him that telling lies and defecting from duty were sins. On the other hand, everyone knew that sin was evil, and that no good could come from evil. But he did feel good: he felt positively marvellous. Consequently, it followed logically that telling lies and defecting from duty could not be sins. (417)

After the death of Nately, when Yossarian outright refuses to fly more than his 71 missions and begins to march backwards, he earns the respect and support of the rest of the men in the squadron, and the neighbouring squadrons. Nately's death is significant, as he symbolises naïveté, and innocence. Yossarian admits that refusing to fly is "yellow", but he perseveres. However, in a curious twist with implications to the Vietnam conflict, it is Colonels Korn and Cathcart's "odious deal" that turns the morally abhorrent act of desertion into a laudable act of defiance: Yossarian may go home if he accepts a Public Relations deal with the commanding officers. As a result of "The Deal", the ultimate act of cowardice becomes the ultimate act of courage, the courage to stand up for what is morally right.

The language surrounding the characters that go AWOL is some of the most interesting. Orr's eighteen failed missions, we learn, are all intentional, allowing him to practice crash landings until the time that he could take advantage of such a tragedy to disappear. He initially makes a little slip, telling Yossarian that he is fixing the tent so that

Yossarian will be warm in the winter. Yossarian confronts him, asking, "What do you mean, me? … Where will you be?" Orr is amused by the question, shaking with "a muffled spasm of amusement," speaking with a "weird, wavering giggle" (357) and Yossarian mistakes the source of this laughter, linking it in his mind to the howling manner in which Sergeant Knight recounted the story of Orr's latest crash landing, tinged with mania and PTSD as some of the more horrifying details come out. However, Orr has the last laugh here, and his stifled giggles are not symptomatic of trauma, but insider knowledge. Despite Yossarian's entreaties to Piltchard and Wren after Avignon that he never be assigned to fly with Orr, Dobbs, or Huple, as he lacks faith in their ability as pilots, Orr tries to convince Yossarian to change his mind:

> "You really ought to fly with me, you know. I'm a pretty good pilot, and I'd take care of you. I may get knocked down a lot but that's not my fault, and nobody's ever been hurt in my plane. Yes, sir – if you had any brains, you know what you'd do? You'd go right to Piltchard and Wren, and tell them you want to fly all your missions with me." (363)

Key to this scene is the moment where Yossarian will no longer play within the confines of language so clearly defined up until now: "Yossarian leaned forward and peered closely into Orr's inscrutable mask of contradictory emotions. 'Are you trying to tell me something?'" (363). Orr responds again in laughter, and the plan is never explicit enough for Yossarian to confidently engage. He laughs off the moment, points out that Orr will "only get knocked down into the water again" (363) and the conversation ends. Immediately we learn that Orr is indeed knocked down on his next missions, and we infer that he has decided to go AWOL. Yossarian, in failing to solve the language game, is left to mourn Orr as though he is truly Missing in Action – he prepares food for him, waits for him to come home. At this point Yossarian is still attempting to liberate himself from within the confines of catch-22, waiting for the workings of the military machine to turn in his favour. He is not yet *au fait* with the need to take matters into his own hands, to be the agent of his own destiny.

By the time of Dunbar's manic reaction to the reappearance of the Soldier in White, Yossarian demonstrates his superiority to the military machine by refusing to participate in their war on language. When Nurse Duckett informs Yossarian that "they [are] going to disappear Dunbar" (421) he responds defiantly: "It doesn't make sense. It isn't even good grammar. What the hell does it mean when they disappear somebody?" (421). No clear

explanation emerges; Dunbar is simply dropped from the narrative and never heard from again. However, the concept of disappearing a person, and the question of who the ominous 'they' are arises again, in a private conversation between Colonel Korn and Colonel Cathcart regarding Yossarian's increasingly disruptive behaviour: "'I wish we could disappear *him*!' Colonel Cathcart blurted out from the corner peevishly. 'The way they did that fellow Dunbar'" (451). The unnamed 'they' is thus someone of higher rank or at least higher power than Cathcart. Korn responds 'confidently': "'Oh, there are plenty of other ways we can handle this one,'" (451). His bravado indicates that Yossarian's refusal to fly and Dunbar's disruption in the hospital are both incidents that Korn has the necessary tools to address. The suggestion that Korn may have power above his rank is echoed in the final show-down between Cathcart, Korn, and Yossarian. Though Cathcart has been painted as the villain until now, it is Korn who is dictating terms, with occasional sarcastic asides at Cathcart's expense. Korn's glib comments establish him as a man of intelligence, a force to be reckoned with. If humour and language games are the tools at Yossarian's disposal, a person in charge with a sense of humour is a very dangerous thing indeed. Korn subverts Cathcart's power through sarcastic asides, establishing himself as the true criminal master-mind of the novel: "'You know, you really have been making things terribly difficult for Colonel Cathcart,' he observed with flip good humor, as though the fact did not displease him at all" (483). Cathcart's contribution to the showdown is minimal, bombastic, and ultimately reverts to platitudes: "'Doesn't he know there's a war going on?'" (483). Korn again responds sarcastically, temporarily establishing a humorous bond with Yossarian, indicating that they are intellectual equals:

> "Will the knowledge that there's a war going on weaken your decision to refuse to participate in it?" Colonel Korn enquired with sarcastic seriousness, mocking Colonel Cathcart.
> "No, sir." Yossarian replied, almost returning Colonel Korn's smile. (484)

This intellectual equality is reinforced, as Korn expresses his admiration for Yossarian in a manner which seems "both derisive and sincere": "'I really do admire you a bit. You're an intelligent person of great moral character who has taken a very courageous stand. I'm an intelligent person with no moral character at all, so I'm in an ideal position to appreciate it.'" (485).

Certain half-hearted efforts are made to distance Yossarian from the "American fighting man". We learn that he is of Assyrian descent, though the point is not laboured: it is

mentioned only twice, and alluded to infrequently. Colonel Cathcart includes the hated foreign name among his list of grievances:

> *Yossarian* – the very sight of the name made him shudder. There were so many esses in it. It just had to be subversive. It was like the word *subversive* itself. It was like *seditious* and *insidious* too, and like *socialist*, *suspicious*, *fascist* and *Communist*. It was an odious, alien, distasteful name, that just did not inspire confidence. It was not at all like such clean, crisp, honest, American names as Cathcart, Peckem and Dreedle. (242)

Curiously, Yossarian does not acknowledge the acts of desertion executed by his friends. Though he is purportedly the squadron's "leading authority on internment," (355) he utterly fails to see the nuances regarding both Clevinger and Orr's disappearance, and the mass desertion back on American soil before his deployment. As discussed above, Yossarian fails to understand Orr's allusions, though Orr makes it as clear as possible without explicitly stating his plans. The reader's realisation dawns far sooner than Yossarian's, whose understanding is comically and indeed uncharacteristically delayed. Despite Yossarian's increasing frustration with the military and his growing fear of the war he insists on participating in the game, in playing their rules, and winning legitimately. He will not order Dobbs to kill Colonel Cathcart because he does not feel he could murder someone, indicating a moral distinction between murder and the casualties of war. He meets his mission quota only once, at seventy missions, just as Cathcart issues a directive ordering men to fly missions on behalf of Milo. As with each incidence of raising the missions Cathcart volunteers his men in order to further his own military career. He considers the collateral pros to this plan, taking relish in the increased risk to Yossarian's life: "…this is a good way to get that lousy rat Yossarian back into combat where he might get killed" (429). Now, the game is too much. It is firmly established that Yossarian simply cannot win by playing by the rules, and Nately's death on his seventy-first mission is Yossarian's breaking point. Despite persistent questioning from supporters in the squadron and authority figures, Yossarian does not have a plan. He will not fly any more missions, and is seemingly willing to accept any consequences. He has opted out of the game, removing their power.

At this point the question of desertion becomes inexorably linked with defiance. As the absurdity of the novel comes full circle, as catch-22 teeters on defeat, and as the war on

language draws to a conclusion, the question of desertion and cowardice is inverted. Appleby quizzes him:

> "Do you think they will try to court-martial you?"
> "I don't know."
> "Are you afraid?"
> "Yes."
> "Are you going to fly more missions?"
> "No." (459)

In Yossarian's unique situation and his utter refusal to refute accusations of cowardice – freely admitting to Havermeyer that he is "yellow" (460) – desertion is, indeed, the bravest option. Cathcart and Korn's odious deal offers Yossarian a way out of the war within the legitimate parameters Yossarian seemingly requires: he may leave with seventy-one missions provided he purport to support Cathcart, Korn, and the military machine which has treated him so cruelly. In short, their plans is to turn Yossarian into a propaganda tool:

> "We're going to glorify you and send you home a hero, recalled by the Pentagon for morale and public-relations purposes. You'll live like a millionaire. Everyone will lionize you. You'll have parades in your honor and make speeches to raise money for war bonds. A whole new world of luxury awaits you once you become our pal. Isn't it lovely?" (490)

He capitulates somewhat later, saying "we'll forget the speeches" provided Yossarian maintain the façade while on Pianosa, in an attempt to suppress the burgeoning rebellion his refusal to fly has inspired. In what appears to be a moment of true cowardice, Yossarian seemingly accepts the deal "jubilantly" and with a "swift grin" (491). It is unclear whether he ever truly planned to go through with it. The Chaplain's reaction may have an influence on Yossarian, it may be that Nately's whore's final attack changed his mind, or it may be that he had always intended to go back on his word. He tells the Chaplain: "You didn't influence me. […] Can you imagine that for a sin? Saving Colonel Cathcart's life! That's one crime I don't want on my record" (498). It is by now firmly established that taking the "legitimate" route out, in the form of the deal, would be more morally reprehensible and cowardly than desertion.

Another realisation dawns, as Yossarian ponders the cryptic threat, "We've got your pal", trying to determine who the pal in question is: "'I think it must be someone who was

killed in the war, like Clevinger, Orr, Dobbs, Kid Sampson or McWatt.' Yossarian emitted a startled gasp and shook his head. 'I just realized it,' he exclaimed. 'They've got all my pals, haven't they?'" (499). The inclusion of deserters Clevinger and Orr in a list Yossarian explicitly labels "dead" is notable. His blindness to these nuances is baffling, truly uncharacteristic, and symptomatic of his desire to win the word game rather than throw in his cards. As already mentioned, Nately's death is one turning point towards Yossarian's insistence on legitimacy. His refusal to take Korn's "odious deal" is another. Finally, it is his realisation that obeying Cathcart and Korn's orders and serving his country are not inexorably linked that allows for his desertion. He challenges Major Danby, asking him how he can work for Korn and Cathcart:

> "I do it to help my country," he replied, as though the answer should have been obvious. "Colonel Cathcart and Colonel Korn are my superiors, and obeying their orders is the only contribution I can make to the war effort. I work along with them because it's my duty. And also," he added in a much lower voice, dropping his eyes, "because I am not a very aggressive person."
> "Your country doesn't need your help any more," Yossarian reasoned with antagonism. "So all you're doing is helping them." (509)

The illusion that serving one's country by serving one's superior officer begins to break down. Yossarian finally realises that the enemies threatening his life are no longer the Axis forces, but rather his own superior officers:

> "I've flown seventy goddam combat missions. Don't talk to me about fighting to save my country. I've been fighting all along to save my country. Now I'm going to fight a little to save myself. The country's not in danger any more, but I am. […] The Germans will be beaten in a few months. And Japan will be beaten a few months after that. If I were to give up my life now, it wouldn't be for my country. It would be for Cathcart and Korn. So I'm turning my bombsight in for the duration. From now on I'm thinking only of me." (510)

With this in place one final dialogue establishes the necessity of desertion, clearly marking it as the least cowardly option:

> "Oh, yes, of course I'd let them send me home! But I'm such a terrible coward I couldn't really be in your place."

> "But suppose you weren't a coward? Yossarian demanded, studying him closely. "Suppose you did have the courage to defy somebody?"
> "Then I wouldn't let them send me home," Major Danby vowed emphatically with vigorous joy and enthusiasm. "But I certainly wouldn't let them court-martial me."
> "Would you fly more missions?"
> "No, of course not. That would be total capitulation. And I might be killed."
> "Then you'd run away?"
> Major Danby started to retort with proud spirit and came to an abrupt stop, his half-opened jaw swinging closed dumbly. He pursed his lips in a tired pout. "I guess there just wouldn't be any hope for me, then, would there?" His forehead and protuberant white eyeballs were soon glistening nervously again. He crossed his limp wrists in his lap and hardly seemed to be breathing as he sat with his gaze drooping toward the floor in acquiescent defeat. (512)

There is no other option. Yossarian has subjected the absurd situation to rigorous Socratic reasoning. The act of his desertion proves he has the courage to defy. He will not capitulate to the military bureaucracy. He will not allow himself to be court-martialled. Though there is no hope for Major Danby, Yossarian will escape, he will continue to evade Nately's whore's knife, and the Chaplain will stay on Pianosa and persevere against the immoral and amoral military brass.

The extended debate regarding the justification for Yossarian's desertion and the comparative lack of joke-work in the final chapters of the novel may be seen to lend credence to critics who faulted Heller's betrayal of his comic technique. However, the desertion debate also utilises the same tools as the novel's earlier joke-work. It serves as a serious conclusion to an extended joke, much the same as the gag about Yossarian's nakedness, and as such is very much typical of Heller's style. When asked about comic technique, Kurt Vonnegut explained:

> I build jokes. I find sections of my book constructed like jokes and then they're not very long and I suddenly realize the joke is told, and that it'd spoil the joke if I were to go past. The tag line is where the joke paid off and so I'll make a row of dots across the page to indicate that something's ended and I'll begin again and it'll essentially build as another joke. Heller will deal in a way with jokes, but longer ones. (Vonnegut and Clancy 48–49)

The desertion debate functions similarly to a joke, however in this instance the logical syllogism is relentlessly emphasised over the illogical, and is no longer funny (Palmer 57). I suggested earlier that in absurd circumstances Palmer's logic of the absurd may be inverted, and many of the jokes in *Catch-22* function in prefacing the logical over the illogical (not least catch-22 itself). However, in this final instance it is not humorous, it is in fact quite serious. In opting out of the language games, in choosing desertion, Yossarian is free from the absurdist entrapments of military bureaucracy, of catch-22; and since he is no longer operating in an absurd universe there is no place for Black Humor.

2.4 *Conclusions*

With most of the 1960s between them, the time period between the publication of *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969) are the formative years for absurd treatments of anti-war literature. *Catch-22* was the vanguard of this type of writing, introducing new techniques that later novelists would hone and adapt. Innovations like Heller's episodic narrative, the inter-mingling of comedy and tragedy, the incongruous privilege of illogic over logic, would all be utilised by later writers, in particular Kurt Vonnegut as we shall soon see.

However, with the passage of time comes a natural lessening of psychological pain; to quote the old adage, "time heals all wounds". Thus *Catch-22* is arguably the most absurd of these novels, as a result of its proximity to the events it describes. Heller's psychological pain as exorcised through joke construction is more immediate even than Vonnegut's, who admits he spent over twenty years attempting to come up with the words for his war novel. Heller, in contrast, sat at a typewriter in Goodfellow Field as soon as he returned to U.S. soil, and began sketching out his narrative. This is why there is so much of himself in the novel, why the gallows humour is so dark, so succinct: the tragic and the comic intermingle so tightly they are virtually indistinguishable.

Attempts to describe Heller's comedic technique, in privileging the over-arching narrative, have failed to examine the joke-work. If, however, we take a lead from the micro level of joke construction and apply this to the over-arching narrative, a much clearer picture emerges, which foregrounds the brilliance of Heller's comedic technique, making him truly deserving of the praise Freud heaped on the gallows humourist. Joseph Heller's jokes are fundamentally about the juxtaposition of the illogical and the logical, and in certain moments, with the full realisation of the absurdity of the war situation, in privileging the logical over the illogical. It is at these moments that the comedy becomes

most subversive, and the novel's power to fuel the burgeoning anti-war movement most apparent.

This interplay between comedy and tragedy held the dual purpose of exciting and inciting his young audience, and the comedic package made the anti-war message both palatable and terrible. In 1963 *Catch-22* was being widely read on university campuses, and in the 13 March 1965 edition of the University of California, Berkeley's underground *Spider* magazine, one Jim Prickett critiques the *New York Times* for being out of touch, claiming that favour for Salinger and Golding had died out, and been replaced by James Baldwin and Joseph Heller (Prickett 3). Prickett's a Bond-man though, and he reserves his highest praise for Ian Fleming; but that's another day's work.

Chapter 3. Kurt Vonnegut

This chapter will demonstrate the interplay between personal experience and humour, with reference to Palmer's logic of the absurd, in Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969). Through a brief discussion of earlier criticism of Vonnegut's humour, I will demonstrate how much of this work has focussed on the over-arching narrative to the detriment of the humour. As discussed in Chapter 1, the work done in the 1960s and 70s by Schultz, Scholes and the Black Humor critics addressed the 'Black' but failed to provide an adequate interpretation of the 'Humor.' Schultz focuses on existentialism, and Scholes discusses Vonnegut's fabulative fiction, while again foregrounding the philosophical element in Black Humor, in this case as a moral or didactic tale. Little attention is paid to Vonnegut as a humourist, beyond ascertaining that yes, indeed, he is funny (Scholes 41). While the Black Humorists' approach to Vonnegut so far certainly has *something* to offer, further light can be shed on the role of humour in this writing by employing Jerry Palmer's logic of the absurd for discussions of joking on the micro level.

As discussed in the Chapter 1, the crux of Palmer's logic of the absurd is a set of twin syllogisms – one logical, one illogical – in which humour is derived from the realisation that the illogical syllogism in fact has a kind of logic after all. It is this privileging of the second, fundamentally illogical syllogism that gives the theory its name, and the emphasis on absurdity is what makes it an ideal partner to an existential reading of the "Black" in Black Humor. Furthermore, and this is perhaps a more anecdotal than theoretical justification, while the early chapters of *The Logic of the Absurd* utilise oral or written joke samples in addition to visual comedy to illustrate the minutely described logic of the absurd, the case studies examined are film and television comedy samples. In *Slapstick* – which is "dedicated to the memory of Arthur Stanley Jefferson and Norvell Hardy, two angels of my time" – Vonnegut emphasises the effect of early film and radio comedy on his writing: "I have called it 'Slapstick' because it is grotesque situational poetry – like the slapstick film comedies, especially those of Laurel and Hardy, of long ago. It is about what life *feels* like to me" (*Slapstick* 1). In *Palm Sunday* (1981) he recalls frequent debates with his sister Alice about the "funniest joke in the world," which he prefaces with a disclaimer:

> Well – you won't laugh. Nobody ever laughs. But one is an old "Two Black Crows" joke. The "Two Black Crows" are white guys in blackface – named Moran and Mack. They make phonograph records of their routines, two

> supposedly black guys talking lazily to each other. Anyway, one of them says, "Last night I dreamed I was eating flannel cakes." The other one says, "Is that so?" And the first one says, "And when I woke up, the blanket was gone." (Vonnegut, *Palm Sunday* Self Interview)

The twin syllogisms are there. The second, illogic syllogism (that you can eat a flannel cake in a dream), is heavily foregrounded when the speaker discovers he has eaten their blanket. But it doesn't work, on paper, because the rhythm is wrong, the "lazy" speech is not conveyed well, the social formation of the radio comedy is absent. It hardly bears mentioning, either, that this joke is of a very different time, was dated even when *Palm Sunday* was published in 1981, and belongs to Vonnegut's Depression-era childhood (hence the apologetic delivery). It serves, however, to illustrate how Palmer's theory of laughter – with its emphasis on film comedy – complements a Black Humor reading of Vonnegut's work, which in contrast to Schultz and Scholes stresses the "Humor" over the "Black."

If we accept that Palmer's logic of the absurd provides a workable theory for the humour in Black Humor, we must turn to a discussion of the proximity of the author to the object of comedy, that is, in the case of the books analysed in this study, their personal war experience. Vonnegut criticism has traditionally included biographical material, and indeed virtually all the book-length volumes devoted to his work contain a biographical introduction, anecdotes, timeline, or some such. There are a few possible reasons for this: for one, Vonnegut himself includes autobiographical prologues to the majority of his novels, and continuously writes himself into the narrative in some way. For another, many of Vonnegut's early scholars were friends, colleagues, or students. A cult of the author formed, prompted no doubt by Vonnegut's own self-conscious cultivation of his image: a consummate PR man, he radically altered his appearance in the run-up to the release of *Slaughterhouse-Five,* presenting a curmudgeonly old Peacenik: he looked, in short, rather like a waspy Mark Twain (Shields 245).

This study extends this tradition; however, biographical material is included here not to paint an image of the author, but to account for a particular element in his comedy. In describing Vonnegut's relationship to the events related in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, we can better understand the nature of the novel's gags. By extension, through an understanding of the nature of joking in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, we may better understand Vonnegut's relationship to his war experience.

Finally, this chapter assesses the novel's relationship to contemporary culture, Vonnegut's status as counter-culture hero, and the commentary *Slaughterhouse-Five* offers on the Vietnam War. The novel aims to present an anti-war message, though Vonnegut recognises the futility of attempting such a thing, relating Harrison Starr's sarcastic reaction: "Why don't you write an anti-glacier book instead?" (Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five* 3). Delivered in Vonnegut's signature witty style, it is the least overtly "funny" of his earlier novels, presenting a wry ironic humour, which seeks to expose the comedic element in tragic circumstances, interspersed with occasional anecdotal gags: "I've finished my war book now," claims the author. "The next one I write is going to be fun. This one is a failure, and had to be, since it was written by a pillar of salt" (16). A reference to Lot's wife, turned into a pillar of salt for looking back, Vonnegut continues: "I love her for that, because it was so human" (16). Vonnegut's cathartic war novel is his own very human response to the atrocities he witnessed in Dresden. *Slaughterhouse-Five* proves the necessity of looking back, of understanding, and of doing so through the protective shield of comic insulation.

3.1 Vonnegut's World War II

Born in Indianapolis in 1922 Kurt Vonnegut was the child of Edith Sophia Lieber, daughter of beer mogul Arthur Lieber, and Kurt Vonnegut Sr., architect at Vonnegut & Bohn (Vonnegut, *Palm Sunday* 46). Both the Liebers and Vonneguts were prominent German families in Indianapolis, and Kurt Sr. and Edith's wedding was an extravagant affair (51). The decline of the family's combined wealth during the Great Depression, owing to the effects of prohibition on the Lieber fortune and the downturn in construction on Kurt Sr.'s income, was to have a lasting effect on Edith – contributing to unhappiness in their marriage, and ultimately to her suicide (Shields 22). Kurt Jr. was the youngest of three children, preceded by Bernard, who was to become an atmospheric scientist of some note, and Alice, whose sudden and tragic death would have a profound effect on Kurt Jr.

Having graduated from Shortridge High School, where he cut his teeth writing for the Shortridge *Echo* (Shields 32) Kurt Jr. enrolled in Cornell University in September 1940 (36). He was warned not to "waste time or money on 'frivolous' courses, but to give full attention to practical studies, principally physics and chemistry and math" (Vonnegut, *Palm Sunday* 54). Due in no small part to Bernard's influence, Kurt was to focus on chemistry, or perhaps biochemistry, which he resented: "Bernie really fucked up my life. If

it hadn't been for him, all the shit that was about to happen to me wouldn't have happened. I enrolled in the sciences at Cornell only as a sop to him, no other reason. Later, I was in a real mess" (qtd. in Shields 35).

He was welcomed onto the staff at the *Cornell Daily Sun* and began contributing regularly (Shields 38), penning sometimes controversial articles advocating a non-interventionist stance towards World War II, which echoed the conservative beliefs of his family (40). His passion for the *Sun* quickly over-shadowed his academic career, and by the end of his freshman year it was necessary to enrol in summer classes to avoid academic probation (42), which, by May 1942, was becoming an increasingly pressing concern (45). Though enrolment in the Reserve Officer Training Programme (ROTC) was a requirement of Cornell (40), he was kicked out owing to a "severe misunderstanding" regarding a cuttingly satirical article. In keeping with his comedic style of writing for the *Sun*, and his "Well All Right" column, in an article entitled "We Impress *Life* Magazine with Our Efficient Role in National Defence" (46), Vonnegut lampooned the ROTC, mocked a *Life* journalist and undermined a lieutenant in one fell swoop. He was shaken, humiliated, and in the wake of the attack on Pearl Harbor, his non-interventionist position grew increasingly untenable. He dropped out of Cornell in January 1943 and enrolled in the army (48). His father responded with scorn, his mother "became despondent and morose" (Vonnegut, *Palm Sunday* 55). In March 1943, Vonnegut reported to Fort Bragg, North Carolina. Mere weeks before his deployment overseas, while he was home on leave in May 1944, Edith Lieber-Vonnegut overdosed on sleeping pills, bringing to a bitter end her financial woes and family hardships (55). It was to have a profound effect on Vonnegut's work, though dwarfed in the shadow of the events to follow.

The details of Vonnegut's deployment are thoroughly documented in Shields' *So It Goes* (2011), as well as in numerous interviews (Vonnegut and McCartan), essays, and the auto-biographical opening chapter of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. In that novel he declares:

> The war parts, anyway, are pretty much true. One guy I knew really *was* shot in Dresden for taking a teapot that wasn't his. Another guy I knew really *did* threaten to have his personal enemies killed by hired gunmen after the war[4]. And so on. I've changed all the names. (1)

[4] Though not addressed in the text, Charles J. Shields suggests in the footnotes that the character Paul Lazzaro was based on a POW named Lou Curto. Shields takes the suggestion from one Ervin Szpek, and it

In the interest of brevity I include here only a broad outline, drawing attention to the details on which fact and fiction overlap.

Vonnegut served in the 106th Infantry Division of the 423rd Regiment (Shields 57) as a scout in a six-man squad (Vonnegut and McCartan). He was deployed to Schnee Eifel (Snow Mountain), in the Ardenne Forest in western Germany, during the Battle of the Bulge, "the largest defeat of American arms in history" (Vonnegut and McCartan). On 19 December 1944, he was captured by German troops (Vonnegut, *Letters* 7). As in *Slaughterhouse-Five* (77), Vonnegut's regiment was surrounded, held by "incredible artificial weather," as anti-aircraft guns fired into the trees overhead, and a German voice announced their capture through a loudspeaker (Shields 59).

Along with his battalion scouting unit "and about fifty people we'd never met before," Vonnegut and his buddy Bernard V. O'Hare were informed that "the war was all over for us, that we were lucky, that we could now be sure we would live through the war, which was more than they could be sure of" (Vonnegut and McCartan). They were marched east with tens of thousands of American prisoners (Shields 59) to Geroldstein. The description of "animals stumbling erect" (61) provided by Geoff Taylor, an Australian attached to the Royal Air Force Bomber Command, and used in *So it Goes* to describe the pathetic appearance of the American soldiers upon their arrival, echoes Billy Pilgrim's repeated exhausted stumbling into Roland Weary (Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five* 40). In Geroldstein, the prisoners boarded train boxcars bound for Prisoner of War camps, "probably in the same boxcars that delivered Jews and Gypsies and Jehovah's Witnesses and so on to the extermination camps" (Vonnegut and McCartan). Vonnegut's true experience of the journey to the POW Camp at Stalag IV-B in Mülhberg does not differ greatly from that attributed to the fictional Billy Pilgrim in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and is outlined in detail in his first letter home to his family following his release (Vonnegut, *Letters* 9). The description of this journey is the first instance of the authorial presence cropping up in the body of the novel. "I was there. So was my old war buddy, Bernard V. O'Hare" (Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five* 48). The boxcars were over-packed, sixty men to each (Vonnegut, *Letters* 7), and they slept in shifts: "Somewhere in there was Christmas" (Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five* 51).

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is essentially confirmed by a letter from Curto to Vonnegut on 29 March 1983. This letter does not appear in Wakefield's collection, though Vonnegut's silence here, having long ago named the inspiration for both Edgar Derby and Billy Pilgrim, certainly points towards Curto.

Upon arrival at Stalag IV-B in Mülhberg the POWs were deloused, the shock of the scalding water killing some (Vonnegut, *Letters* 7), and received cast-off clothing just as Billy Pilgrim did (Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five* 59). The British POWs really did perform *Cinderella* in drag (Shields 62). The American POWs chose a leader, but instead of "old Edgar Derby" (Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five* 106) it was Kurt Vonnegut Jr., by virtue of his having some high-school German (Vonnegut, *Letters* 8). Like Billy Pilgrim, Vonnegut was selected for work detail in Dresden (Shields 62), and the first impressions of Dresden in the novel are described through Vonnegut's eyes:

> The skyline was intricate and voluptuous and enchanted and absurd. It looked like a Sunday school picture of Heaven to Billy Pilgrim. Somebody behind him in the boxcar said, "Oz." That was I. That was me. The only other city I'd ever seen was Indianapolis, Indiana. (Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five* 108)

So, too, was Private Edward "Joe" Crone of Rochester, New York, who Vonnegut admitted in *Fates Worse than Death* was the model for Billy Pilgrim. Both Vonnegut and the fictional Pilgrim were assigned to Schlachtof-Fünf (Shields 64). The guards appointed to watch over them were no younger, stronger, or more qualified than those watching over Billy Pilgrim. Instead of a one-legged guard carrying gun and cane (Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five* 109), they had a blonde Hitler Youth (nick-named "Junior") and "One Lamp Louie," an older sergeant with an eye patch (Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five* 65).

Vonnegut was assigned to work detail in a malt factory, where he, like Billy Pilgrim had access to high-carbohydrate syrup designed for pregnant women. The men of Arbeitskommando 557 dallied as they passed through the kitchens (Shields 67), just like the fictional prisoners who hid spoons all over the factory. The description of Edgar Derby's first taste of the syrup echoes the desperation the starving POWs felt, bursting into tears of relief (Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five* 117).

An incident involving a supposed Red Cross representative was to provide the inspiration for Howard J. Campbell Jr. (Vonnegut, *Letters* 307), expanded upon in *Mother Night* (1961). The representative addressed the Americans, attempting to recruit turncoats to an "elite unit of top-notch GIs to fight the Russians on the eastern front" and bribed them with the comforts they so craved; food, new uniforms, dignity (Shields 68). In the novel, this elite force was dubbed "The Free American Corps" (Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five* 118). Nobody, real or fictional, volunteered.

On 13 February 1945, air-raid sirens sounded in Dresden. Though planes often flew overhead, they were always bound for elsewhere. Dresden was strategically unimportant, and considered safe; though flooded with refugees, "there was no war in Dresden" (Vonnegut, *Armageddon in Retrospect*). "You needn't worry about the bombs, by the way," Billy Pilgrim is told, as Vonnegut believed. "Dresden is an open city. It is undefended, and contains no war industries or troop concentrations of any importance" (Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five* 106). The American POWs and their guards sought shelter in a basement and natural refrigerator of the Slaughterhouse, while RAF bomber crews dropped high explosives overhead: "There were sounds like giant footsteps above. Those were sticks of high-explosive bombs. The giants walked and walked" (Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five* 129). When the POWs emerged the following morning, they were 150 survivors in an almost entirely destroyed city.

They were assigned, that afternoon, to be housed with British South African troops in Gorbitz, a suburb of Dresden (Shields 73). As shallow bomb shelters proved ineffective against the blanket bombing, Arbeitskommando 557 was divided into smaller work details (74), and assigned the ghastly task of excavating the "corpse mines" (Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five* 157): removing and burning corpses and retrieving food supplies in relays. When this was no longer tenable, bodies were "cremated by soldiers with flame-throwers right where they were" (157): "The ceremonies associated with respecting the dead had ended, and jets of ignited gasoline converted former sanctuaries for the living into catacombs" (Shields 75). A POW named Michael Palaia was caught looting from one of the catacombs, a crime punishable by firing squad. Kurt Vonnegut Jr. and three other men – friends of Palaia's – dug his grave (76). In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Michael Palaia was to become the "poor old high school teacher" Edgar Derby (Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five* 157), a somewhat heroic character in a novel that eschews heroism, and consistently criticises strength and power. Vonnegut also named his 1981 "Autobiographical Collage" "*Palm Sunday*" after the day on which Palaia died.

Vonnegut, O'Hare and their colleagues in Arbeitskommando 557 were liberated from Dresden on Friday 13 April 1945. Vonnegut wrote to his family from Camp Lucky Strike in Le Havre on 29 May 1945 (Vonnegut, *Letters* 6) to tell them he had survived. On 4 July, Independence Day, his uncle Alex and sister Alice picked Kurt up from Camp Atterbury near Indiannapolis. Kurt asked to drive the car (10).

3.2 Vonnegut's Joke-Work

As outlined in Chapter 1, critics have struggled to come up with ways to discuss these comedic anti-war novelists. Around the time *Catch-22* was published, the term "Black Humor" was gaining prominence, and retroactively applied to Kurt Vonnegut's back-catalogue in favour of "science fiction". In a conversational style emulating Vonnegut's own – a feature that was to become a hallmark of Vonnegut criticism – Klinkowitz and Somer describe the emergence of Vonnegut as a subject worthy of discussion:

> Critics were confused. Obviously anybody who wrote science fiction "buggered the truth for money" and could not be trusted. Anybody who competed with comic books and television came in a close second and could not be profound. And yet a distinguished member of the literary Establishment (who shall remain nameless to protect his professional reputation) had the audacity and honesty to say, in print, "I loved *Sirens of Titan* when it came out. I still do and wish someone would tell me why." Many serious critics felt the same way. They hated to admit they were common because they dug Vonnegut, especially since they could not understand him. (Klinkowitz and Somer xvii)

The editors here touch a nerve which was to remain tender for Vonnegut for many years – the suggestion that a writer of science fiction could not be taken seriously as a novelist, that it was not a serious genre, and with that the question of whether or not Vonnegut was a science fiction writer at all. I argue here that it is a fallacy to read Vonnegut – or at least *Slaughterhouse-Five* – within these parameters, as what science-fictional elements exist are in the service of psychological release and secondary to the novel's thematic aims. This psychological release is equally served through comedy, and it is the novel's Black Humor, defined within the parameters we have established above, that offer the fullest realisation of Vonnegut's intentions.

Furthermore, while Kurt Vonnegut did not feature in Friedman's *Black Humor* (1965), the publication remains significant to his career, as he came to be associated with these writers. His exclusion is not extraordinary; in 1965, Vonnegut was almost completely out of print, with the exception of his most recent novel, *God Bless You, Mr Rosewater* (Shields 190). Vonnegut's frustration with the term 'Black Humor' bears a striking resemblance to his irritation at being labelled a science fiction author. Perhaps he simply detested classification. As discussed in Section 1.2, Vonnegut is the subject of a chapter in Robert

Scholes' *The Fabulators* (1967). Scholes' work marks a development from the Black Humorists' theories, arguing that Vonnegut's Black Humor is in fact fabulative fiction – fiction with a didactic purpose, yet somehow different from traditional satire. Scholes' work has already been discussed at length, so for now it is sufficient to recall the suggestion that the notion of "satire" contains *some* value for characterising Vonnegut's work, and to highlight the fact that *The Fabulators* preceded *Slaughterhouse-Five* by two years.

Steven Weisenburger's *Fables of Subversion* (1995) classifies both *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* as political satire, though it is marred with the usual problems: a focus on the overall narrative structure to the detriment of joke construction. It's worth recalling that, after Klinkowitz declared Black Humor dead and buried in 1974, critical attempts to classify the humour it described fell out of fashion, so it is not surprising that Weisenburger is here reverting to a literary term that has stood the test of time. However, a few of Weisenburger's comments are just a bit off centre. For example, in seeking to describe the distinction between personal and social responsibility, he claims, "At least Joseph Heller could still imagine some possibilities for individual action. In *Slaughterhouse-Five* they seem to have disappeared. The book's protagonist, Billy Pilgrim, voices an abnegated ethics" (175). Weisenburger is here over-emphasising the moral responsibility of traditional satire, and failing to see the subversive and transformative power of the humour in these comedic anti-war novels. He's also missing the point of Billy's passivity, which will be discussed below.

Vonnegut staunchly rejected the term "Black Humor," just as he did "science fiction," and his critics followed suit. As a critical term used to define a genre of American Fiction in the twentieth century, it did have limited use, and its critics failed to realise its potential from a humour studies perspective. Vonnegut railed against it:

> Friedman decided that Terry Southern, John Barth, myself,[5] Friedman himself, Joe Heller, Donleavy – a whole bunch of people – were black humorists. They didn't mix with each other, I don't think they paid particularly much attention to each other. It was simply Friedman's conceit that we were all black humorists. Critics accepted this because it allowed them in a simple phrase to deal with fifteen writers or so. The critic would customarily say, "This novel

[5] Note that Vonnegut specifically references his own inclusion here. He is absolutely, positively, not mentioned in the anthology. I invite you to double check, dear reader. You can borrow my copy.

> under consideration is far superior to the self-indulgent whimsy of the black humorists," there we'd all go out the damned window, and we never had anything to do with each other. […] it obviously has some meaning or Friedman wouldn't have gotten away with it. It wasn't quite nonsensical – we were all about the same age, and none of us is a patriot: we are social critics. (Vonnegut and Clancy 55)

Vonnegut goes on, in this interview, to direct his judge and jury to Freud's work on gallows humour, which Vonnegut evidently considers to be the type of humour Friedman really meant to refer to. It is "a response to hopeless situations," and, according to Vonnegut, is referred to as Jewish humour in America: "Jewish jokes are middle European jokes. And the Black Humorists are gallows humourists, as they try to be funny in the face of situations which they see as just horrible" (Vonnegut and Clancy 55–56). The value of this interpretation to an understanding of the humour in Black Humor has already been discussed in depth in Section 1.2. However, the idea of Vonnegut as a social critic is important, and deserves further attention. Not only are concepts of protest thematically important in his novels – and particularly in *Slaughterhouse-Five* – but these concepts are also relevant to his subversive use of humour.

Jerome Klinkowitz's *Vonnegut in America* (1977) sought to "show how Vonnegut's posture as a writer seems to grow out of his realisation of the possibilities of our common American culture" (Klinkowitz and Lawler xii). As this implies, Vonnegut's writing is born of popular culture – not philosophy or psychology – and thus innately tied to it: "He has steadfastly refused to become an aloof, alienated intellectual"(xiii). Indeed, Vonnegut's novels provided powerful commentary on contemporary affairs, in a package accessible and engaging to his young audience. They acquired cult status, and a "generational spokesman" was born, in no small part due to his habit of inserting himself into the works. Though authorial presence in *Slaughterhouse-Five* will be discussed below, it's worth remembering that Vonnegut's biographical presence in his work is by no means limited to this novel. Following the success of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and the cult of celebrity that began to form, Vonnegut began writing personal introductions to his re-issued earlier novels (qtd. in Shields 256). The trope continued in his later works, most notably perhaps in *Slapstick*. Additionally, in the 1960s, he began publishing highly personalised essays in popular magazines – collected in *Wampeters, Foma & Granfalloons* (1974) – which, according to Klinkowitz, "featured the same development that was becoming evident in Vonnegut's fiction during these years: the ability to treat his subject by making himself the

center of it and then reporting on himself" (*Structuring the Void* 34). In *So it Goes*, Charles J. Shields takes a slightly cynical view of Vonnegut's carefully cultivated public image, painting Vonnegut as a consummate public-relations man who groomed himself in such a way as to court a college-based cult following. When his first wife, Jane, campaigned for Eugene McCarthy, Vonnegut hid away in his study: "Asked whether her husband, as 'spokesman of a generation,' had lent a hand in the campaign, Jane replied, 'Strangely, there was very little connection between the spokesman of the generation and that particular movement'" (Shields 240). However, the image of counter-culture hero suited his needs, and Vonnegut's popularity on the speaker circuit proved lucrative. It would significantly affect the quality of his humour: in inserting himself into the text, Vonnegut becomes the quintessential gallows humourist, choosing to expend the energy of his pain through laughter.

If Kurt Vonnegut is the voice of a generation, and if he had a pre-existing and on-going body of work which preached the ideals of non-interventionism, kindness, and humanitarianism, what makes *Slaughterhouse-Five* his most effective anti-war novel? The degree to which Vonnegut used humour in connection with authorial presence to grant an additional degree of connection between audience and subject is critical. In forcing the audience to empathise, their horror at the atrocities described is increased and they, like the humourist himself, seek release. Of all his novels, it is *Slaughterhouse-Five* to which Vonnegut himself claims to have been closest. The novel is a form of catharsis, which ultimately accepts as fact the brutality of man. Lawrence Broer writes of the trauma of war in Billy Pilgrim's experience, drawing comparisons with Hemingway's Frederic Henry from *A Farewell to Arms*. He refers to the protagonists' shared "despairing, naturalistic view of existence as perpetually warlike" (Broer 60). Broer emphasises the autobiographical nature of *Slaughterhouse-Five*: "[Pilgrim and Henry] are dangerously pessimistic men whose shattered consciousness and flight from complexity and social responsibility reflect their authors' own sense of vulnerability and disillusionment" (60). But Vonnegut's war experience was starkly different from Hemingway's, and Broer does not emphasise humour's cathartic value.

As Scholes claimed, Black Humor is "not concerned with what to do about life but with how to take it" (43); *Slaughterhouse-Five* is not concerned with Vonnegut's experience in Dresden, but with his reaction to it. It is key to understanding his significance in the growing anti-war movement. Klinkowitz's *Structuring the Void* (1992) looks at the struggle to find a subject in post-World War II American fiction, which is rather eloquently

exemplified by Vonnegut's difficulty in writing a novel about an event he experienced, rather than witnessed:

> The true achievement of *Slaughterhouse-Five* was that, after twenty years of trying to write about it, Vonnegut finally realised that the truth of his Dresden experience was not the firebombing itself but his own reaction to it. [...] As Vonnegut would explain in many other interviews, massacre on such a huge scale – the Dresden casualties were measured as high as a quarter million from the single raid – simply does not register with the mind. [...] As a result, people shrink away from such happenings or excuse them with a nervous giggle; and since the reality of mass murder is never absorbed, it is never understood, and thus cannot be prevented from happening again. But rather than losing the subject entirely, or – even worse – writing a detached account glorifying the adventure of war, Vonnegut kept it in front of him, unexpressible as it was, by detailing his attempts to face it. The result was *Slaughterhouse-Five*. (36–37)

Since *Slaughterhouse-Five* attempted neither to glorify nor hyperbolise the horrors of war, since it focussed on Vonnegut's feelings towards it, and since – with the passing of time – this once "Great War" was written about as just another nonsensical slaughter amidst an ongoing history of such atrocities, its power as an anti-war novel is remarkable. Coupled with Vonnegut's cult of personality, his use of humour in response to Dresden served to highlight the horror of war; rather than excusing it with a nervous giggle, Black Humor forces us to confront our discomfort, and release it.

Though Heller muddies the waters between his own war experience and that of Yossarian, the distinction between fictional Billy Pilgrim and the authorial presence is clear, and intentional. According to Kathryn Hume, "Vonnegut's main characters are usually straightforward projections of some part of his psyche, and they let him work out his inner conflicts; minor characters often embody other fragments of his personality" (177). She goes on to argue this with recourse to a range of Vonnegut novels, examining the reoccurrence of characters (Kilgore Trout, Eliot Rosewater, Howard J. Campbell) and the emergence of his own voice in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, as analytical, factual, and direct. The things seen through Vonnegut's own eyes are presented as immutable facts. That which is seen through Pilgrim's eyes is more symbolic. Hume outlines the degree to which Vonnegut emerges himself in the narrative, and the corresponding degree of catharsis which the novel provides the author: "The artistic and personal problems he takes up in

one story are directly affected by those he did or did not solve in the previous story" (178). She describes how Vonnegut experiments with allowing central characters to speak for their creator, going so far as to dub *Sirens of Titan*'s Malachi Constant a "messenger." In *Cat's Cradle* and *Mother Night*, she argues, he comes closer to articulating his feelings about Dresden, "trying strategies for describing catastrophe" (178) – echoing Bryan's suggestion that he should strive to write about this event. It is the culmination of these experiments in narrative technique that make *Slaughterhouse-Five* "the Dresden novel," as well as the most auto-biographical, and, in more ways than one, the most successful. According to Scholes, fabulators turn the "materials of satire and protest" into comedy, *not* satire. This is the Black Humor laugh; it implicates the reader in the text, forcing them to share in the author's experience, thus producing empathy. If the author can move the reader to laugh along with him or her, the reader is taken inside the book, inside the trenches, and is living an aspect of the war experience through comedy. This is why humour has such power to produce empathy, and why it becomes a form of protest when applied to the war novel.

The key to this technique lies in the autobiographical sections of *Slaughterhouse-Five*– particularly the first and last chapters. The final chapter lends a sense of historic significance, which at the time of publication was very real, and very urgent. The deliberate historical positioning of this chapter is firmly tied in time to the deaths of Robert Kennedy (the night before) and Martin Luther King (a month before, according to Vonnegut – in fact it was two months), placing the writing of this section specifically at 7 June 1968. Vonnegut continues, "every day my Government gives me a count of corpses created by military science in Vietnam. So it goes" (154). Thus, *Slaughterhouse-Five* ends with a return to the type of language used in the autobiographical first chapter – though now he looks forward rather than backwards like Lot's wife – and is noticeably devoid of humour. This short section concludes on a Pacifist note: "My father died many years ago now – of natural causes. So it goes. He was a sweet man. He was a gun nut, too. He left me his guns. They rust" (154). This short section is a reminder that *Slaughterhouse-Five* had much to say about Vietnam. To modern and contemporary audiences, the content no longer seemed implausible; it had historic precedence, was indeed based on historic fact, was semi-autobiographical, and released to an audience embroiled in another large and seemingly never-ending conflict. Conversely, the novel includes science-fiction elements, time travel and alien life, reintroducing the element of implausibility. Could *Slaughterhouse-Five* have succeeded comically without the science-fiction elements? According to Palmer's formulation, it would have appeared too excessively black to be funny. With regards to the

risk of appearing too silly, of over-emphasising the implausible, *Sirens of Titan* may be offered as evidence: the earlier novel is a considerably more allegorical reflection on World War II, and presents an entirely different comedic treatment of its subject.

Vonnegut himself believes that treading this fine line, that his delicate use of allegory and irony is his greatest asset. In a 1974 letter to one Aaron Spiegel, who evidently did not get the joke, Vonnegut wrote:

> Since you are so literal minded, believing, as you seem to, that people at all times should say exactly what they mean or say nothing, I have no hope of explaining to your satisfaction why I said what I said. I was using a form of humor called irony, saying one thing while clearly meaning another. Such humor is not to your taste, and seems dangerous to you. I, on the other hand, would not be able to make my living as a humorist if I could not use irony. It is not a form of lying, and it is not a form of intentional deception, either. It is a matter of saying one thing while clearly saying another. (Vonnegut, *Letters* 217)

The possibility of comic failure is the greatest challenge when addressing serious subject matter in a comedic tone. According to Crichton:

> [Vonnegut] writes about the most excruciatingly painful things. His novels have attacked our deepest fears of automation and the bomb, our deepest political guilts, our fiercest hatreds and loves. Nobody else writes books on these subjects; they are inaccessible to normal novelistic approaches. But Vonnegut, armed with his schizophrenia, takes an absurd, distorted, wildly funny framework which is ultimately anaesthetic. In doing so, his science fiction heritage is clear, but his purposes are very different: he is nearly always talking about the past, not the future. And he proceeds, from his anaesthetic framework, to clean the shit off, we are able to cheer him on – at least for a while. But eventually we stop cheering, and stop laughing.
>
> It is a classic sequence of reactions to any Vonnegut book. One begins smugly, enjoying the sharp wit of a compatriot as he carves up Common Foes. But the sharp wit does not stop, and sooner or later it is directed against the Wrong Targets. Finally it is directed against oneself. It is this switch in midstream, this change in affiliation, which is so disturbing.
>
> [...]

> A Vonnegut book is not cute or precious. It is literally awful, for Vonnegut is one of the few writers able to lift the lid of the garbage can, and dispassionately examine the contents. (Crichton 110)

According to Palmer's formulation in *The Logic of the Absurd*, people (like Mr Spiegel) who over-emphasise the plausibility syllogism in joke construction may find them excessively abrasive. Black Humor delights in treading this line, and playfully foregrounds darkness in the absurd war situation. Eaton underscores Vonnegut's own commentary on this matter, in service of a Black Humor reading:

> "I think the Vietnam War freed me and other writers," Kurt Vonnegut (2006: 20) recalls, "because it made our leadership and our motives seem so scruffy and essentially stupid." When Vonnegut undertook to write about his own experiences during World War II in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, he realized he could approach the subject of war in a serious way through comedy: "And what I saw, what I had to report, made the war look so ugly" (Vonnegut 2006: 20). The Allied bombing of Dresden, which Vonnegut had witnessed first-hand as a prisoner of war, was a ghastly "military experiment to find out if you could burn down a whole city by scattering incendiaries all over it ... Why my fellow prisoners of war and I weren't killed I don't know" (Vonnegut 2006: 18). In his memoir *A Man Without a Country* (2006), the last book he wrote before his death, Vonnegut (2006: 3) poignantly comments on how comedy can be deployed even in the most horrible situations: "Any subject is subject to laughter…. I saw the destruction of Dresden. I saw the city before and then came out of an air-raid shelter and saw it afterward, and certainly one response was laughter. God knows, that's the soul seeking some relief." Far from trivializing it, dark comedy "becomes Vonnegut's means of protecting himself from the horror he has witnessed" (Horton 2005: 85). (Eaton 327)

It's important to highlight the distinction between traditional war heroes and Billy Pilgrim, the novel's anti-hero. As discussed in relation to Joseph Heller's joke-work (Section 2.2), the anti-hero figure serves as a foil to earlier heroic protagonists of the war novel. *Slaughterhouse-Five*'s subtitle, "The Children's Crusade," comes from a promise to Mary O'Hare that war would not be lionised. She confronts Vonnegut, accusatorially:

> "You were just babies in the war – like the ones upstairs!"

> I nodded that this was true. We *had* been foolish virgins in the war, right at the end of childhood.
>
> "But you're not going to write it that way, are you." This wasn't a question. It was an accusation.
>
> "I – I don't know," I said.
>
> "Well, *I* know," she said. "You'll pretend you were men instead of babies, and you'll be played in the movies by Frank Sinatra and John Wayne or some of those other glamorous, war-loving, dirty old men. And war will look just wonderful, so we'll have a lot more of them. And they'll be fought by babies like the babies upstairs." (Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five* 11)

Billy Pilgrim's anti-hero status will be discussed further below, but for now, it's important to note that the novel contains an additional degree of commentary on the concept of the war hero, and further critique of this glorification of violence. Billy Pilgrim's son, Robert, is a Green Beret, and his casting as such is so exaggerated, so ironically glamourised, that it becomes parody. Mary O'Hare's comments and Robert's role in Vietnam recalls the 1968 John Wayne film *The Green Berets*. A propaganda piece for the Vietnam War, *The Green Berets* paints these Special Forces troops as macho heroes in an impossible situation. One of the film's taglines read, "So you don't believe in glory. And heroes are out of style. And they don't blow bugles anymore. So take another look at the special forces in a special kind of hell!" (Kellogg et al.). The film's agenda is embarrassingly obvious, and Wayne is the epitome of a "glamorous, war-loving, dirty old [man]," so Billy Pilgrim's son's allegiance to the Special Forces is likely not accidental. In contrast, Vonnegut warns his own sons "that they are not under any circumstances to take part in massacres, and that the news of massacres of enemies is not to fill them with satisfaction or glee" (Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five* 14). Billy Pilgrim meets a Marine major in 1967, a man "in favour of increased bombings, of bombing North Vietnam back into the Stone Age, if it refused to see reason" (43), who praises the Green Berets. He tells Billy that he should be proud, to which Billy responds "'I *am*. I certainly *am*,'" (44). The blatant villainy of the Marine major, his exaggerated bravado, and our knowledge that Billy is not generally given to enthusiasm, combine to make this scene a joke, and the Marine major the butt. When Robert visits Billy in the hospital in Vermont, his entrance is described in the most glamorous, war-loving and dirty old way possible:

> Robert was wearing the uniform of the famous Green Berets. Robert's hair was short, was wheat-colored bristled. Robert was clean and neat. He was decorated with a Purple Heart and a Silver Star and a Bronze Star with two clusters. […] He was all straightened out now. His posture was wonderful and his shoes were shined and his trousers were pressed, and he was a leader of men.
> "Dad – ?"
> Billy Pilgrim closed his eyes again. (138)

Billy's close-eyed reaction is not how one should greet a war hero. He is evidently not a proud father, and his reaction is at odds with his assurance to the Marine major that he *is* proud. His closed eyes betray a desire not to see, to look away, or to escape from the horrors his son must surely endure, and which he himself had endured.

Countless overt and covert references to the Vietnam conflict make *Slaughterhouse-Five* the epitome of the post-modern novel, recalling Hölbling's comments on post-World War II writer's attempts to describe an ongoing state of conflict, rather than specific historic events (see Section 1.1). In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Billy Pilgrim foretells his own death, on 13 February 1976:

> At the time of his death, he says, he is in Chicago to address a large crowd on the subject of flying saucers and the true nature of time. His home is still in Ilium. He had to cross three international boundaries in order to reach Chicago. The United States of America has been Balkanized, has been divided into twenty petty nations so that it will never again be a threat to world peace. Chicago has been hydrogen-bombed by angry Chinamen. So it goes. It is all brand new. (103)

This deliberately places the U.S. military in opposition to peace, as opposed to in opposition to a specific enemy. It hints at some unnamed conflict between China and the United States, suggesting a failed and flawed attempt by the U.S. to eradicate Communism. It also suggests an international community in opposition to U.S. idealism, a rejection of the former image of the United States as international peace-keepers, and thus a damning indictment of the official reasons for the United States' involvement in Vietnam.

Slaughterhouse-Five, in "storifying" Vonnegut's war experience, is an attempt at catharsis. The strong auto-biographical element, the blatant insertion of the authorial presence, and the powerful commentary on the ongoing political situation make the humour in this novel some of the blackest Vonnegut writes. The auto-biographical first chapter describes the

process of writing a war novel and declares, having completed it, that he has exorcised the demons that haunted him since Dresden (16). The effectiveness of this catharsis is evidenced by his failure to write for two years following its completion, and his assertions in interviews that he felt as though he had completed, in publishing his Dresden novel, his life's work, and that he was free now to do as he pleased: "I felt after I finished *Slaughterhouse-Five* that I didn't have to write at all anymore if I didn't want to. It was the end of some sort of career" (Vonnegut, *Wampeters, Foma, & Granfalloons (Opinions)* 279). Before turning to an analysis of the joke-work in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, we will grant the last word to Vonnegut himself on the difficulty of sustaining a comedic response to tragic circumstances. In *A Man Without a Country* (2006), he discusses how he has grown weary with age, and can no longer be funny in response to tragic events:

> It's damn hard to make jokes work. In *Cat's Cradle*, for instance, there are these very short chapters. Each one of them represents one day's work, and each one is a joke. If I were writing about a tragic situation, it wouldn't be necessary to time it to make sure the thing works. You can't really misfire with a tragic scene. It's bound to be moving if all the right elements are present. But a joke is like building a mousetrap from scratch. You have to work pretty hard to make the thing snap when it is supposed to snap. […] Humor is a way of holding off how awful life can be, to protect yourself. Finally, you get just too tired, and the news is too awful, and humor doesn't work anymore. […] All I really wanted to do was give people the relief of laughing. Humor can be a relief, like an aspirin tablet. If a hundred years from now people are still laughing, I'd certainly be pleased. (129–130)

If we ascribe to Freud's explanation of gallows humour, Vonnegut has here grown weary of the psychological effort required for constructing jokes in response to tragic circumstances. This, possibly, explains the absence of humour in the final chapter of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. He is hinting that the accumulation of psychological burden in response to personal tragedy has dulled his own sense of gallows humour, but remains hopeful that later generations can find the same psychological release, for a time.

3.3 Close Reading of *Slaughterhouse-Five*

3.3.1 Tragic Irony

One of Vonnegut's most successfully deployed comedic tropes, in a novel that frequently casts the war experience in a comedic mode, is the repeated creation of moments of tragic irony. These moments are classified by the creation of an expectation, and then the comedic subversion of that expectation, as it is resolved in a tragically comedic or comically tragic refrain. The structure is used again and again throughout the novel, and culminates in the expression of two of the novel's key tragically ironic moments: the death of Edgar Derby and the bombing of Dresden.

One of the earliest uses of this tragic irony serves as a soft introduction to the technique, and is more comical upon first reading, and more tragic-ironic upon later reflection. While Billy Pilgrim and his chaplain hold services on a Sunday morning during manoeuvres in South Carolina, the gathered crowd is "theoretically" obliterated in a training exercise: "The congregation had been theoretically spotted from the air by a theoretical enemy. They were all theoretically dead now. The theoretical corpses laughed and ate a hearty noontime meal" (Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five* 23). The incident juxtaposes their implied innocence prior to deployment, with the truly precarious nature of their pending situation. The foolhardiness of a large group of soldiers gathering in the open air on a hillside, imbued with religious imagery (the Sermon on the Mount comes to mind), is made evident when the scene is considered from another perspective; as an exposed and vulnerable enemy target. Their laughter releases the emotional strain, dispelling, for now, the realisation that lives are truly this vulnerable. The incident grows more tragic for Billy: "Towards the end of maneuvers, Billy was given an emergency furlough home because his father, a barber in Ilium, New York, was shot dead by a friend while they were out hunting deer. So it goes" (23). Billy's experiences fictionalises an important biographical detail for Vonnegut; while he was stationed at Camp Atterbury, Indiana, Vonnegut's mother Edith committed suicide (Shields 53).

In a similar vein, Roland Weary's 57-millimeter antitank gun (Vonnegut trained on a 24-millimetre howitzer (Shields 50)) exposes his location in a comically obvious manner:

> The gun made a ripping sound like the opening of the zipper on the fly of God Almighty. The gun lapped up snow and vegetation with a blowtorch thirty feet

> long. The flame left a black arrow on the ground, showing the Germans exactly where the gun was hidden. The shot was a miss. (25)

Here, however, the burden of innocence is lessened. We already know Roland Weary to be an odious, war-loving soldier. We know that he had "helped to fire one shot in anger" (25) – a military term, though the use of "anger" is not coincidental – and the religious reference is more bawdy, less idyllic. At the same time the exposure is not theoretical, but very real, and comically exaggerated, exposing a thirty-foot long black arrow pointing directly towards the "hidden" gun. The irony is considerable. The outcome is tragic: "What had been missed was a Tiger tank. It swivelled its 88-milimeter snout around sniffingly, saw the arrow on the ground. It fired. It killed everybody on the gun crew but Weary. So it goes" (25). The sniffing snout of the Tiger tank recalls Billy Pilgrim's father's death while hunting. Here, significantly, there is no laughter from the participants. The comedy here is decidedly black, and only the bawdy metaphor of the "zipper on the fly of God Almighty" inspires a chuckle.

Another tragically ironic motif is the repeated mentions of barking dogs, incongruously juxtaposing the image of the threatening guard dog with the reality of a scared animal, echoing the soldiers themselves. The opening chapter mentions Sandy, who provides the author with comfort during his late-night booze-fuelled phone calls, as Billy Pilgrim's Spot provides companionship and comfort. At numerous times, also, a dog barks. A barking dog pursues Roland Weary, Billy Pilgrim, and the two scouts through the forest during the Battle of the Bulge. A dog barks when Billy's flying saucer arrives from Tralfamadore (54); when the POWs are coaxed from their train into their prison camp (59); and when Kilgore Trout (who is terrified) is left alone in the alley with a bag of newspapers and a customer book (123). The barking dog is a "big bronze gong" (59), a portent of danger, recalling Billy Pilgrim's original traumatic moment, his capture as five German soldiers and their dog find Roland Weary "beat[ing] the living shit out" of Billy Pilgrim in a creek bed (36). The "police dog on a leash" whose barks echo through the forest during the chase is comically unthreatening, revealing the animal's cruel treatment:

> The dog, who had sounded so ferocious in the winter distances, was a female German shepherd. She was shivering. Her tail was between her legs. She had been borrowed that morning from a farmer. She had never been to war before. She had no idea what game was being played. Her name was Princess. (38)

The realisation that the formerly menacing "Princess" is in reality as lost and frightened as Billy Pilgrim is comically ironic, and the release of tension in discovering that this once-great threat is such a pitiful creature is echoed in the revelation that the German soldiers are teenagers and old men.

The comparison to the pitiful figure of Billy Pilgrim to the shivering Princess, with her tail between her legs, as well as the repeated references to the sorry state of the American soldiers and their German guards – the generally sorry representation of these "great" military men – is particularly poignant when applied to those figures for whom war may have been an improvement on their normal situation. While in transit to the Prisoner of War camp, Billy shares a box car with an unnamed forty year-old hobo, who repeatedly provides a sorrowful comfort through recalling prior tragic experience: "'I been hungrier than this,' the hobo told Billy. I been in worse places than this. This ain't so bad'" (49). The phrase is repeated at each mention of the desperation of the POWs' situation: when we learn that the prisons are full, that there is no food for them to eat, or fuel to warm them, and finally that Billy's train does not move for two whole days, the hobo reassures Billy "This ain't nothing at all" (51). On Christmas night, Billy nestles beside the hobo and sleeps; though none of the other POWs will allow Billy to sleep beside them due to his kicking and whimpering, the hobo provides tangible comfort. The first incident of Billy engaging in conversation with the hobo is not until a week later, however:

> On the eighth day, the forty-year-old hobo said to Billy, "This ain't bad. I can be comfortable anywhere."
> "You can?" said Billy.
> On the ninth day, the hobo died. So it goes. His last words were, "You think this is bad? This ain't so bad" (57).

Thus Billy Pilgrim's only source of comfort during his ten-day train journey is extinguished, his constant assurance that their situation is tolerable cruelly juxtaposed with the harsh realisation that it is, indeed, so bad. The biblical language arises again, "on the eighth day", "on the ninth day", counting on past the day which should have provided rest, as though to further test Billy's resolve. The cruelty is enhanced by Billy's question, as though he is beginning to believe the hobo when he asks, "You can?" It is not a challenge, but an entreaty for further reassurance. The laughter arises from the subverted expectation of the biblical "and on the seventh day he rested" with the darkly comic "on

the ninth day, the hobo died," followed by the repeated phrase "so it goes" which applies equally to Christ-like hobos as to champagne bubbles and stagnant water.

The arrival of the American soldiers in the British POW camp marks a series of tragic comic reversals, on both the micro and macro level, ranging from the subversion of the expected image of the American fighting man, to the provided "party favours" betraying the American's delicate digestive systems and offering truly base scatological humour. Prisoners for many years by the time of the Americans' arrival, the British officers were "among the first English-speaking prisoners to be taken in the Second World War" (67), and have spent their time creating an oasis of stiff-upper-lipped calm in a "sea of dying Russians" (67). The Russians are entirely de-humanised. Viewed through the British officers' eyes, the Russians present an uncomfortable vision of the reality of war, which the British officers choose not to believe (until they are forced to). The Russians serve as an additional barrier to escape, like a moat: "[The British officers] could tunnel all they pleased. The would inevitably surface within a rectangle of barbed wire, would find themselves greeted listlessly by dying Russians who spoke no English, who had no food or useful information or escape plans of their own" (67). In contrast, the British officers are described in dandyish terms: "They were adored by the Germans, who thought they were exactly what Englishmen ought to be. They made war look stylish, and reasonable, and fun" (68). In attempting to carve out a perfectly normal existence in a ludicrously absurd situation, they come to epitomise absurdity so thoroughly that their hospitality towards the Americans ends, quite literally, in shit.

The betrayal of their hospitality is at their own hands. Their shelter from the war makes them so far removed from the reality of the war situation that they are isolated, shut off, absurdly naive, deaf, dumb, and blind even to the terrible condition of their Russian allies in the same camp. The British officers are described in terms parodying the British stereotype as proponents of order and good hospitality amidst the chaos of war:

> The Englishmen had known for twelve hours that American guests were on their way. They had never had guests before, and they went to work like darling elves, sweeping, mopping, cooking, baking — making mattresses of straw and burlap bags, setting tables, putting party favors at each place.
>
> Now they were singing their welcome to their guests in the winter night. Their clothes were aromatic with the feast they had been preparing. They were dressed half for battle, half for tennis or croquet. They were so elated by their own hospitality, and by all the goodies waiting inside, that they did not take a

> good look at their guests while they sang. And they imagined that they were singing to fellow officers fresh from the fray (69).

The juxtaposition of the image of a POW, set starkly against the "sea of dying Russians" with the camp image of the British home-maker is painted most comically in the description of their dress: half shed are the vestiges of battle, the officers' uniforms, and in their place comfortable leisurewear. The marriage of the image of the proud British soldier with the foppish image of the gentlemen of leisure is incongruous, and calls to mind a stiffly starched uniform with loafers and a sweater vest. It is a perfect commentary on their insulation from the true war experience, as represented by the American soldiers. The humour is then extended as they begin to grasp their guests' betrayal of these expectations:

> There was silence now, as the Englishmen looked in astonishment at the frowsy creatures they had so lustily waltzed inside.
> One of the Englishmen saw that Billy was on fire. "You're on fire, lad!" he said, and he got Billy away from the stove and beat out the sparks with his hand.
> When Billy made no comment on this, the Englishman asked him, "Can you talk? Can you hear?" Billy nodded. The Englishman touched him exploratorily here and there, filled with pity. "My God — what have they done to you, lad? This isn't a man. It's a broken kite." (70)

The British officers go on to question Billy's coat, as the symbols of power and prestige are once again represented through dress, and serve to expose the fragility of the American military machine. Billy's fur-trimmed coat is too small, had been "made for an impresario about as big as an organ-grinder's monkey" (65), it is riddled with bullet holes, its arms have come off, and it is lined with crimson silk: "The Germans found him to be one of the most screamingly funny things they had seen in all of World War Two" (65). The British soldiers explain to Billy that the coat is an assault on his military dignity: "'Ohhhh – Yank, Yank, Yank –' said the Englishman, 'that coat was an *insult*. […] It was a deliberate attempt to humiliate you. You mustn't let Jerry do things like that'" (71). The scene is echoed later in the novel, when the German guards in Dresden also suddenly become aware of the American fighting man's inferiority, betrayed once again by Billy's coat:

> The eight were grim as they approached the boxcars containing their wards. They knew what sick and foolish soldiers they themselves appeared to be. One of them actually had an artificial leg, and carried not only a loaded rifle but a

> cane. Still — they were expected to earn obedience and respect from tall, cocky, murderous American infantrymen who had just come from all the killing at the front. And then they saw bearded Billy Pilgrim in his blue toga and silver shoes, with his hands in a muff. He looked at least sixty years old. […]. The eight ridiculous Dresdeners ascertained that these hundred ridiculous creatures really were American fighting men fresh from the front. They smiled, and then they laughed. Their terror evaporated. There was nothing to be afraid of. Here were more crippled human beings, more fools like themselves. Here was light opera. (108–109)

However, the question of clothing, and the ridiculous image of Billy Pilgrim, is finally resolved, as the joke comes full circle. We begin with the British officer explaining to Billy that "Jerry" is mocking him, and the laughter of the German soldiers at the American soldiers' expense, but in the end it is Billy who is mocking "Jerry". Billy is confronted and reprimanded by a German surgeon, a veteran of two world wars, and a resident of the soon-to-be defeated Dresden:

> The sight of Billy offended him, especially after he learned from the guards that Billy was an American. It seemed to him that Billy was in abominable taste, supposed that Billy had gone to a lot of silly trouble to costume himself just so.
> The surgeon spoke English, and he said to Billy, "I take it you find war a very comical thing."
> Billy looked at him vaguely. Billy had lost track momentarily of where he was or how he had gotten there. He had no idea that people thought he was clowning. It was Fate, of course, which had costumed him — Fate, and a feeble will to survive.
> "Did you expect us to *laugh*?" the surgeon asked him.
> […]
> "You thought we would enjoy being *mocked*?" the surgeon said. "And do you feel *proud* to represent America as you do?" (110)

Billy has the last laugh, as the coat which at first represented an insult now serves to insult this German veteran, and finally offers up its rewards: a partial denture and a two-carat diamond, which would become Valencia Merble's engagement ring (the diamond not the denture).

To return to the British officers' party favours, and the manner in which they betray the British hospitality, and expose the absurdity of their insulated existence – this occurs first

on a micro level, as it is revealed that the party favours are in fact some of the more gruesome products of Nazi war-time efficiency:

> At each place was a safety razor, a washcloth, a package of razor blades, a chocolate bar, two cigars, a bar of soap, ten cigarettes, a book of matches, a pencil, and a candle. Only the candles and the soap were of German origin. They had a ghostly, opalescent similarity. The British had no way of knowing it, but the candles and the soap were made from the fat of rendered Jews and Gypsies and fairies and communists, and other enemies of the State. So it goes. (69)

The tragic irony of these perfectly endearing party favours being the rendered fat of Holocaust victims is stark, and a cruel betrayal of the officers' congenial intentions. It is the closest the novel comes to a Holocaust joke (indeed the closest a novel *should* come to a Holocaust joke), and it is intentionally un-comedic. This is one of the most extreme examples of tragic irony in the novel, and it inspires a sharp exhalation of breath rather than laughter, a harsh realisation of irony, without any of the amusement.

On the macro level, a combination of these party favours and the British officers' welcome feast creates one of the basest comedic moments in the novel, one that is sheer slapstick. In a morphine-induced fever dream, Billy Pilgrim wanders from the hospital and emerges into the night to take a leak: "Somewhere in the night there were cries of grief. With nothing better to do, Billy shuffled in their direction. He wondered what tragedy so many had found to lament out of doors" (90). He unwittingly approaches the latrine, and the description of the structure is clouded by Billy's stupor, so that it is garish and recalls the bawdy British production of *Cinderella*, as he comes across a sign – illustrated – asking patrons to "please leave this latrine as tidy as you found it!" (91). The scene descends from fever dream into scatological slapstick comedy:

> Billy looked inside the latrine. The wailing was coming from in there. The place was crammed with Americans who had taken their pants down. The welcome feast had made them as sick as volcanoes. The buckets were full or had been kicked over.
>
> An American near Billy wailed that he had excreted everything but his brains. Moments later he said, "There they go, there they go." He meant his brains.
>
> That was I. That was me. That was the author of this book. (91)

The British officers' guests have defiled their oasis of calm, have revealed the reality of the front by destroying the illusion that war is either stylish, reasonable, or fun. The explosive imagery and kicked buckets reveal chaos, the American soldier (indeed Vonnegut himself) admitting that he has "excreted everything but his brains" then moments later, having another bowel movement so violent he claims "there they go" is such a perfect foil to the British officer, costumed for tennis or croquet, that one cannot help but laugh and laugh at the scene. The British officers' disappointment in the Americans, their weak attempts to educate them on decorum and conduct during their imprisonment, are immediately dismissed as laughably absurd for the rest of this episode, and poor Edgar Derby is painted as all the more tragic figure in subscribing to their idealism.

And so to Edgar Derby. Repeatedly referred to as "poor old" Edgar Derby, he embodies American idealism in the face of World War II, the "good war." We learn that he had to pull political strings to get into the army at age forty-four, and that he is "so old he had a son who was a marine in the Pacific theatre of war" (69). He is a high-school teacher whose subject, ironically, is Contemporary Problems in Western Civilisation. He is "mournfully pregnant with patriotism and middle age and imaginary wisdom" (109). Vonnegut explicitly outlines in the autobiographical first chapter that Edgar Derby will provide the novel's most significant ironic moment:

> "I think the climax of the book will be the execution of poor old Edgar Derby," I said. "The irony is so great. A whole city gets burned down, and thousands and thousands of people are killed. And then this one American foot soldier is arrested in the ruins for taking a teapot. And he's given a regular trial, and then he's shot by a firing squad." (*4*)

The moment, foreshadowed from the outset and framed as the climactic ironic scene, is so short, so simple, that it isn't explained in any more detail than it is in this first instance. The suspense is protracted for the entirety of the novel, just as Snowden's death is in *Catch-22*. Valencia Merble romanticises the event as she does Billy's involvement in it (87–88). We are told repeatedly, in various iterations, that Derby will eventually be shot, executed, and so forth (*4*, 60, *71*, *76*, 89, 99, 137, 157). We are forced to laugh at his naiveté when he believes he will survive the war, and the tragic irony of this moment is coupled with the belief that the equally doomed Dresden is safe: "Derby was imagining letters to home, his lips working tremendously: *Dear Margaret – We are leaving for Dresden today. Don't worry. I will never be bombed. It is an open city. There was an election at noon, and guess*

what? And so on" (107). It is worth noting that this is the one moment where the reader emits a dark giggle at Derby's well-established fate, after which the device takes an extended breather for 38 pages. His death is indeed the final moment, the final death, the final "so it goes," and all that follows is the end of World War II (equally simply) and the promised final word (*Poo-tee-weet?*), also foreshadowed from the first:

> Somewhere in there the poor old high school teacher, Edgar Derby, was caught with a teapot he had taken from the catacombs. He was arrested for plundering. He was tried and shot.
> So it goes. (157)

And that is it. In the midst of the corpse mines, the Maoiri who dies from dry heaving, the incineration of the remains of Dresden's citizens in their catacombs, an absurdly patriotic American is court-martialled and shot for the theft of a teapot. The irony that so simple and so innocuous an act could be his undoing in the ashes of the 135,000 people who died in Dresden is as eloquent a point on which to conclude the novel as any. It is not, however, comedic, nor is anything else in this final chapter.

3.3.2 Billy Pilgrim: Anti-hero and Wounded Soldier

In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Billy Pilgrim is not only presented as an ineffective soldier; he is the antithesis of the American war hero. He is, on occasion and as discussed above, quite literally a joke: "Billy was preposterous – six feet and three inches tall, with a chest and shoulders like a box of kitchen matches. He had no helmet, no overcoat, no weapon, and no boots. […] He didn't look like a soldier at all. He looked like a filthy flamingo" (24). David Simmons argues that Pilgrim is an anti-hero who echoes the figure of Christ: a Pacifist in the vein of counterculture heroes, refusing even to carry a weapon (123).[6] In shirking the traditional image of the war hero, Pilgrim exposes the absurdity of war. Billy Pilgrim celebrates the heroism (or lack thereof) of the everyman. In one interview, in reference to Freud's remarks on gallows humour, Vonnegut claimed: "It's humor about weak, intelligent people in hopeless situations. And I have customarily written about

[6] I would add a caveat to this – Billy does not refuse to carry a weapon, as a chaplain's assistant he is simply not issued one. However, his powerlessness is emphasised, and could, I suppose, be viewed as representative of conscientious objection: "A chaplain's assistant is customarily a figure of fun in the American Army. Billy was no exception. He was powerless to harm the enemy or to help his friends" (22). However, Simmons' interpretation explains Pilgrim's status as counter-culture hero, regardless of its basis in the facts of the novel.

powerless people who felt there wasn't much they could do about their situations" (qtd. in Cronan Rose 23). Billy Pilgrim is one such powerless person.

The juxtaposition between the expectation and reality of the American military man has been described above, via the elaborate joke of Billy's "costuming" in the impresario's jacket, a blue toga, silver shoes, and his hands warmed in a "muff" formed of the coat's fur trim (109). Vonnegut criticises the American military machine more generally through depictions of the soldiers as weak, childlike, or insane – flawed but entirely human – perhaps most notably in his promise to Mary O'Hare (11). In highlighting the humanity of the soldiers, in describing the grotesque nature of their survival, the novel draws attention to the human face of war, mirroring contemporary concerns about the draft for Vietnam. In placing himself in this action through the manifestations of the authorial self, which will be discussed further below, Vonnegut reinforces the horror of this contemporary threat. The scatological slapstick shattering of this illusion of the "glamorous, war loving, dirty old men" caricature depicted by the British Officers is one of the most laughable scenes in the novel. The dying Colonel Wild Bob also serves to satirise the image of the American war hero. Having lost his entire regiment, Wild Bob makes an impassioned speech parodying such inspirational pre-battle speeches as Shakespeare's famous "Saint Crispin's Day" speech from *Henry V*: "But the colonel imagined that he was addressing his beloved troops for the last time, and told them that they had nothing to be ashamed of, that there were dead Germans all over the battlefield who wished to God that they had never heard of the Four-fifty-first" (49). The colonel is a truly tragic figure, doomed with double pneumonia and a high fever. His ramblings are presented as those of a man in the throes of fever, and there is no couching his traumatised condition in metaphor; it is stated outright: "This was a man who had lost an entire regiment, about forty-five hundred men – a lot of them children, actually" (48). Something about this explanation of the colonel's situation is different in tone, a break away from the general narrative, an elaboration upon a detail which contains no humour, no subtle gag, no zipper on the fly of God Almighty. The change in narrative voice is explained quickly – it is a real memory of Vonnegut's. The section concludes, "I was there. So was my old war buddy, Bernard V. O'Hare" (49). The reference to his old war buddy recalls the stories O'Hare and Vonnegut failed to recall in the autobiographical first chapter (10). It is too real for comedy, too real for light opera.

Ultimately, with his Tralfamadorian vision of time, Pilgrim accepts that war is inevitable, and that man is fundamentally flawed. To elaborate upon Billy's encounter with the Marine Major at the Lions Club meeting:

> He was in favour of increased bombings, of bombing North Vietnam back into the Stone Age, if it refused to see reason. Billy was not moved to protest the bombing of North Vietnam, did not shudder about the hideous things he himself had seen bombing do. He was simply having lunch with the Lions Club, of which he was past president now. (44)

In highlighting Billy's lack of emotional response, his childlike ignorance of the brutality of war, despite having lived through it, this scene serves to expose Pilgrim's lack of personal development, while subtly and humorously emphasising the escapist time-travel motif in the novel. The implication is that, though Pilgrim has lived a full life, including holding the honour of Lions Club President, he remains the same "child" who embarked on his war crusade many years ago. Broer therefore argues that it is in fact the author who is the true hero of the novel: "Billy [...] may choose to close his eyes to unpleasantness, but Billy's regress is Vonnegut's progress" (Broer 74). Furthermore, there is an implied passiveness to Billy's life. The honour of his Lions Club presidency is not celebrated, and we can infer that Billy does not celebrate this, or much else in his life. We know this, indeed, as he gets "disgracefully drunk" to cheat on his wife at New Years' (33), and is distressed by his wedding anniversary (126).

The logical explanation for Billy's dulled existence, his lifelessness, his passivity ("everything was pretty much all right with Billy" (114)) and most assuredly his time travel, is that he is suffering, throughout his life, from unexamined and untreated Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. There are countless incidents of this, but to highlight just a few: one of the first things we learn about Billy, in the brief sketch of his life that opens the second chapter, is that he "was treated in a veteran's hospital near Lake Placid, and was given shock treatments and released" (18). In Billy's hallucination immediately prior to his capture, he imagines that he "would turn to steam and float up among the treetops" and that he "was skating on a ballroom floor" while "thousands cheered" (35). There is also Billy's chronic weeping (44); Billy's shrieking laughter during *Cinderella* (71); and his proposal to "ugly Valencia," one of the "symptoms of his disease" (78). There is frequently a disconnect between emotion and reaction, and Billy's physiological response (laughter, weeping) does not match the event. One of these examples, the matter of Billy's weeping, is elaborated on rather tellingly. In an attempt to solve a "complaint" whereby "every so often, for no apparent reason, Billy Pilgrim would find himself weeping," his doctor prescribes a daily nap. The weeping is described as an inconvenience, like IBS, and not a

chronic symptom of psychological pain. It is rather easy to hide, but a nuisance for the patient: "Nobody had ever caught Billy doing it. Only the doctor knew. It was an extremely quiet thing Billy did, and not very moist" (44). It further establishes Billy's child-like nature, his innocence and naiveté, and most importantly his passivity. He is gently vibrated to sleep by a product called "Magic Fingers" which rocks him: "but sleep would not come. Tears came instead. They seeped. Billy turned on the Magic Fingers, and he was jiggled as he wept." Everything about this, from the sentence structure to Billy's tears, is passive. Billy is not crying, his tears are escaping, as though disconnected from any true emotion. It is the eventual realisation of this emotion and a gradual though incomplete marriage of feeling and symptom (laughter, tears) that marks Billy's tentative psychological progress.

The question of whether Billy's time travel is "true" or a result of his trauma – the truest symptom of his disease – is rather more tricky, and the issue is handled subtly in the novel. A surface reading of *Slaughterhouse-Five* may reveal a sometimes-funny book with occasional swearing that has science-fiction elements. But Vonnegut's use of science-fiction as a means through which to discuss serious subject matter is well established by the time he published *Slaughterhouse-Five*. The space-travel passages are escapist (Montana Wildhack, the blue-movie star companion serves as ample evidence), but the Tralfmadorian vision of life and death is comforting and more religious than other-worldly. Occasionally time travel is explicitly mentioned in proximity to traumatic events, such as: "This was before Billy had his head broken in an airplane crash, by the way – before he became so vocal about flying saucers and traveling in time" (32). Later (or, indeed, earlier), in the Veterans Hospital with Eliot Rosewater in 1948, we learn about Billy's early attempt at psychiatric treatment, when he was committed along with twenty-nine other patients on his ward who had "come there voluntarily, alarmed by the outside world" (72). Occasionally, as in the instance of the ballroom hallucination, it is stated explicitly whether Billy is time travelling, hallucinating, or even remembering, which could lend credence to the science fiction interpretation. However, this is the easy option. The question of whether Billy's distinction between time travel, hallucination and memory is a facet of his fantasy, justifying its validity, or whether the quality of these moments is somehow different, is key to understanding their function. These potential hallucinations, as well as the morphine-induced fever dream in the POW camp, among others, are set apart from the instances of time travel: they are moments occurring within on-going sections, passages, or moments in time, and do not begin new sections. They are also

accompanied by a change in "tone" – though the difficulty of how to characterise the change remains – and Vonnegut uses the term himself; as Billy hallucinates his ballroom-dancing career, "The cheering went on but its tone was altered as the hallucination gave way to time-travel" (36).

There is an extended joke in Billy's psychiatric treatment in the Veterans hospital, which can be viewed at an extended criticism of the treatment of Veterans, particularly relevant to contemporary Vietnam War issues at the time of publication. Psychiatric treatment is parodied, as it is in *Catch-22*, and Billy's treatment is a feeble box-ticking exercise, as though shock treatments and a quick release will be sufficient to cure the damage. The doctors in the Veterans hospital are quick to wash their hands of the burden of psychological damage, thus making a joke of their own profession, but the sequence is also a riff on the idea of blaming one's childhood for psychiatric issues: "They didn't think it had anything to do with the war. They were sure Billy as going to pieces because his father had thrown him into the deep end of the Y.M.C.A. swimming pool when he was a little boy, and had then taken him to the rim of the Grand Canyon" (72). However, we know that the first time Billy becomes unstuck in time, during what we may assume is a panic attack (31), the *first* moment he relives through time travel is this swimming lesson. It is notable that the seeds of childhood trauma are planted by the doctors in the Veterans hospital, hinting at contemporary Vietnam and government attempts to conceal or gloss over veterans' scars, both physical and emotional. We also know that it is in the Veterans hospital that Billy first learns of Kilgore Trout, becomes a fan of science fiction, and, we may assume, reads of Tralfamadore:

> Rosewater was twice as smart as Billy, but he and Billy were dealing with similar crises in similar ways. They had both found life meaningless, partly because of what they had seen in war. Rosewater, for instance, had shot a fourteen-year-old fireman, mistaking him for a German soldier. So it goes. And Billy had seen the greatest massacre in European history, which was the fire-bombing of Dresden. So it goes.
>
> So they were trying to re-invent themselves and their universe. Science fiction was a big help. (73)

The riff on psychiatry is developed with a play on "reinvention," a term often bandied about in popular psychology. The joke is in the subversion of the meaning of the term in a psychiatric context, and the reality that Rosewater and Billy quite literally reinvent their

universes to accommodate the escapist and comforting Tralfamadorian vision of time. Science fiction is, indeed, a "big help."[7] Not because the novels provide comfort or escape, but because they help these psychologically fragile men create elaborate fantasy worlds, to cope with their trauma and proceed – if dully – with the challenge of daily existence. Kilgore Trout even provides a justification for the necessity of creating their fantasy: *Maniacs in the Fourth Dimension* is about "people whose mental diseases couldn't be treated because the causes of the diseases were all in the fourth dimension, and three-dimensional Earthling doctors couldn't see those causes at all, or even imagine them" (75). They are therefore trapped. In believing the Tralfamadorian vision of time, in believing indeed in Kilgore Trout, they are forced to believe that their human doctors cannot see their illnesses, and are thus insulated from any potential, if meagre, benefit they can do.

The repeated "So it goes" is a bell that sounds after each death, a Tralfamadorian response to the illusion of death:

> When a Tralfamadorian sees a corpse, all he thinks is that the dead person is in bad condition in that particular moment, but that the same person is just fine in plenty of other moments. Now, when I myself hear that somebody is dead, I simply shrug and say what the Tralfamadorians say about dead people, which is "So it goes". (20)

"So it goes," therefore, is meant to provide comfort, to allow Billy, who has lost his father and wife, and witnessed the death of thousands, to rationalise this unfathomable loss, to dismiss it as belonging to a specific moment, to distance Billy from reality and to insulate him from his grief. However, because it is repeated so frequently in the novel – 103 times to be exact (Standish and Vonnegut, Jr. 299) – it can have a range of effects on the reader, from dully mundane, to jarringly tedious. It is, on occasion, used humorously:

> Billy Pilgrim padded downstairs on his blue and ivory feet. He went into the kitchen, where the moonlight called his attention to a half bottle of champagne on the kitchen table, all that was left from the reception in the tent. Somebody had stoppered it again. "Drink me," it seemed to say.
> So Billy uncorked it with his thumbs. It didn't make a pop. The champagne was dead. So it goes.

[7] This turn of phrase isn't an accident: "big help" is often deployed sarcastically in American vernacular ("Thanks, you're a big help.").

The mantra has been repeated twenty-eight times already at this stage in the novel, has been applied to minor characters, a dog named Spot, the only American soldier to be shot for cowardice since the Civil War, a gun crew, and Billy Pilgrim's wife, so the audience is aware that it is a death-knell: a narrative expectation. The "surprise" comes only in acknowledging that the champagne is dead. Jerry Palmer's twin syllogisms arise again here, with the use of the word "dead": We have learned that "so it goes" is the Tralfamadorian response to death: we know that people die, and that "so it goes" is the appropriate response. We also know that champagne can die (go flat), so, logically, "so it goes" must be the appropriate response. Thus, in the case of the champagne bubbles, the wry smile as opposed to the belly laugh is more appropriate: the joke is dependent on "so it goes" being an appropriate response to mass slaughter as well as to "dead" champagne bubbles. It is symptomatic of Billy's passivity that his response to these deaths is equal.

In the Veterans hospital in 1948, there are hints that Billy may, should he choose, be cured of his PTSD. He hears birds outside, and one *asks* "Poo-tee-weet?" (72). We know, from the introduction, that "Poo-tee-weet" is the only thing there is to say about a massacre (14). Here, as in the novel's final word, the birdsong is presented as a question, as though to ask "is it over?" We may assume that if Billy is seeking to address this question in the Veterans Hospital in 1948, and if, after his second hospitalisation from the plane crash and the traumatic death of his wife in 1968, Billy is attempting to get on national television to spread the comforting Tralfamadorian vision of time, that he has failed to address his PTSD in 1948. Thus, the cycle of time travel and the slow progression of the Dresden story continue. The novel's chronology is clear, it is revealed at the end of the autobiographical chapter. The progression of time, however, and the unpredictable resolution of Billy's traumatic experience, is the true story of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. The bird's question is not asked again until the final page, after the full horror of the Dresden corpse mines has been explained in simple language, after Billy has relived and survived his traumatic experience. It is still a question, this "Poo-tee-weet," but we are left with the feeling that the answer is somehow more hopeful.

The novel's non-linear format is self-consciously acknowledged by the author in his description of Tralfamadorian novels, laid out "in brief clumps of symbols separated by stars," similar to telegrams:

> There isn't any particular relationship between all the messages, except that the author has chosen them carefully, so that, when seen all at once, they produce

> an image of life that is beautiful and surprising and deep. There is no beginning, no middle, no end, no suspense, no moral, no causes, no effects. (64)

In actuality, what this format does is remove the element of suspense, and the repeated "So it goes" resonates with the reader so often they become passive towards it, as Billy does towards life. Pilgrim becomes unstuck for the first time early on in his war experience, and from that time has an awareness of his entire future, providing a rationalisation for his passive approach to life – he is at the mercy of fate, and unable to change his own. Occasionally the format is used to provide comic insulation: we may laugh because we know Billy will survive, or in contrast we can laugh in the knowledge that Edgar Derby will die (case in point, his letter home to Margaret discussed above). When we are told of Billy's death on 13 February 1976, as he addresses a baseball stadium crowd, Billy laughs and, interestingly, "invites the crowd to laugh with him" (103). Here is an emotional response, at least, though it is an ostensibly inappropriate one. Billy, serene, is assassinated by the now insane Paul Lazzaro, and presented as a prophet or martyr. It is notable, also, that the short autobiographical passage at the beginning of the final chapter references the assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King (154). When Billy invites the crowd to laugh with him, there is little to encourage the reader to join in, and the inappropriateness of doing so is reinforced by comparison to the assassinations of Kennedy and King.

As the novel progresses, Billy's emotions progress towards some kind of resolution. There is peace in his escapist fantasy, as an idyllic Montana Wildhack nurses Billy's son. She is naked, the Eve to Billy's Adam. She is "Tralfamadorian and guilt-free" (151). Her final word is Reinhold Niebuhr's Serentity Prayer, granting the serenity to accept the things that cannot be changed, the courage to change what can, and the wisdom to know the difference. The same prayer hangs on the wall of Billy's office, expressing "his method for keeping going, even though he was unenthusiastic about living" (44). It is incongruously illustrated in-text between a line-drawing of two large, round and garish breasts, written on a heart-shaped locket. It is at once a reminder that life is sweet, that our bodies need not be a source of shame (a rejection of original sin), and that we must accept and make peace with life. The drawing of the breasts is like something a teenage boy would sketch while defacing a poster, but there is no real invitation to laughter, as Montana Wildhack has already demonstrated that her body provides no shame. The

beginning of the next chapter is once again autobiographical, so there is a kind of conclusion here, in this lesson of acceptance.

Billy's realisation of his lingering psychological pain reaches a climax at his wedding anniversary. While listening to a barbershop quartet (the Four-eyed Bastards) sing "That Old Gang of Mine," he has a powerful emotional reaction:

> Unexpectedly, Billy Pilgrim found himself upset by the song and the occasion. He had never had an old gang, old sweethearts and pals, but he missed one anyway, as the quartet made slow, agonized experiments with chords — chords intentionally sour, sourer still, unbearably sour, and then a chord that was suffocatingly sweet, and then some sour ones again. Billy had powerful psychosomatic responses to the changing chords. His mouth filled with the taste of lemonade, and his face became grotesque, as though he really were being stretched on the torture engine called the *rack*. (126)

Billy's synaesthesiastic reaction to the song marks the moment at which his emotions begin to interact with the novel's narrative, to match what is happening in the parallel Dresden story-line. At this point in that narrative arc, Billy and his fellow POWs are trapped in the meat locker, *not* witnessing the bombing of Dresden. It is a very powerful narrative moment for Billy to have such a reaction, particularly when one considers Vonnegut's challenge in writing a war novel about a moment he did not actually witness. Billy's response to the barbershop quartet is jarringly out of character, and a fitting reflection with which to cast an unseeing eye on the traumatic event itself. Billy's abrupt awakening from his dulled progress through life is far more powerful than any description of the actual bombing could be. It is also important to note that, in the more contemporaneous narrative, Billy's life as an optometrist, he has just found and befriended Kilgore Trout. Trout is, in fact, in the room at the moment the barbershop quartet affects Billy so. The gap between Billy's life and his emotional response to that life begins to heal, as the creator of his escapist fantasy vision, the science-fiction hack writer responsible for the creation of Tralfamadore, is physically present. His fantasy life gently shatters as Kilgore behaves like a celebrity author at the party, teasing Maggie White – "a dull person, but a sensational invitation to make babies" (124) – that his stories are all true, "If I wrote something that hadn't really happened, and I tried to sell it, I could go to jail. That's *fraud*" (125). He reassures concerned friends and his wife, as the psychological barriers that have held

strong all these years begin to crumble like the showers of calcimine in the meat-locker in Dresden:

> "Really — I'm O.K." And he was, too, except that he could find no explanation for why the song had affected him so grotesquely. He had supposed for years that he had no secrets from himself. Here was proof that he had a great big secret somewhere inside, and he could not imagine what it was. (126)

Billy's reaction to the barbershop quartet is one of the most honest and open of Billy's psychotic breaks. He remembers, explicitly does not time travel, but *remembers* the night Dresden is destroyed (129). He remembers the sounds above as he and the other POWs take shelter in the meat-locker. He remembers the guards' movements. He recalls thinking of everyone else he knew in Dresden dying. It is specific to Billy's power to remember: it is simple, innocent, and intimate. The trigger that unlocked Billy's memory is revealed:

> The guards drew together instinctively, rolled their eyes. They experimented with one expression and then another, said nothing, though their mouths were often open. They looked like a silent film of a barbershop quartet.
> "So long forever," they might have been singing, "old fellows and pals; So long forever, old sweethearts and pals — God bless 'em —" (129–130)

At last, Billy reacts appropriately, recalling rather than reliving his principal traumatic moment. He is not numb, but feeling. In the next episode, Billy tells his escapist fantasy, Montana Wildhack, about the moment of the bombing. Unlike a similar moment with Valencia Merble, he is not mysterious; his role is not concealed by Valencia's glorification of Billy's war story. It is open and honest, and he recalls the guards who "in their astonishment and grief" looked like the barbershop quartet. It is the moment of Billy's awakening.

3.3.3 Manifestations of the Authorial Self

As all of this suggests, Vonnegut creates a concrete distance between his actual presence and that of his protagonist. While he unabashedly announces his presence four times in the sections concerned with the war, the authorial manifestation is a firmly separate entity from Billy Pilgrim. Shields reveals that Pilgrim was in fact based on a real POW in Dresden with Vonnegut, a Private Edward "Joe" Crone of Rochester, New

York, who intended to be ordained an Episcopalian minister after the war (Shields 66). Shields writes, "to Vonnegut, 'he was beautiful,' a kind of holy fool" (77).

Though countless incidents in *Slaughterhouse-Five* are based, wholly or in part, on true events, and it is widely accepted that hack writer Kilgore Trout represents Vonnegut's literary ego,[8] in understanding Vonnegut's own war experience it is important to consider the moments where Vonnegut, author, breaks the fourth wall and announces his presence in Pilgrim's narrative. The disturbing Colonel Wild Bob incident is the first in which Pilgrim and Vonnegut share an experience. The refrain, "If you're ever in Cody, Wyoming, just ask for Wild Bob!" (49), is repeated on numerous occasions, as a symbol of American values and a yearning for home. Billy mutters the phrase in the hospital while Rumfoord discusses the bombing of Dresden (137), and Vonnegut quips lazily to Bernard V. O'Hare when they return to Dresden in 1967 (155).[9] It represents a kind of perverse homecoming; in the absurdist war experience, Dresden represents a safe haven of sorts, in contrast with the down-home America which perpetuated this great evil. When Wild Bob originally extends the invitation, in the throes of his death from double pneumonia, Vonnegut writes, as quoted above, "I was there. So was my old war buddy, Bernard V. O'Hare" (49). Thus, when the phrase is recycled during the 1967 Guggenheim trip, it is a sort of tragically ironic in-joke, delivered lazily, inspiring no laughter.

There is a more subtle allusion, also, to the authorial presence. We learn, in the autobiographical first chapter, that Vonnegut has "this disease late at night sometimes, involving alcohol and the telephone. I get drunk, and I drive my wife away with a breath like mustard gas and roses" (3). He asks the operator to connect him to friends he hasn't spoken to in years. Immediately prior to his abduction by the Tralfamadorians, after Barbara's wedding, Billy answers a phone call: "There was a drunk at the other end. Billy could almost smell his breath – mustard gas and roses. It was a wrong number. Billy hung up" (53). Again, the repeated phrase is an in-joke for the alert reader, but also a reaffirmation that Billy and Vonnegut are separate entities. Vonnegut may just as well have been phoning Joe Crone.

The authorial manifestation during the latrine incident (91) has been discussed above, and serves to reinforce the anti-heroism of both Pilgrim and Vonnegut's own involvement in the war. In revealing the author's presence, heightening the reality of the moment, the

[8] Sometimes self-deprecatingly so: "'Jesus – if only Kilgore Trout could *write*!' Rosewater exclaimed. He had a point: Kilgore Trout's unpopularity was deserved. His prose was frightful. Only his ideas were good" (79).
[9] See also Shields 225.

idea of the Children's Crusade takes priority over the image of the dirty, war-loving old man. It's also quite funny, in the way that a joke sometimes functions better when related from the first-person perspective. The innocence comes to the foreground again as Pilgrim and Vonnegut arrive together in Dresden: "Somebody behind him in the boxcar said, 'Oz.' That was I. That was me. The only other city I'd ever seen was Indianapolis, Indiana" (108). The suggestion, again, that Dresden is a kind of spiritual home for Vonnegut recalls the refrain from L. Frank Baum's *Wizard of Oz*, "There's no place like home."

After Pilgrim's psychological epiphany, inspired by the Four-eyed Bastards, there follows a key moment when he claims ownership of his war experience, and strives for recognition of his presence for the atrocity at Dresden. Though his life's work to this point has been escapism, it is notable that when he returns to the hospital for a second time – to treat his head injury after the plane crash – he chooses to remember and embrace his time in Dresden. In order to do so, he echoes Vonnegut's announcements of authorial presence, as he interrupts Bertram Copeland Rumfoord's discussion of the historical Dresden bombing with the decidedly emphatic "I was there" (140). In order to be fully understood, he waits a very long time to speak again, so his words will not be dismissed:

> There in the hospital, Billy was having an adventure very common among people without power in time of war: He was trying to prove to a wilfully deaf and blind enemy that he was interesting to hear and see. He kept silent until the lights went out at night, and then, when there had been a long period of silence containing nothing to echo, he said to Rumfoord, "I was in Dresden when it was bombed. I was a prisoner of war. […] We don't ever have to talk about it," said Billy. "I just want you to know: I was there." (141)

Both Billy and Vonnegut have their homecoming. In the final chapter Vonnegut returns with O'Hare, as Billy's war-story comes to a close, and the full horror of his trauma is revealed in the corpse mines:

> Billy Pilgrim was meanwhile traveling back to Dresden, too, but not in the present. He was going back there in 1945, two days after the city was destroyed. Now Billy and the rest were being marched into the ruins by their guards. I was there. O'Hare was there. We had spent the past two nights in the blind innkeeper's stable. Authorities had found us there. They told us what to do. We were to borrow picks and shovels and crowbars and wheelbarrows from our

> neighbors. We were to march with these implements to such and such a place in the ruins, ready to go to work. (156)

Now, at last, as Billy Pilgrim attains a kind of peace, recalling and appropriately reliving his traumatic experience, character and author are united. The narrative switches from third to first person: "Authorities found *us* there"; "They told *us* what to do"; "*We* were to march [...]". As Billy Pilgrim's escapist science-fiction fantasy finally re-joins with his reality on the surface of the moon, so too does Vonnegut's authorial self join with his most important fictional character as they come home to Dresden.

3.4 Conclusions

The key function of the joke-work in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, as in *Catch-22*, is to reach a resolution, and both novels, having provided the necessary catharsis through humour, present comparatively un-funny final (or close to final) chapters. Billy Pilgrim's eventual realisation of the full extent of his traumatic moment draws together his current and former self, allowing him to be whole again, in the same way that Heller's greatest joke, catch-22, is finally resolved when Snowden spills his secret. The joke-work done, the final chapters can be honest, serious, and truthful – recalling Vonnegut's comments in *A Man Without A Country* regarding the difficulty of sustaining a comedic response. There is a parallel between *Catch-22*'s search for Snowden's secret, and *Slaughterhouse-Five's* search for Billy Pilgrim's "big secret somewhere inside" (126), his trauma from the bombing of Dresden. Both novels repeat and circle until they can satisfactorily come to, embrace, and accept this painful conclusion.

Slaughterhouse-Five makes occasional subtle nods to *Catch-22*. Billy Pilgrim is a chaplain's assistant, "customarily a figure of fun in the American Army" (Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five* 22) and of course Heller's R. O. Shipman is a chaplain. The "figure of fun" comment could be construed as a reference to the earlier comedic novel; however, it is more likely that Billy Pilgrim is characterised as a chaplain for the religious over-tones, and his non-combatant, Christ-like tendencies. More significant is the reference to echolalia in *Slaughterhouse-Five* when Billy Pilgrim begins to repeat everything Professor Rumfoord says (140), recalling the constant repetition, recycling, and reduction of language in *Catch-22*, but more specifically the incidents involving the moaning in the briefing room (Heller, *Catch-22* 253), and the panicked discovery of the Soldier in White's return (418). Finally

there is Rumfoord's nod to the men in the air, the men responsible for the bombing of Dresden, the men in the bomber squadron. "It must have been hell on the ground" offers Rumfoord, and then "Pity the men who had to *do* it" (Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five* 145). What is implied here is that the burden of guilt outweighed the fear and horror that bombardiers such as Yossarian experienced, but Billy's "I do" indicates that he has thought of this, that he has considered the Yossarians over-head.

The most interesting and fruitful comparisons between *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Catch-22* come from juxtaposing Yossarian to Billy Pilgrim, Heller to Vonnegut. Most obviously, we have an author who had experienced World War II from the air writing a novel of the horror of World War II from the air, and in contrast an author who experienced a single, significant, traumatic event somewhat passively and from the ground writing a novel of a man who experiences rather than lives World War II. Vonnegut's novel creates insulation, and a gradual discovery that horror is real, that trauma is real, no matter what the power of that insulation. Heller's novel creates absurdity, and allows this absurdity to spiral ever outward, rather than inward, in order to reflect the sprawling chaos of the war experience.

Finally, Heller's humour reflects absurdity, so that through the constant, drilling, repetitive absurdity of situation, language, person, and circumstance, the reader eventually comes to share in Yossarian's frustration and madness, creating a climactic situation in which escape is the only sane and logical solution, and the exhausted reader shares the belief that Yossarian must flee. Vonnegut's humour implicates the reader, invites them to laugh alongside these children on their crusade, thus allowing the reader to share in the war experience and the associated horror. If you can laugh with me, says Vonnegut in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, you may share the burden of my "big secret somewhere inside".

Slaughterhouse-Five is the last of the comedic anti-war novels under discussion here to receive extensive critical treatment as a Black Humor novel. Klinkowitz claimed that Vonnegut moved on from Black Humor through structural innovation. However, I have argued before that Black Humor did not cease to exist; critics simply failed to chart its development from a humour studies perspective. If we examine later examples of novels using comedy to cope with tragic circumstances, it becomes clear that there is indeed a continuity of humorous technique. Furthermore, they remain social critics. Vonnegut's inclusion of the deaths of Robert F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King at the end of *Slaughterhouse-Five* is echoed by Tom Robbins in his inclusion of the 9/11 terrorist attacks in *Villa Incognito* and Vigorito's references to student protest and Kent State. The comedic

anti-war novel was not "dead" by the mid-1970s – the comic technique simply changed in tone with the passing of time.

In attempting to understand and come to terms with the psychological burden of Dresden, Vonnegut "storifies" his war experience on two levels: autobiographically and fictionally. Will Kaufman describes the difficult line a comedian must tread: "deflect[ing] the force of his criticism by hiding behind the masks of allegory and play" (Kaufman 148), and the risk of "irony fatigue": the inability of an aging comedian to conceal their distaste for society behind a comic mask any longer. Vonnegut refers to this comic exhaustion in *A Man Without a Country*. The novels preceding *Slaughterhouse-Five* grew increasingly Black, and those that followed were, for a time, increasingly comedic, fulfilling his promise that they will be more "fun". However, in *Slaughterhouse-Five* he is at the height of his powers, and the delicate balance between tragedy and comedy serves to increase his readers' empathy, draw them in through shared laughter, and in doing so, to fully expose the horror of the war zone.

Chapter 4. Tom Robbins

In interview after interview Tom Robbins laments his treatment by the East Coast literary establishment, beginning with Michael Rogers in 1976, and continuing to his most recent media appearances. The problem, he claims, is that critics have not yet discovered the correct way to read him; though his narrative is decidedly American his literary aesthetic is Eastern, not Western, and "that's the only tradition they recognize and understand" (Purdon and Torrey 108). Occasionally guilty of self-plagiarism, and certainly prone to repetition – Rogers bemoaned with growing frustration the careful, almost calculated way Robbins spoke in his interview for *Rolling Stone* – the frequency with which certain ideas and phrases crop up over the years indicates that he interviews with the same slow dedicated certainty he writes: once an idea is fully formed there are no revisions. His anti-literary establishment diatribe is usually followed by his assertion that the flaw in critics' approach to his work is their inability to take his playfulness seriously: he believes they find it "problematic". Thus it may be that the ideal way to approach Robbins' work is to specifically tackle its playfulness. And according to Tom Robbins at least, it has not been done before.

Tom Robbins is a, possibly *the*, counter-culture writer. He so thoroughly embodies the spirit of the 1960s that *Rolling Stone* described *Another Roadside Attraction* (hereafter referred to as *ARA*) as "the quintessential counterculture novel" (Purdon and Torrey 3) and no lesser critics than the Hells' Angels declared it their favourite book (60). Elvis was reading it the night he died (60). "With the Hell's Angels and Elvis on your side," quipped Peter O. Whitmer, "who the hell needs the *New York Review of Books*?" (60). Though his books do not offer extended comedic assaults on the war experience, as *Catch-22* or *Slaughterhouse-Five* do, the spirit of protest is the very soul of his work. Robbins' literature protests against stagnation in all regards, in government, in literature, and against the "tyranny of the dull mind" (Robbins, *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* 389). His use of comedy is central to his protest; in his insistence on writing "seriously playful" literature, Robbins is railing against tyranny.

While Robbins is hesitant to "avoid the autobiographical in my novels, wishing neither to shortchange imagination nor use up my life in literature" (Robbins, *Tibetan Peach Pie* xiii), Liam O. Purdon and Beef Torrey are quick to highlight the effect of formative experiences in Robbins' youth on his literary output (ix). This is arguably most evident in

Villa Incognito where his fascination with and desire to run away with the circus – so often mentioned in interviews and expanded upon heavily in *Tibetan Peach Pie* (hereafter *TPP*) – comes fully to fruition. Though Amanda and John Paul Ziller meet at the Indo Tibetan Circus and Giant Panda Gypsy Blues Band in *ARA*, Dern Foley, Dickie Goldwire and Mars Albert Stubblefield not only run away with the Laos National Circus, they remain in hiding there for over twenty-five years (Robbins, *Villa Incognito* 50), MIA from the Vietnam War, presumed dead, they are the secret residents of Villa Incognito.

This chapter will assess critics' attempts to read Robbins, offer a new interpretation of his writing from the perspective of his humour, and argue for an understanding of Robbins within the history of Black Humor, emphasising his development from earlier examples while continuing to tread the delicate line between comedy and tragedy.

4.1 Literature Review

Tom Robbins' early publication history, and reputation among the paperback presses, echoes that of Kurt Vonnegut and may account in part for shortcomings in critical attention to his work. As Robbins complains, critics did not really understand how to talk about him, and the issue may be rooted in an insistence in taking him "seriously" – perhaps to lend some additional degree of gravitas to the subject – instead of giving serious critical attention to his playfulness. As critical attention to Robbins is less prolific than the earlier authors, it seems prudent to provide some additional context at this time.

Another Roadside Attraction was first published in 1971, and followed in 1976 by *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*. *Cowgirls'* publication was somewhat unusual, and a unique (at the time) strategy was developed to capitalise on the underground success of *ARA*. *ARA* had initially been published in hardback by Doubleday, and performed poorly. However, the Ballantine edition, based purely on word-of-mouth, was taking off and "starting to sell like crazy on campuses and in any city where long-haired, drug-consuming young people gathered" (Rogers and Robbins 10). By the time of Rogers' *Rolling Stone* interview in 1976 *ARA* had sold over half a million copies without the benefit of advertising. So when Robbins' literary agent Phoebe Lamore approached Bantam with the paperback rights to *Cowgirls*, then a work-in-progress, the idea of selling rights to a paperback publisher was unheard of. Bantam sold the rights to Houghton Mifflin, who simultaneously published a small hardcover edition (for reviewers and libraries) and a trade paperback edition: the first time Houghton Mifflin had done such a thing (11). Despite Robbins' popularity and

impressive paperback sales, this unusual publication history may partially account for resistance among reviewers and academics in the early part of his career. The dearth of scholarly material necessitates a broader review of Robbins' treatment by academics, however this approach is complemented by the author's tendency to expound on the same philosophical themes throughout his oeuvre.

The first scholarly work on Tom Robbins emerged in 1978, with Robert L. Nadeau's article in *Critique*, "Physics and Cosmology in the Fiction of Tom Robbins". In this essay Nadeau provides a reading of *ARA* and *Cowgirls* within a scientific framework, specifically Heisenberg's Indeterminacy Principle and Einstein's Theory of Relativity. He argues that the artist's task is to shape scientific discovery, frame it for a general audience, and help assimilate new scientific ideas into the public consciousness. In the course of this essay Nadeau outlines the way Robbins' borrows ideas from physics to illuminate his philosophy. He provides a reading of *ARA* in terms of Heisenberg's assertion that there is an element of chance in the universe's mode of operation, that the "rules of nature" are not immutable (66). Similarily, he interprets *Cowgirls* in terms of Einstein's Theory of Relativity, which expands on the Clockworks as a symbol of the contemporary scientific belief (Quantum Theory) that time as a linear progression of events is doubtful (70). In his analysis of both novels Nadeau highlights the difference between Eastern and Western thought, and criticises dogmatic views of our world, both religious and scientific. He highlights Marx Marvellous realisation that accepting scientific theory as fact is as dangerous as accepting religious allegory as anything other than hypothetical (65). Nadeau's article is an unusual literary approach, but in tying Robbins to scientific theory he does lend a degree of seriousness to the novels discussed, while simultaneously calling to attention the depth, quality and range of Robbins' own reading. Nadeau's 1981 book *Readings from the New Book of Nature* condenses this argument considerably in the chapter on Robbins, however this book also notably contains a chapter on Kurt Vonnegut, indicating that criticism addressing both authors focussed not on similarities between their comedy, but rather their philosophy.

Raymond Olderman's 1978 article, "The People who Fell to Earth," provides a kind of taxonomy of prevalent concerns in literature from 1974 to 1976. Olderman addresses broad recurring themes in the literature of "the people who fell to earth after The Thing That Happened in the Sixties" (498). He outlines a relatively elaborate classification system and illustrative examples; for example, under the umbrella term of the 'new consciousness' he identifies three models: theoretical (such as "The Principle of

Simultaneity" – this strand recalls Nadeau's reading of Robbins' work within the parameters of physics); new social and political arrangements (such as outer space, communes, utopia); and new human models (such as The New Woman, The New Man, and The New Black) (503). Within these three models he identifies several sub-types, and illustrates their prevalence with analysis of one or two key texts, listing numerous other examples. In this process he name checks some eighty books by almost as many writers with Heller's *Something Happened*, Vonnegut's *Slapstick* and Robbins' *Cowgirls* included. Though *Cowgirls* falls within the time-frame that Olderman is describing, he quickly dismisses the novel as "less genuine and less impressive" than *ARA* (505). He cites *Cowgirls* as an example when discussing spiritualising work as a "means of seeking both personal balance and an effect on public behaviour" (506), a likely nod to Robbins' philosophical asides and authorial filibusters. In the discussion of the "imperative to *keep moving*", one of three characteristics of new consciousness, Sissy Hankshaw's hitch-hiking is cited; a form of quest whose final goal is movement itself rather than a specific destination (509). *Cowgirls* is again name-checked as an example of novels with a representative character forming a model for a particular (and implicitly peculiar) community within the new consciousness, specifically a model of the 'New Sorcerer' (513). Finally, and unsurprisingly, *Cowgirls* is grouped along with Charlotte Painter's *Seeing Things* in the sub-section of New Woman fiction, which is concerned with "The Female Principle", and more specifically with reclaiming a kind of lost dimension of the Female Principle (516). Though *Cowgirls* is not addressed in any great depth (none of the eighty texts are), it does provide a context in which to read Robbins' work, and demonstrates his value as a pertinent example of literature from the period, and his relevance to dominant literary concerns.

The following year (1979) the first PhD thesis on Robbins' work was completed. Patricia E. Cleary Miller's dissertation "Reconciling Science and Mysticism: Characterization in the Novels of Tom Robbins" was submitted to the University of Kansas, Lawrence, and also included an interview with Robbins. Though Miller worked for the Department of English of Rockhurt University for many years ('Patricia Cleary Miller & William Trowbridge'), her research interests as well as her literary output moved towards poetry. She did not subsequently write or publish on Robbins' work.

Charles Senn Taylor's pamphlet "Tom Robbins' Chink: a Posthumous Zarathustra" posits that *Cowgirls'* Chink is comparable to Nietzche's Zarathustra, and compares lessons the Chink imparts to Sissy with those which Zarahustra passes on to the Übermensch. Taylor discusses the idea that Western Society seeks unattainable values (such as the

Clock People's "Eternity of Joy" (5)), as well as the gurus' acceptance that there are no absolute truths since God is dead (7), and thus that the best way to 'teach' disciples was to drive them away – quite literally in the case of pilgrims seeking the Chink's teaching (11). He also argues that Sissy, the quester, is the ideal disciple for the Chink as she comes to him having already found herself *in* the quest; she hitchhikes not towards a specific destination, but rather to move for movement's sake (12). Taylor points to the Chink's advice to Sissy, to seek an earlier western spiritual heritage (The Horned One (13)). The latter part of the pamphlet turns to Nietzche's remarks on Greek Tragedy, the juxtaposition of Apollinian and Dionysian principles, and views Dionysian tragedy as embracing the irrational life, thus arguing that Tragedy (which contains both elements) is a rejection of Plato's Nihilism (17). He links this back to the Chink's clock works, a non-linear, artistic vision of time which is inherently ambiguous, paradoxical and ultimately creative (23). Pursuit of this creative vision is the ultimate quest, and only art can lead to childlike innocence (20).

Still Life with Woodpecker, Robbins' third novel, was published in 1980. In that year Jerome Klinkowitz mentioned Robbins in "Avant-Garde and After." This article addresses a "crisis" in 1970s fiction, and critics' division on what mattered: "with one group of novelists and critics insisting that the true art of fiction lay in the writing, and the other more interested in what was written *about*" (125). Klinkowitz is initially critical of showmanship in the writing of the period, claiming that abstraction in other artistic formats had "dire consequences" in literature (125); however for the most part he is praiseworthy of avant-garde techniques and the writers who used them well. In discussing Brautigan's *Trout Fishing in America*, he mentions the power of the "comically over-wrought metaphor" to hold the reader's attention, forcing the reader's imagination to appreciate the absurdity of such language, thus bridging the gap between "tenor" and "vehicle" (128). He argues that such language use is used not for referral, but rather as objects themselves, creations of the author (128). Such comments could apply equally to Robbins' use of metaphor. Notably Klinkowitz classifies Robbins as part of an emergent group of 1970s writers who attempt to address society's problems without miring themselves in realism, labelling them "bubble gum fiction." Klinkowitz declares *ARA* "the first underground classic of bubble gum fiction" (134), and much of his analysis focuses on Robbins' use of metaphor, particularly his use of layering, and metaphor which self-consciously describes language itself: "At his best, Robbins gives the reader one metaphor, then asks for cooperation in tying a second one to it…" (134). He praises Robbins' "plain American

speech", a comment oft made of Vonnegut's language, and claims Robbins' greatest trick is the use of a flat style to "defuse the most sacred objects," and attributes the success of Robbins' plots to this subversive style, describing fantastical events in down-to-earth language (134). Klinkowitz posits that the act of reading a novel written in this style initiates the reader, forcing them, through the act of reading, to undergo the same transformations as the characters therein (135). This idea will be discussed in depth in relation to Robbins' comedic technique, below.

Mark Siegel's *Tom Robbins*, from the Western Writers Series, also came out in the same year. It is perhaps the most fitting comment on Robbins' treatment by academia that in this, the first scholarly monograph about the author, his date of birth is misreported as 1936, not 1932.[10] Siegel's monograph marks a turning point in criticism about Robbins from a focus on philosophy, physics and metaphysics to considering him a writer of the Western Frontier, and claims that the conflict between freedom and social responsibility is the psychological function of Western writing (5). Siegel discusses a post-World War II shift from the Western tradition of integrating the hero into society to forcing the hero to remain outside of society – exiled, even killed (5) – a formula Robbins' employs somewhat subversively throughout his writing: though at the time of Siegel's writing only *ARA*, *Cowgirls* and *Still Life* were under discussion. Siegel agrees with ideas touched on by Raymond Olderman and Charles Senn Taylor, that Robbins' novels are spiritually didactic – designed to provide "positive, concrete suggestions for living in the modern world" (7), echoing Scholes' idea that Black Humor is "not concerned with what to do about life but with how to take it" (Scholes 43). Siegel also offers some enlightening commentary on Robbins' readership at that time:

> Perhaps because his interests revolve around the quest for a fulfilling style of life, his success largely has been with young people and others on the social fringes of America who are disenchanted with accepted majority lifestyles. That is, Robbins's readers are not the traditional readers of formula westerns, who seek a psychological or emotional release from tensions generated by American society. Rather, his readers are those people who, in an earlier time, would have been the Westerners themselves. Criticism of the established social and cultural orders is not difficult to find in contemporary American literature in fact, it is

[10] Purdon and Torrey attribute the error, which crops up frequently, to the Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication data, and add that "Mr. Robbins has assured us his mother first laid eyes on him in 1932" (Purdon and Torrey xxi).

> difficult to avoid. What Robbins has to offer are encouragement and advice on how to improve the quality of our lives (Siegel, *Tom Robbins* 9–10).

Siegel, much like Karbo (see below), is not a universal fan of Robbins' "didactic set-pieces", or authorial filibusters, claiming "some are amusing, some are informative, and some are sophomoric and annoying" (19), though he admits that when read metaphorically they do indeed hold value. Also up for critique are the two major paradoxes in Robbins' [early] work: the emphasis on individualism and the critique of egotism; and the devotion to Eastern philosophy (in *ARA*), in contrast with his rejection of 'gurus' in *Cowgirls*. Ultimately, Siegel determines, Robbins argues that "any truly fulfilling way of life must evolve from the individual's recognition of his true, personal relationship to the world (32). Siegel refers to the essay "Feminismo" in which Robbins states that "there are no group solutions. There are only individual solutions, individual liberations" (33), for which he received criticism for arguing against the kind of liberal-romantic movements which granted him his cult status in the first place. Siegel also evokes Nadeau and Olderman in references to 1970s literature's attempts to come to terms with new trends in physics and metaphysics, settling ultimately on a view that combines Existentialism and Nihilism, and refers to *Cowgirls:* "I believe in everything: nothing is sacred/I believe in nothing: everything is sacred" (qtd. in Siegel, *Tom Robbins* 33). The Chink's words, he argues, are a kind of rallying cry for this type of writing, which advocates a system of multiple, possibly contradictory perspectives, in which belief in and understanding of the contradictory nature of these perspectives is key to their value. This includes a system of understanding the individual in relation to the universe, and vice versa. According to Siegel, Robbins' suggests through the medium of *ARA*'s Amanda that we must "lighten up" (35), and he references Nadeau's essay in suggesting that as modern physics does not have rigid laws, modern man's metaphysics should not be rigid either (36). Siegel eventually ties together earlier criticism on physics and metaphysics in Robbins' work with his own argument that Robbins' literature is of the frontier; drawing on Lucy Hazard's assertion that "Frontier Literature" deals "with the physical pioneering for control of nature, with industrial pioneering for control of the labor of other men, and with spiritual pioneering for control of man's self" (50), Siegel suggests that American literature of the time, as evidenced by Robbins' work, is seeking a new philosophical frontier, and further that in viewing "control" with wariness Robbins is simultaneously evoking the early frontiersmen, whose journey westwards was a rejection of rigid Puritan values (50).

In a 1981 article for *Mosaic* Siegel expands on ideas from New Physics, which he began exploring in the 1980 monograph: though there is quite a bit of repetition. The essay argues that, "Robbins' conception of the world as probabilistic, unhierarchical, flexible and changing constructively is not mere optimism but a reasonably well-substantiated psycho-social application of contemporary physical sciences" ("The Meaning of Meaning in the Novels of Tom Robbins" 120). Siegel draws parallels between Robbins' work and that of Nobel Prize-winning physical chemist Ilya Prigogine, whose theory of dissipative structure posits that "order emerges *because* of entropy, not *despite* it" (120). Siegel claims that Robbins, in contrast with Thomas Pynchon, subscribes to Prigogine's view; through his novels he demonstrates that disruptions in society will give rise to a new, more positive structure. Individualism is foregrounded, and is achieved through self-knowledge: institutions change when individuals change. Robbins' protagonists go through a personal transformation, then re-enter society where their lead offers the possibility of societal change (121).

Beverly Gross's 1982 article for *North Dakota Quarterly* emphasises the counter-culture in *Cowgirls*, focussing on the character traits that make characters like Sissy, the Chink, and the Countess "misfits". Gross makes some interesting comments on the novel's privileging "madness" while denigrating "neurosis" (42); however the article tends towards plot summary, and reads rather more like a review of the novel than a critical analysis – indeed, the insights Gross provides are somewhat past their sell-by date, appearing as they do six years after the novel's publication. Gross does place Robbins in a lineage of generational "spokesmen" which includes other comedic writers of protest literature: "Tom Robbins may well be the most popular writer currently among the American hip young, for whom he is the kind of spokesman and inspiration that at various times in the recent past has been the mission of Joseph Heller, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., and Richard Brautigan" (36).

Browne and Fishwick's 1983 essay collection *The Hero in Transition* focuses on the United States' crisis of heroism in the post-Vietnam era; how a period of rapid change destabilised the idea of the hero figure, and the American public lost faith in their leaders, resulting in the rise of the anti-hero. In Fishwick's introduction to the volume he explains that the essays contained therein are an attempt to understand the heroes of contemporary literature, born out of a culture of rapidly increasing media coverage. William Nelson's essay looks at "Unlikely Heroes" in Robbins' *Cowgirls* as well as John Kennedy Toole's *Confederacy of Dunces* and John Irving's *The World According to Garp*. Nelson's essay examines

these novels' popularity in light of their comic-tragic mode and individualist heroes (163). Nelson focuses on Sissy Hankshaw's individualism, and in particular her rejection of sexual stereotypes: Sissy refuses to be a victim (165). Nelson argues that Sissy's innate individualism (her over-sized thumbs) which causes her alienation from society is actually her saving grace as she is alienated from an undesirable society and therefore redeemed through her alienation (166). According to Nelson the grotesque comic mode is used in all three novels to evoke 1960s ideals of "multiple modes of being" and promote individualism, and he makes some useful though under-explored connections between the use of the comic to explore this alternative, even transcendent reality, highlighting the chaos of the 'traditional' world, and the heroes' rejection of this chaos:

> Each perspective rejects traditional ways of being in the world. The heroes' often non-rational responses are intended to preserve the individual's right to *be* in a chaotic and irrational universe. The terror of this universe and the hypocrisy or falsification of conventional views of it require the comic mode to accommodate for and to humanize the chaos. Other modes, including the tragic, which implies dignity, transcendence or reconciliation, distort the true nature of the situation as seen by the novels. (169)

By way of conclusion Nelson recalls Fishwick's introductory reflections on the "violent and bizarre" modern world, and considers the tools at authors' disposal:

> The form of our response is not that of a comedy in which there is a reconciliation of social differences nor can the actors sustain the dignity of the tragic mode. The consciousness of such contradiction causes popular literay [sic] representations to take the form of the grotesque and their most important characters to be unlikely heroes. (170)

Nelson's essay and the reading of Sissy as an anti-hero figure recall similar interpretations of Yossarian and Billy Pilgrim.

Roger Sutton's 1983 article for *School Library Journal* bears an interesting comparison to "What They're Reading", the 1969 survey in *Change in Higher Education* which highlighted *Catch-22*'s continuing popularity on college campuses, and the 1965 *Spider* article announcing the rise of Joseph Heller along with the demise of Salinger and Golding (Prickett). Sutton's article looks at cult books among Young Adult audiences, some of which have filtered down from college campuses, lending them an air of sophistication,

and making the reader feel unique for their special appreciation of the cult book (131). He identifies the special status of science fiction and fantasy novels, claiming that with their "high drama and philosophical theorizing or heavy symbolism, […] many young adult readers will be captivated" (132). Sutton mentions Robbins, Heller, Vonnegut and Ken Kesey in the same breath, as a counter-point to the seriousness of some cult books (he mentions earlier the drug biographies of such cult figures as Jim Morrison and Janis Joplin), emphasising their humour: "These are very different novels but have in common extreme black humor, full of satire and irony. They present the outsider's viewpoint and find humor in all the things – war, mental illness, deformity – that the larger society takes very seriously" (132). Sutton broadly claims that these "comic cult books" have "an ironic rather than romantic vision of the world", however it is their expression of alienation, their exaggerated or grotesque characters, their difference, their outsidedness, and (most importantly, he claims) their out-sizedness which appeals to the young reader, granting these novels their cult status (132).

Despite the 1984 publication of *Jitterbug Perfume* surprisingly little scholarly material was produced on the author in the latter half of the 1980s. In 1987 Robbins featured in *Aquarius Revisited: Seven Who Created the Sixties Counterculture That Changed America*. Peter O. Whitmer's article, reproduced in Purdon and Torrey's *Conversations* and included here, combines a portrait of the artist's somewhat hermetic lifestyle in La Conner, some biographical details, and an interview. The Sandoz LSD experiments and Robbins' use of the psychedelic drug are discussed in some detail – in keeping with the book's focus – as well as his time in the Bay Area and Seattle. Numerous "celebrities" of the counter-culture are mentioned, including the anecdote of Robbins' polite refusal to audition for Charles Manson (58), and his friendship with Timothy Leary (61).

By 1990 Robbins' effectiveness as a subversive writer is called into question. In an interview with Marie Edlin for *Publisher's Weekly*, Robbins acknowledges "that he has lost the group between the sixteen-to-eighteen-year-olds and the baby-boomers, largely because he is no longer considered subversive" (Kent 266). Brian Kent points to the advent of the internet to Robbins' waning relevance to youthful audiences: "Given Robbins's increasingly old-fashioned love for the written word in an image-laden cyber-culture that can fuel the subversive fantasies of young adults at the click of a mouse (a transformation in consciousness Robbins addresses in *Fierce Invalids Home from Hot Climates* (2000)), it is not surprising that those in their twenties might find Robbins's gentle prodding passé" (266).

Thomas R. Whissen includes *ARA* as well as *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* in *Classic Cult Fiction* (2002). Interestingly he frames the publication of *ARA* in the wake of the Kent State shootings and the invasion of Cambodia, which he claims marked a change in mood for the counterculture. Whissen claims that the spirit of protest associated with the 1960s emerged after the death of J. F. Kennedy and dissipated with the Kent State shootings, that the 1970 massacre was so heinous protest was somehow no longer appropriate, and despaired acceptance became the new counterculture mode: "Whereas moral indignation had previously inspired bitter satire, a feeling of utter frustration now resulted in absurdism. Lampooning laced with gallows humor became the tone of protest, and Robbins appeared fortuitously to become its leading voice" (14). In his discussion of *ARA* and "the meaning of meaning" Whissen concludes that meaning is meaningless, that "in a pointless world, sense itself no longer makes sense" and that the "only defence against the dread of modern life is to adopt a party mood, thumb your nose at the world, and have fun" (15). Whissen is thus arguing that "metaphysical high comedy" (16) and taking laughter seriously was the appropriate mode of protest after 1970.

Purdon and Torrey refer to a limited edition Bantam publication, *Candy from a Stranger: A Tom Robbins Reader* from 1994: the year *Half Asleep in Frog Pajamas* is released by the same publisher (Purdon and Torrey xxvi). However, the text is not listed on WorldCat, and seems to be utterly unavailable. It is not mentioned in Hoyser and Stookey's bibliography (1997) or in the 1996 bibliography compiled by Mike Songster, Matt Cooperberg and Lorin Hawley for now-defunct fan site TheAftrlife.org (Songster et al.).

Half Asleep was the subject of a scathing review from the *New York Times*' Karen Karbo, in which she branded Robbins' supposed feminism as "cheerful misogyny" and contended that Robbins secretly believes all women require to be happy is "a good fuck" (qtd. in Kent 262). Karbo's review actually takes more issue with Robbins' style – "trademark cuckoo plots, woo-woo philosophizing, overwrought metaphors" (Karbo) – and pokes none-too-subtle fun at Robbins' appeal to a younger audience. She accuses him of "stretching himself" to emulate Tom Wolfe, and ultimately declares that she needed a Xanax and a glass of Chardonnay to enjoy the novel. In a letter to the *New York Times* editor the following month one Stuart Wittenstein of Jersey City writes in defence of the novel, accusing Karbo of bias, exaggeration, and a failure to appreciate Robbins' "comic fantasy" before levelling her with a charge of substance abuse for her Xanax and Chardonnay cocktail (Wittenstein).

Catherine E. Hoyser and Lorena Laura Stookey's *Tom Robbins: A Critical Companion* (1997) was published under the *Critical Companions to Popular Contemporary Writers* series. Though aimed at a high-school or early university audience, the book is important in that it is the first full-length study of Robbins work since Mark Siegel's slim 1980 monograph. In the intervening seventeen years Robbins had published three new novels: *Jitterbug Perfume* (1994), *Skinny Legs and All* (1990) and *Half Asleep in Frog Pajamas* (1994). Hoyser and Stookey's text provides a short biography – tellingly it perpetuates the Library of Congress' misreporting of Robbins' date of birth (Hoyser 3) – as well as a brief and broad commentary on his critical context and writing style, followed by chapters on each of the novels with sub-headings such as 'Plot', 'Character', and 'Style'. Hoyser and Stookey offer alternate readings of the texts – for example the chapter on *Jitterbug Perfume* offers an alternate Marxist perspective on the text – allowing students to see how different literary theories can be applied to Robbins' work. Though Hoyser and Stookey's *Critical Companion* is an enjoyable and accessible broad introduction, and while it serves to highlight Robbins' appeal to youthful audiences and college students, it does not offer much by way of new research, tending rather to summarise earlier critics' work.

In contrast to Marie Edlin's comments of less than a decade earlier, in a 1999 review in *Corriere Della Sera* "legendary" Italian critic Fernanda Pivano refers to Robbins as "the most dangerous writer in the world" (Purdon and Torrey xxvii). The anecdote bears mention as it crops up frequently in interviews and articles. Robbins subsequently met Pivano, and asked what she meant:

> In heavily accented English, she replied, "Because you are saying that love is the only thing that matters, and everything else is a big joke." Frankly, I'm unsure that is what I've been saying, and I would have preferred she'd have answered, "Because you are such a threat to the status quo, to the tyranny of the dull mind." But I cherish the title nonetheless. It makes me feel like James Bond. Or one of Bond's villains. (Krug)

In 2002 Robbins featured in *American Writers: A Collection of Literary Biographies*, edited by Jay Parini. Brian Kent's article, the most comprehensive scholarly treatment of Robbins published in years, begins with a focus on the author's treatment by critics. To open interviews or articles with reference to this treatment borders on a trope, but helpfully Kent names names, pointing to specific negative reviews and the reasoning behind the criticism. Kent, like Robbins himself, identifies Robbins' levity as the reason

behind critics' inability to take him seriously; however Kent probes somewhat deeper, considering why Robbins' brand of comedy is treated with less deference than some others:

> Robbins's novels are exercises in identifying and breaking through the dimensions of contemporary life that block the capacity for individual and creative perception, which inhibits the ability to act independently and to establish a joyful relationship to the world. His primary means for conveying this process is comedy. But unlike other comedic writers — Thomas Pynchon and Kurt Vonnegut often appear as benchmarks for comparison — Robbins's comedy contains a bedrock positivism that makes him suspect in the eyes of critics who believe his humor and whimsy belie serious intent. Robbins typically greets such suspicion with sentiments akin to Bernard Mickey Wrangle's in *Still Life*: "Those who shun the whimsy of things will experience rigor mortis before death." (260)

Kent underscores the effect of Nadeau's analysis on future scholarship, as well as Robbins' own scholarly interests, in discussing modern physics. Kent reviews Nadeau's essay, and connects his thesis with a recommendation from "more than one critic" to consider Fritjof Capra's *The Tao of Physics* a "helpful primer for Robbins's fiction" (261). Kent, however, is quicker than Nadeau to acknowledge that it is unlikely the 1970s counter-culture audience that made Robbins' fiction a paperback success were interested in his commentary on modern physics, but rather his philosophy, sexual liberation, rejection of authority and advocacy for psychedelics (261).

Kent allies himself with Karbo, thus taking a contrary stance to critics who praise Robbins' feminism, and in particular Robbins' self-identification as a feminist, highlighting his treatment of women primarily as sexual play-things:

> Where he runs afoul of some feminists is in their sense that what Robbins really means by the feminine principle is the female principle, a conception that limits women's potential for self-definition. One indication of this, they argue, is his reliance on sex as a primary means for achieving a more harmonious and independent existence. (262)

In focusing on language ("The Many-Tongued Beast") Kent compares Robbins' self-conscious use of language, the "essential 'bookness'" of his books, to the work of John Barth and Donald Barthelme, two authors who frequently crop up in analysis of

Vonnegut's work also. Kent highlights the techniques Robbins' employs to hold plot together, citing specifically the narrator's role in over-coming narrative disruptions (263) – by which he likely means the frequent philosophical asides, or "authorial filibusters". Kent cites Klinkowitz' "Avant-garde and After," which acknowledges Robbins' self-conscious use of language as an artificial construct. He goes on to suggest that Robbins' language play, his riffs, puns and one-liners, are employed to demonstrate characters' overall outlook, "and sometimes just for the pure pointless fun of it" (263). He ties this in to Robbins' frequent comments on depressing literature, suggesting that Robbins' joy in language is one facet of his larger philosophy and joyous outlook. According to Kent the question, ultimately, is whether Robbins' skills as a wordsmith diminish towards the latter half of his career, or whether his audience's pleasure in these techniques wane with age:

> Even in the area of his greatest attribute as a writer, his play with language, critics began to carp about his prose being overloaded or simply too much of a good thing. In a review shaped as a Dear John letter to Robbins, Zsuzsi Gartner, previously an admirer of Robbins's fiction, bemoans the wordplay in his novel *Fierce Invalids Home from Hot Climates* before asking, "Were you always like this and I just didn't notice?" She then finishes her reader's sayonara to Robbins with the words of a commiserating friend: "We loved him so much because we were so puerile and he was too. Then we grew up". (276–277)

Robbins is mentioned in a 2005 article for *The Western Historical Quarterly* by Michael Allen, which discusses the Cowboy Code and cultural appropriation of the cowboy figure by artists, writers and musicians as a figure not of New Left politics but rather individualism and agrarian values. Allen highlights the resurgence of interest in cowboy themes in the late and post-Vietnam war era:

> Cowboys and rodeo are quintessentially American; they represent the forces of the westward movement, Manifest Destiny, and the civilizing of the North American West. Thus, from some radical 1960s anti-American perspectives, rodeo cowboys, like cowboys, might possibly represent imperialism, genocide, unsavory aspects of westward expansion. (279)

Artists, Allen argues, resolved this dilemma by embracing the Cowboy Myth, depoliticising the cowboy, and emphasising their anti-industrialism and individualism. The apolitical 1960s hippy movement differed from New Left in that they "showed no interest

whatsoever in overthrowing the American government to bring 'power to the people'" (279). Thus, the cowboy became a new hero of this movement, as the 'hippies' adopted a new variation of the Cowboy Code. Allen's article goes on to focus on the move away from New Left politics in the latter half of the 1960s, and he offers many examples of Christian themes in popular music, which developed from "collective radicalism" to a "purely individual search for 'freedom' and 'personal expression'" (Peter Doggett qtd. in Allen 281). Though the article primarily focuses on music, the 'road movie' and the picaresque genre are discussed, including *Cowgirls*. Robbins, Allen explains, feminises the Cowboy Code in Bonanza Jellybean, who offers a type of counterculture anarchism. In keeping with Robbins' assertion that "movements are for Beethoven and the bowels" ('Tom Robbins on "Feminismo"') Allen explains that "Bonanza is a cultural revolutionary, not a leftist politician" (294).

In 2006 Robbins wrote the introduction to Susan Bernofsky's translation of Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*. Though his signature stylistic flairs do not come across in this biographical and critical introduction, his interest in Hesse's inward journey (*Weg nach Innen)* through writing is apparent (Hesse vii). Robbins quotes Thomas Mann's remarks on Hesse, which provide an insight as to Robbins' interest in the author's work:

> For me his lifework, with its roots in native German romanticism, for all its occasional strange individualism, its now humorously petulant and now mystically yearning estrangement from the world and the times, belongs to the highest and purest spiritual aspirations and labors of our epoch. (ix)

He concludes his introduction with a nod towards Hesse's Eastern mysticism, which accounts for his popularity among the 1960s American counterculture, and quotes Kurt Vonnegut: "[Hesse is] deeply loved by those among the American young who are questioning. […] The wanderers of Hesse always find something satisfying – holiness, wisdom, hope" (x). Robbins gives the final word to the London *Times Literary Supplement*, whose description of Hesse's influence could equally apply to Robbins or Vonnegut:

> The cult has adjusted the kaleidoscope of Hesse's works in such a way as to bring into focus a Hesse for the 1970s: environmentalist, war opponent, enemy of a computerized technocracy, who seeks heightened awareness… and who is prepared to sacrifice anything but his integrity for the sake of his freedom (x).

Conversations with Tom Robbins, published in 2011 and edited by Liam O. Purdon and Beef Torrey, contains a scholarly introduction, a selection of interviews dating from 1976 to 2009, and concludes with a "literary conversation" between the editors and Robbins. Due to Robbins' tendency to craft his responses with the same care with which he crafts his novels, the interviews are occasionally repetitive, and tend to focus on a mix of Robbins' philosophical and literary perspectives. Purdon and Torrey's introduction is insightful, and though praiseworthy does acknowledge Robbins' tendency to rehash material. They identify four dominant themes in the interviews: how childhood experiences contributed to his writing; Robbins' opinions of his own work over time; imagination and the power of language; and the transformative power of imagination to explore alternative modes of living. Purdon and Torrey discuss Robbins' experience with the Beers and Barnes Traveling Circus, emphasising the effect this was to have on the author, and the importance of seeking joy and indeed magic through seemingly frivolous pursuits. Most importantly the introduction addresses the role of imagination in the writing process, compares Robbins' style of writing to Jackson Pollock's style of painting, and describes it as "repeated and tactical collapsing of the distinction between two-dimensional, abstract and three-dimensional, experiential narrative in the storytelling by incorporating intrusive acts such as those of discursive philosophizing, genealogy, and meditation" (xv). This has relevance to the transformation Robbins intends for his readers to go through in untangling his metaphors, as I will discuss below. The reading experience brings the reader to an awakening, allows them to deal with consensual reality using humor as a means of "psychic survival" and, ultimately, to drop out of consensual reality and find meaning (xvi–xvii).

Coinciding with the release of *Tibetan Peach Pie* (2014), Mara Altman's "Kindle Singles" interview with Robbins appeared. The most comprehensive and scholarly interview since Purdon and Torrey, Robbins is extremely generous to Altman both in terms of time and content. Though touching on many of the themes covered elsewhere, Robbins – fresh from completing his memoir – is clearly rather comfortable with Altman, and expounds upon earlier themes in a new and fresh way. For example, though he does discuss the pivotal moment in his life when he first ingested LSD, Robbins here prefaces this section of the interview with a note – emailed a few days after their meeting – that his literary sensibility was well formed by this time, and carefully highlights that it was not the act of taking the drug itself which released his creativity, a caveat which may serve to discourage impressionable fans and budding writers from attempting the same literary journey. He

also here criticises Timothy Leary for overly publicising their explorations in acid: "…a lot of people ingested LSD who were not spiritually or intellectually or emotionally capable of integrating it into their lives in a positive way, and because it was all out front, it made it a large target for the forces of repression, and they eventually succeeded in repressing it and are still at it to this very day" (Robbins and Altman).

4.2 Robbins' Korean War

> "I've even made an effort to avoid the autobiographical in my novels,
> wishing neither to shortchange imagination nor
> use up my life in literature." (*TPP* xiii)

Tom Robbins' *Tibetan Peach Pie* touts itself as "A True Account of an Imaginative Life", though shirks definition as either autobiography (a format "fuelled by ego") or memoir ("although it waddles and quacks enough like a memoir") (*TPP* xiii). It may be best to define it, as Vonnegut did *Palm Sunday*, as "autobiographical collage". Robbins claims it is "a sustained narrative composed of the absolutely true stories I've been telling the women in my life […] over many years, and which at their insistence I've finally written down" (xiii). Though these anecdotes are arranged chronologically they are sufficiently abundant in colour and insufficiently abundant in detail to be considered the definitive resource on Tom Robbins' life – indeed that resource does not yet exist. They do serve to present an impression of the autobiographical details that had a bearing on Robbins' writing.

Born in Blowing Rock, North Carolina on 22 July 1932, Robbins was the first child of Baptists George Thomas and Katherine Robinson Robbins (Purdon and Torrey xxi). Katherine, a "frustrated writer" herself, encouraged Robbins' early literary efforts by transcribing his stories whenever inspiration struck him, just months after he began to talk in complete sentences (*TPP 7*). Her attempts to edit or improve his stories are referred to frequently in interviews, as were his attempts to resist her changes and his insistence that they be restored to their original format. At age five Robbins began to collect his stories in a *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* scrapbook, which survives today (*7*). His work was unpublished until he was seven years old, when he submitted a story about a "reckless boy, a courageous dog, and a dangerous waterfall" (8) to his school newspaper. Given that this was a consolidated school with grades one through twelve, Robbins would likely have been among the younger contributors.

The Robbins' second child, Rena, passed away in May 1939 at just four years of age as a result of an overdose of ether during a routine tonsil removal (19). In March 1940 twin sisters Mary and Marion were born (20). Between 1941 and 1943 the family relocated first to Burnsville, North Carolina, then to Urbana, Kilmarnock and finally Warsaw, Virginia (Purdon and Torrey xxi). Tom entered Warsaw High School in the eighth grade in 1945 where he was voted "Most Mischievous Boy" (*TPP* 78) following "the great academic flip-flop of 1948", precipitated by terrible jeering from class-mates for a straight-A report card in his first semester Tom returned Straight F's in the second (78). He was transferred to Hargrave Military Academy for his senior year, graduating in 1950 at age sixteen. In 1951 he enrolled in Washington & Lee University, an all-male liberal arts college in Lexington, Virginia, "a sort of finishing school for Southern gentlemen" with an honour code, an expectation that its students wear "conventional dress" (coat and tie), and an affluent student body (93). Following on from experience gained at *The Northern Neck News* while still in Warsaw (79), Robbins worked as a sports writer for the school paper, the *Ring-tum Phi*, under the editorship of Tom Wolfe (94). Robbins left Washington and Lee at the end of his sophomore year (103) though he was not, contrary to popular myth, expelled for starting a food fight. He worked for a short time in the mail room of a Richmond insurance company, while living back home with his parents, now in Colonial Heights (105). In the Summer of 1952 Robbins married Peggy Waterfield; they had one son, Rip, in 1954 (Purdon and Torrey xxii).

Robbins enlisted in the United States Air Force in July 1953, two weeks before his twenty-first birthday. In *TPP* he offers the reason for this radical move as "precisely the same reason that 90 percent [sic] of all enlistees join the military, which is to say, I was at a point in my life when I didn't know what else to do" (109). Though the Korean War had "wound down", conscription remained in effect, and Robbins' reasons for joining the air force echo those of Heller: "I was about to be drafted into the army, a prospect that held a minimum of charm for me since I fancied neither shooting nor being shot. The air force seemed a more peaceable alternative…" (112). He completed basic training at Sampson Air Force Base, New York (110). In Chicago Robbins studied meteorology – a two-year college course condensed into four months (115).

In Autumn 1954 Robbins arrived in Japan to await transport to Korea (114). Stationed at K-2 Air Force Base (117) Robbins was tasked with teaching the meteorological techniques he had learned in Chicago to members of the South Korean air force, including "registering prevailing atmospheric conditions and encrypting, decoding,

and plotting on maps meteorological data transmitted via shortwave radio from various observation sites around western Asia" (115). He avoided KP (mess-hall duty) and "base beautification" by signing in under pseudonyms – R. M. Rilke and Fyodor Dostoyevsky – and skipping duty after lunch (116). Robbins stresses repeatedly in interviews that he was a non-combatant and flippantly dismisses his military service as an exercise in Black Market cigarette-sales, which, "struck a symbolic blow against Cold War communism, being a working example of capitalistic principles on a democratically fundamental plane" (117). The PX permitted the purchase of two cigarette cartons monthly, and as Robbins did not smoke he sold them on to one of his Korean students (118). The enterprise developed to include the unwanted cartons from other non-smoking Americans and eventually toiletries, which were evidently passed on to a third party (118). The enterprise was "wee potatoes" but a welcome distraction and complement to furloughs in Japan (119). During his tour Robbins was also stationed briefly at a joint armed forces communications centre in Taegu (120).

Robbins completed his tour of duty and returned to the US aboard a troopship to Seattle. While on board he wrote a satirical column under the pseudonym "Figmo Fosdick" entitled *Shipboard Confidential* (125). Though Robbins does not specify in *TPP* what the target of the column's humour was, he does highlight the over-zealous censorship he had to endure from the paper's adviser, a Roman Catholic chaplain (125). From Seattle, he returned to Richmond, Virginia, by Greyhound, and to the loving embrace of his wife Peggy – only to discover her pregnant with another man's child (126). They divorced in 1956 (Purdon and Torrey xxii).

Following leave in Richmond – where Robbins became enchanted with the Bohemian scene in the Fan District, an area he was to return to upon his discharge in 1957 (*TPP* 128) – he reported to Offutt Air Force Base outside Omaha, Nebraska: headquarters of the Strategic Air Command (133). The physical embodiment of Cold War paranoia, Robbins claims the facility's mission was "to be poised and prepared for Hot War every minute of every day":

> At all times, day and night, weekends and holidays (including the alleged birthday of "the Prince of Peace") there were SAC bombers in the air, each freighting a payload of atom bombs, their crews awaiting the signal to proceed to a selected target and blow it into radioactive dust. Once the U.S. president had hung up the iconic red telephone, the next call, the order from Washington to let the hell begin, would be answered in the building where I worked. (133)

Robbins' role in the Special Weather Intelligence unit was to supply the most up-to-date weather conditions to pilots in the Eastern Bloc, via intelligence received from ham-radio operators in obscure corners of that region: what Robbins calls "meteorological espionage" (133). He was honourably discharged and returned to Richmond, Virginia in 1957 (Purdon and Torrey xxii). He claims the air force did not court his continued service as, while he "presented a clean, neat, pleasant countenance to my comrades and superiors", it could not conceal "the irrepressible bohemian vapors" he exuded (*TPP* 137).

These "bohemian vapors" had an early manifestation. In *Tibetan Peach Pie* Robbins discusses at length the profound effect a travelling circus was to have on his work, an effect that is seen particularly in *Villa Incognito*. When he was nine years of age and residing in Burnsville, North Carolina, a circus set up on the grounds of a boarding school immediately adjacent to the Robbins' home. He became enchanted by the ringmaster's daughter, Bobbi, and with his parents' permission went "on the road with the show" – albeit only to the next town (28). As a teenager Robbins worked for the Hunt Brothers circus, expressing the deepest admiration for the aerialists: "cherry atop the olfactory omnium-gatherum, the whole overflowing showtime sundae, was the pure aesthetics and philosophical eloquence – the poignant Zen – of the aerial masters" (30). Citing Philippe Petit's spectacle, dancing in the sky between the World Trade Centre's twin towers, Robbins' recognised the Tibetan tenet of "crazy wisdom" in these aerialists (30).

A few additional biographical details bear mention, particularly Robbins' role in the Civil Rights Movement, and concurrently the psychedelic revolution. Spurred on by his hatred of injustice Robbins' famously left the Richmond *Times-Dispatch* – a newspaper which reflected "the long-standing temperament and ideology of it statewide readership, an audience so conservative it considered Unitarians a satanic cult" (164) – for publishing photographs of African Americans. Though the *T-D*'s editorial policy did not expressly forbid it, naming African Americans was nonetheless avoided unless they had committed an offence, and photographs of African Americans did not appear (165). Robbins first included a photograph of Louis Armstrong alongside a gossip column (165) and was reprimanded by his editor when readers complained (165). However, a few weeks later the same columnist mentioned an African American woman, and Robbins decided to "test the waters" (166), running the photo of Pearl Bailey. Complaints were voracious, and Robbins was sternly rebuked. When a third opportunity for mischief presented itself Robbins resigned from the newspaper, and went right ahead and ran Sammy Davis Jr.'s photograph in the next issue (167). Around this time (1961) Robbins was involved with a

biracial group that met at a local Unitarian church; at considerable personal risk the group travelled to King William County to teach African-American pupils after the school board shut down public schools rather than integrate (164). When asked what his employers at the *Times-Dispatch* might have said had they known, Robbins replied "Oh, they wouldn't know what hit 'em" (see Appendix 1). When interviewed for *Anthem*, Shainee Gabel asked if Robbins had been influenced by a particular American movement or philosophy. He responded, repeating his earlier gag:

> I've always thought that movements were for Beethoven and the bowels, so I've stayed away from movements. But to answer your question, I was definitely a part of the anti-war movement during the sixties, until at one point it occurred to me that the people on the streets were just another army. Things started to get a little out of hand and I decided that if you're for peace, then you should live peacefully. (Gabel and Hahn 360)

When interviewed in 2013 and asked if he had been specifically involved in the anti-war movement during Vietnam Robbins replied, "Yeah, I sniffed my share of tear gas" (see Appendix 1). However, his most radical protests took place within his novels, which are extended exercises in teaching a pacifist outlook – and his main technique for doing so, his consistently most subversive act, is his comedy.

4.3 Tom Robbins' Joke-work: Crazy Wisdom as late-Black Humor

Probably some of the best approaches to Tom Robbins' comedic style are from Robbins' himself, who is keen always to talk about the power of levity, and the important psychological work of play. In his essay "In Defiance of Gravity" Robbins laments the state of modern literature:

> For too many years my edacious reading habits had been leading me into one unappealing corner after another, dank cul-de-sacs littered with tear-stained diaries, empty pill bottles, bulging briefcases, broken vows, humdrum phrases, sociological swab samples, and the (lovely?)[11] bones of dismembered children: the detritus of a literary scene that, with several notable exceptions, has been

[11] A sure reference to Alice Sebold's *The Lovely Bones* (2002).

> about as entertaining as a Taliban theme park and as elevating as the prayer breakfast at the Bates Motel. (*Wild Ducks* 180)

Robbins points an accusing finger via the Pulitzer, Booker and National Book Award lists at writing programmes which encourage students to peddle such literature, describing the predictable 'bark' as the prescribed method, and the subversive 'meow' as something these programmes quell. "Meowing" he explains, "is the human impulse to be playful" (182). The bark, he claims, is orthodox, expected, and bankable, and while certain 'subversive' departures can be entertained, to commit fully to turning against the tide of such literature (which is to say to produce uplifting books) is too 'off-the-wall' for the literary establishment (182).

Robbins is arguing not just for the production of more uplifting literature as a counter-measure against the effects of "serious" (read: "depressing") literature on the collective psyche, but rather for a philosophical turn towards playfulness as a more appropriate response to modern challenges: "What does matter is that we come to recognize that playfulness, as a philosophical stance, can be very serious, indeed; and, moreover, that it possesses an unfailing capacity to arouse ridicule and hostility in those among us who crave certainty, reverence, and restraint" (182). Echoing Whissen's call for "metaphysical high comedy" as a form of protest (Whissen 16), Robbins is referring to a "*divine* playfulness intended to lighten man's existential burden" (*Wild Ducks* 182) and in evoking this "existential burden" Robbins raises a comparison to so-called Black Humor. Robbins' philosophy marks a development in the Black Humorists laughing acceptance of man's existential burden, advocating instead for a philosophical rejection of Blackness, and thus the production of a body of literature in which humour is a state of being, possessing "an unfailing capacity to arouse ridicule and hostility in those among us who crave certainty, reverence, and restraint" (182). He is not suggesting we plug our ears and avert our eyes from tragic events; he is arguing that we *take laughter seriously*. Robbins connects this with Tibetan "crazy wisdom" and laments the intelligentsia's inability to retain a childlike sense of wonder: "As a result of their having abandoned that part of human nature that is potentially most transcendent, it's no surprise that modern intellectuals dismiss playfulness – especially when it dares to present itself in literature, philosophy, or art – as frivolous or whimsical" (183). He also makes a distinction between "that which is lighthearted" and "that which is merely light-weight", which is a suitably illustrative dichotomy.

It is worth noting at this juncture that "In Defiance of Gravity" first appeared in *Harper's Magazine* in 2004, by which time the work of postmodernist critics was widely accepted within the academy. In *Postmodernist Culture* Steven Connor notes a recent (as of 1989) "explosion of interest in a whole range of cultural texts and practices which had previously been scorned by, or remained invisible to, academic criticism" (184), highlighting the work of Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams, Roland Barthes and Stuart Hall and their interest in mainstream culture. Robbins' discussions of playfulness in his work and his repeated complaints that such playfulness is not understood by contemporary critics are striking, and belied by the fact that one could argue that playfulness was very much central to late twentieth-century theories of aesthetics. Certainly the kind of literature Robbins is claiming that critics ignore was being discussed in light of postmodernist collage, as well as broader thematic concerns. Connor's comments on the distinction between "official culture" versus the art produced by "ethnic minority cultures" and his assertion that the "alleged outsider becomes the representative 'spokesperson for society'" (189) recall Robbins' propensity for giving voice to marginalised people and in particular women, the physically disabled (Sissy, *Cowgirls*), people from minority cultures (Gwen Mati, *Half Asleep*), members of the counter-culture (Amanda, *ARA*; Bernard Mickey Wrangle, *Woodpecker*… the whole kit and caboodle really). On the other hand postmodernist critics' interest in popular culture – Connor's examples include sport, fashion, social rituals and more – could be the "light-weight" to which Robbins was referring. Considering the extent of Robbins' reading in critical, scientific and philosophical spheres and his notable lack of engagement with the contemporary work of postmodern critics, it may be that in highlighting the distinction between "that which is lighthearted" and "that which is merely light-weight" he is claiming his own place, and the comedic novel's place, in high culture as opposed to popular culture.

Kent's discussion of Robbins' playful use of language highlights the *joie de vivre* that imbues his work. It is interesting to contrast references to this joy of expression and exuberance with critiques of Heller's repetition, *reductio ad absurdum* and language games. In contrast to Heller's tactical game – his attempts to overcome and ultimately escape the tricks language plays – Robbins is playing the game joyfully, playing for the sake of playing. Kent claims Robbins' use of language is an expression of the positive energy his work represents, "an unabashed, unapologetic romantic who favors the transformational power of magic over the plodding consistencies of logic and rationalism [he] advocates

instead for a literature of joy, one that places full responsibility for individual happiness on individuals themselves (263). This use of language to further Robbins' philosophical agenda and rid society of the 'tyranny of the dull mind' is based in crazy wisdom.

Crazy wisdom, as defined by Tom Robbins, is "the opposite of conventional wisdom":

> It is wisdom that deliberately swims against the current in order to avoid being swept along in the numbing wake of bourgeois compromise, wisdom that flouts taboos in order to undermine their power; wisdom that evolves when one, while refusing to avert one's gaze from the sorrows and injustices of the world, insists on joy in spite of everything; wisdom that embraces risk and eschews security, wisdom that turns the tables on neurosis by lampooning it, the wisdom of those who neither seek authority nor willingly submit to it. (*Wild Ducks* 183–184)

He highlights, defines, redefines and addresses crazy wisdom repeatedly in interviews and writings. In *Tibetan Peach Pie* Robbins recalls his first, formative, psychedelic experience – shared with three friends one Halloween when he was "a tick past forty" (57) – and the peels or laughter the *psilocybe semilanceata* inspired:

> In our altered state of consciousness we seemed to be fortuitously in tune with those Asian "crazy wisdom" sages who have defined life as "the beautiful joke that is always happening"; with the avatar Ramakrishna who, after achieving ultimate enlightenment, returned to say that what Nirvana most closely resembled was laughter. (57)

He mentions the concept in interviews spanning from 1981 with Michael Strelow, referencing the poet Jiménez's advice, "if they give you ruled paper, write the other way" (Purdon and Torrey 21), to 2013 (see Appendix 1). Though he rarely cites influences or readings on the subject, in a 2008 interview with Andrea Miller he does mention favouring the Rinzai branch of Zen Buddhism, which "eschews the mind-quieting practice of meditation in favour of the mind-blowing activity of wrestling with koans" (Purdon and Torrey 152). He claims solving koan riddles, or attempting to, is crazy wisdom at work, and indeed Klinkowitz suggests that the transformational power of Robbins' work lies in the reading process:

> …Robbins makes the actual reading of his novel an experience in the stylistic transformation he has in mind. A successful reading of his book makes the reader an initiate, for he or she has performed the same mental tricks, the same

> imaginative acrobatics, as have the fictional characters in Robbins' story. ('Avant-Garde and after' 135)

This process echoes the narrative games Heller plays in *Catch-22* and the cognitive process both reader and character must undergo to liberate themselves from the novel's absurd language traps. The idea of unravelling koans appeared in a 1982 interview when Robbins mentions John Cage's influence on his style, claiming that his "abbreviated, episodic style of writing" was inspired by Cage's *Silence* (Purdon and Torrey 29).[12] In his interview with Miller, Robbins also highlights aspects of crazy wisdom in Sufism and in the west, citing Muhammad Ali's bravado in face of arrest for refusing conscription as an example: though he hastens to add that, "crazy wisdom in the West is almost always devoid of a spiritual dimension" (Purdon and Torrey 153). In a 2009 interview with Tania Ahsan, Robbins finally provides a kind of reading list for crazy wisdom: "Chögyam Trungpa, Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, Gurdjieff, Rumi, Kabir, numerous anonymous masters out of the Tibetan "crazy wisdom" lineage and my idol, the fifteenth-century Zen poet and rebellious monk, Ikkyu Sojun" (Purdon and Torrey 161).

Having thus defined "crazy wisdom" as Robbins espouses it, let us return to "In Defiance of Gravity". Robbins discusses its relationship to gallows humor, making heavy reference to Freud's work on the subject. He explains that though "serious playfulness" may be used to "domesticat[e] fear and pain" it is not about dismissing these, or allowing them to pass by un-experienced. He recalls Oscar Wilde's famous last words (indicating his garish hotel wallpaper, "Either it goes or I go") commending this eminent witticism with Freud's assertion that "gallows humor is indicative of 'a greatness of soul'" (*Wild Ducks* 185):

> The quips of the condemned prisoner or dying patient tower dramatically above, say, sallies on TV sitcoms by reason of their gloriously inappropriate refusal, even at life's most acute moment, to surrender to despair. The man who jokes in the executioner's face can be destroyed but never defeated. (186)

Robbins, however, relates this Freudian understanding of gallows humour back to crazy wisdom, claiming the latter's pre-eminence due to its ability to force deeper reflection, untangle the koan, and thus to come to an understanding of the great mystery:

[12] In the same breath he dismisses Kurt Vonnegut's influence, stating simply that he had not read Vonnegut by the time he wrote *ARA*.

> When a venerable Zen master, upon hearing a sudden burst of squirrel chatter outside his window, sat up in his deathbed and proclaimed, "*That's* what it was all about!", his last words surpassed Wilde's in playful significance, constituting as they did a koan of sorts, an enigmatic invitation to rethink the meaning of existence. Anecdotes such as this one remind the nimble-minded that there's often a thin line between the comic and the cosmic, and that on that frontier can be found the doorway to psychic rebirth (186).

What Robbins is suggesting is really not so much different from Freud's comments on gallows humour, and approximates early attempts to define Black Humor in the emphasis on the comic's power to grasp the cosmic. By Robbins' formulation it is the *process* of understanding the comic that brings the reader to enlightenment. An ability to think on the frontier of language, to understand the delicate balance between darkness and light, logic and illogic, is what grants readers an insight into the cosmic. It is the act of reading Robbins' work, of unravelling his koans, rather than the messages contained in his novels, which offers enlightenment.

Robbins returns to Freud's assertion that "wit is the denial of suffering", an eloquent paraphrasing of Freud's argument that "humour is a means of obtaining pleasure in spite of the distressing affects that disturb it" (Freud and Crick 222). It is denied not in the sense of negating its existence, but rather in the sense of refusal: "armed with a playful attitude, a comic sensibility, we can deny suffering dominion over our lives, we can refrain from buying shares in the company" (*Wild Ducks* 189). Robbins views this comic sensibility as the dominion of the enlightened – the masters of crazy wisdom, the Chink – just as Freud views a propensity for humour as "one of the highest physical achievements [which] also enjoys the special favour of thinkers" (Freud and Crick 222).

This idea of wit in the sense of a quality with which those 'great of soul' are imbued speaks to Robbins' joke construction. He frequently describes his slow, meticulous writing process, and the near-naiveté with which he approaches the task of writing. It is slow and deliberate. There are no second drafts, no revisions:

> Usually, my witticisms are composed on the spot. They're simply intrinsic; an inseparable, integral, organic part of my writing process – doubtlessly because humor is an inseparable, integral part of my philosophical world view. The comic sensibility is vastly, almost tragically, underrated by Western intellectuals. Humor can be a doorway into the deepest reality, and wit and playfulness are a desperately serious transcendence of evil. My comic sense,

> although deliberately Americanized, is, in its intent, much closer to the crazy wisdom of Zen monks and the goofy genius of Taoist masters than it is to, say, the satirical gibes on *Saturday Night Live*. It has both a literary and a metaphysical function. (Purdon and Torrey 98).

Robbins approaches the writing process as an explorer of the human psyche, and his jokes are no different. Furthermore, Robbins discusses the Pacific Rim as a kind of frontier – both in the American Western sense of the term, but also in a philosophical sense – and he positions himself within a particularly introspective Pacific literary, artistic, or philosophical circle:

> But people who land out here on the Rim, on the edge, looking not back to Europe – from where most of our ancestors came – but towards Asia, do tend to turn inward. And for that reason, it's no surprise that many of the major developments or new trends have had their genesis here – from the psychedelic movement to Zen Buddhism and oriental systems of liberation. (Gabel and Hahn 362)

He goes on to describe the ideal position for observing this inner self as a broad panoramic viewpoint, as opposed to peering "through a knothole in a junkyard fence". He describes this place as that where "language and myth intersect at the imagination" (364). This, he explains, is the position he assumes at the beginning of each day: the frontier of language. With his comedic technique emanating from his philosophy, a philosophy based on the Pacific Rim, it seems only logical that his moments of crazy wisdom, his koans, are poised on the frontiers of language, between serious and playful, in the nucleus of the absurd joke.

Kent argues that Robbins concludes his exploration of the relationship between physics and metaphysics in *Fierce Invalids*. This exploration began in *ARA* and *Cowgirls* and, according to critics like Nadeau and Siegel, centred around the belief that as New Physics was no longer considered immutable, so should man's philosophy (metaphysics) be open to unravelling, to contradiction, and that a belief in and understanding of the contradictory nature of these perspectives is required (Siegel, *Tom Robbins* 33). Robbins' novels forward the belief that a sense of humour, an appreciation of playfulness, is necessary to fully understand these contradictions – not to separate them, but to accept their contradictory nature. Kent claims that Robbins offers a "justification for the very nature of his fiction" (283) in *Fierce Invalids*, which ties together the dualistic nature of comedy with that of the

cosmic mystery. The Kandakandero shaman, Today is Tomorrow, comes to realise that an appreciation of "Western man's comedic sense" is key to understanding the dualistic nature of life's mystery, the meeting of darkness and light. The protagonist, Switters, theorises that scientists will discover, when they split the nucleus of the smallest particle, "an energy field in which light and darkness intermingle" (qtd. in Kent 283). Based on Today is Tomorrow's understanding of the importance of laughter, this intermingling could, perhaps, also occur "on the biomolecular plane, the social plane. That a people who could move in the primal realm of laughter could live free of all of life's dualities" (qtd. in Kent 283). Kent highlights Switters' summation of these ideas, a "theory on joy itself being a form of wisdom":

> If people are nimble enough to move freely between different perceptions of reality and if they maintain a relaxed, playful attitude well-seasoned with laughter, then they would live in harmony with the universe; they would connect with all matter, organic and inorganic, at its purest, most basic level. (qtd. in Kent 283)

It is this connectivity to the universe, this use of humour to reach enlightenment, which marks a development in Robbins' brand of Black Humor, recalls those gallows humorists so "great of soul", and radically chooses joy in spite of everything.

According to Max F. Schulz Black Humor "posit(s) an absurd world devoid of intrinsic values, with a resultant tension between individual and universe" (*Black Humor Fiction of the Sixties* 6). Robbins, in contrast, strives towards harmonising individual and universe, meditatively accepting the inherent contradictions of the comic sensibility. In defining the differences between existentialism and Black Humor Schulz explains that the existentialist is individualistic, and the hero's capacity to choose one course of action is, in itself, a heroic, life-affirming act: "Thus, while one finds in existentialism a rejection of suprapersonal law, dogma, and social order, one finds retained a confidence in the dignity and ordering capacity of the individual" (7). Though Robbins' does advocate for individualism, his heroes must forge their own path and return to society to lead by example; he does not ultimately view the individual in tension with the universe, but rather with society. According to Schulz, with Black Humor "choice poses the primary difficulty" (7). Black Humor shifts perspective from individual choice to a cosmic force pushing the individual into action. The Black Humor hero (Billy Pilgrim, for example) responds not with despair, but with a cool acceptance of, and a dry wit in face of the "bewildering

trackless choices that face the individual" (7). However, we know from *Still Life* that Robbins considers free will ("choice") "the word upon which all adventure, all exhilaration, all meaning, all honour depends" (190). Choice, Robbins tells us, is "outlaw philosophy":

> Determinists who view the universe as an agitation of billiard balls, caroming off one another according to predetermined laws, have always been threatened by "outlaws" who insist on playing the game with their own cues. Laws describe constraint. Their purpose is to control, not to create. The universe adheres to laws only when evolution is static, catching its breath so to speak. When things start to change again, when nature returns to its easel, its piano, its typewriter (not the Remington SL3, you better believe), as it has periodically forever, then laws give way to choice. Dullards are law-abiding because they choose not to choose. Outlaws, being less frightened by the bewildering variety of experience, being, in fact, slightly mad for encounters new and extreme, will seek to choose even when no choice readily presents itself. (Robbins, *Still Life* 196)

So Robbins marks a development from Schulz' brand of existential Black Humor because his philosophy dictates that the individual seek harmony with the universe, and rejects immutable laws in favour of New Physics and a new metaphysics in which both people and nature are governed by free will.

To return to "In Defiance of Gravity" and Robbins' discussion of crazy wisdom, the greatest choice available to the novelist is to reject gravity in favour of serious playfulness, to meow rather than bark, to embrace a wisdom "that evolves when one, while refusing to avert one's gaze from the sorrows and injustices of the world, insists on joy in spite of everything" (*Wild Ducks* 184). Siegel, too, contrasts Robbins with other contemporary novelists' use of "black comedy" – he refers specifically to Thomas Pynchon and Joseph Heller – whose "comedy tends to emphasize rather than alleviate the reader's horror at the terrible things that they describe" (*Tom Robbins* 40). Siegel agrees that Robbins is not "black": "Unlike Pynchon and Heller, he is not concerned so much with making us re-experience the terrible condition of humanity and man's ultimate inability to do much about it. Rather, he is concerned with what we can do to make things better" (40).

Robbins' frontiers of language recall Jerry Palmer's discussion of the theory of reversals. Palmer points out that most theories of humour operate under the assumption that the mind is in a state of equilibrium, where the illogical syllogism of a joke is resolved

by the logical mind: "in this context humour is seen as a process of paradox creation and resolution, where the paradox creates disequilibrium and its resolution restores equilibrium" (24). According to Palmer the theory of reversals refers to mental states in which disequilibrium is the norm – para-telic (non-goal-orientated) rather than telic – such as playfulness and humour. In humour this disequilibrium consists of attributing two contradictory attributes to the same person; Palmer uses the example of the person slipping on a banana peel being simultaneously dignified and undignified (24). Metaphor, according to Palmer, operates in the same way: the "junction of the dissimilar" (24). I have argued elsewhere that Vonnegut and Heller place logical men in illogical circumstances: that war is an absurd situation. I have posited also that in such circumstances the mind is already in a state of disequilibrium, which would be further altered by humour or play: if a mind in a state of disequilibrium is confronted with logic (paradoxical in the circumstance), the resolution comes from making the logical illogical again. We see this repeatedly in *Catch-22*: it's the main gag. Robbins too operates in paradox. We can see from his elaborate and layered metaphors that his *shtick* is to place two incongruous elements in proximity, and to then riff on this incongruity for comedic value. His characters, too, find themselves operating in absurd situations, though their minds are not altered by the negative influence of trauma, but rather through transcendence – chemical or otherwise. Thus Robbins' masters of crazy wisdom operate within paradox, viewing contradiction – Palmer's moment of reversal – as the key to understanding life's mystery:

> In the "crazy wisdom" philosophies of Asia, it's traditional to enjoy life as curious cosmic theatre, a grand show fraught with paradox and delicious absurdities. In fear-based, narrow-minded, hierarchical Western cultures, however, such wisdom is usually mistaken for frivolity. (Purdon and Torrey 124)

Robbins is suggesting that in order to be truly open-minded and wise we must joyfully accept paradox and absurdity rather than doom ourselves to frustration by attempting to resolve it, as Yossarian does for much of *Catch-22*.

Robbins concludes "In Defiance of Gravity" citing an Ancient Egyptian legend which claims admittance to the afterlife was granted only to those whose hearts were lighter than a feather. He determines that in contemporary (American) culture, "where the tyranny of the dull mind holds sway," such superstition would be dismissed as frivolous. However, he highlights the work of a broad range of artists, philosophers and writers whose art

combines the serious and the comic: "what about Shakespeare, for God's sake, the mega-bard in whose plays, tragedies included, three thousand puns, some of them real groaners, have been verifiably catalogued?" (*Wild Ducks* 187). In questioning when modern 'literati' will be able to embrace levity with the same fervour as gravity, he offers as conclusion Norman N. Holland's assertion that "comedy is deemed inferior to tragedy primarily because of the social prevalence of narcissistic pathology" (187); people have grown too self-important to laugh at themselves. Despair, Robbins concludes, is addictive – "Misery becomes a kind of emotional masturbation" (188) – which accounts for the East Coast establishment's inability to comprehend literature which is both funny *and* serious. He points to Latin American magic realists' ability to knit together the serious and the magical in their writing, remains open to the possibility that other tools than comedy may exist to express the fullness of the human experience, but does not know what those may be: "Until I've seen them at work, however, I'll stand by my contention that when it comes to writing, a fusion of prankish Asian wisdom, extra dimensional Latin magic, and two-fisted North American poetic pizzazz (exotic as that concept might seem to some) could be our best hope for clearing passageways through our heart-numbing, soul-shrinking, spirit-smothering oceans of frost" (*Wild Ducks* 190).

4.4 Close Reading of *Villa Incognito*

Villa Incognito is a study in attitudes towards overseas conflict in the United States from the Vietnam era to the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. Focussing on volitional MIAs from the Vietnam War – Dern Foley, Dickie Goldwire and Mars Albert Stubblefield – this is the closest Robbins has come to discussing actual overseas military engagement. While "G-men" feature in Robbins' earlier novels to varying degrees (FBI agents taking up residence in the roadside zoo in *ARA*; the National Guard's intervention on the Rubber Rose Ranch in *Cowgirls*; CIA agent Switters, the protagonist of *Fierce Invalids*…) most mentions of the Vietnam conflict are allusions, asides, or general non-interventionist rhetoric: Robbins' work tends to tout pacifism rather than overtly denounce military engagement. To tar Robbins with a brush once applied to Vonnegut, the tools for barbed satire are there; why then does he choose to offer to focus eloquent portraits of the counter-culture and a light-hearted pen (Bryan 36). Why not directly address counter-culture concerns? Both *ARA* and *Cowgirls* were written or set at a time when the Vietnam War was on-going, and in particular amidst the rising-tide of anti-military sentiment in the U.S. Yet it is rarely

mentioned. There are no Vietnam veterans, no Peace marches, no anti-war protests: their absence, given his characters' philosophical and political outlook, is conspicuous. Striking, then, that in 2003 Robbins should suddenly choose to focus on three former air-force pilots. Just as *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*'s World War II novels provided a cautionary tale for the Vietnam war, so Robbins' *Villa Incognito* could be seen to speak to U.S. overseas intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq in the wake of 9/11. Whissen argues that to the post-1970 counterculture audience whose spirit of protest had yielded to a despaired acceptance of the political climate, their "feeling of utter frustration" manifesting itself in Robbins' brand of absurdist humour, so that "lampooning laced with gallows humor" (14) became the new mode of protest literature. *Villa Incognito* thus stands firmly in the shadow of the Twin Towers. However, in keeping with Robbins' philosophy of "joy in spite of everything" he chooses, instead of barbed satire, to thumb his nose at the prevailing political climate and adopt a light-hearted, though not light-weight, approach.

Villa Incognito spans three distinct time periods: Part I, centring around Tanuki and Lisa Ko's great grandmother Miho, may be presumed to take place around the turn of the last century; Part II explores the Smarty Pants crew's disappearance in 1973; and Part III is set in Summer 2001, leading up to the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The circumstances leading to Dern Foley, Dickie Goldwire and Mars Albert Stubblefield's enlistment, combat experience and disappearance are described in varying degrees of depth. In the case of Dickie Goldwire, a biographical sketch is provided as part of the narrative, under the pretext of demonstrating his admiration for Stubblefield, and the origins of their friendship. Suffering from heartbreak at the University of North Carolina Dickie petulantly enlists:

> As soon as final exams were done, Dickie, over strenuous parental objection, enlisted in the air force.
> "You'll be shipped to Vietnam!" they squawked.
> "I hope so," murmured Dickie, and he meant it, though he was not exactly clear why – especially after all the convincing anti-war rhetoric to which he'd been exposed at the Rhinoceros. (*Villa* 103)

Though we learn about Dickie's motives, the emotional background to his decision to enlist, Stubblefield and Foley's histories are related more briefly via FBI background compilations. They contain only the highlights, but none of the flavour, though it is noted that Stubblefield enlists in the air force "apparently on a whim" (128). Robbins' playful

use of different modes to describe the crewmembers is a trope he has employed in the past – he includes "Biographical Notes" on John Paul Ziller and Plucky Purcell in *ARA*. References to the Smarty Pants crew's actual time in the war are imbued with humorous jibes and barbed attacks at the fool-hardiness of U.S. involvement, and could be read as a cautionary tale for events contemporaneous to the novel's publication in 2003. As part of Dickie's biographical sketch, Robbins describes the circumstances that lead to his joining the Smarty Pants crew:

> He'd stayed in Vietnam less than six months. Typical military illogic had him assigned to a ground air-control post, where, like so many other victims of Pentagon inefficiency, he was forced to function far below the summit of his potential. About the time he'd become acclimated to the steam and the rot, to the boom and the bugs, to the itchy white rashes that kept erupting under his skin and the red lightning that kicked like neon frog legs in the jukebox sky; about the time that he'd resigned himself to never hearing another discussion that didn't revolve around gooks and doom on the one hand, cars, baseball, and girlfriends (real or fantasized) on the other, somebody somewhere woke up long enough to reassign him to a B-52 squadron in Japan. From then on, he'd only see Vietnam from up in the red-lit Wurlitzer. (106)

This passage is rife with Heller-esque jabs at military logic and inefficiency. Dickie is described as a victim of bureaucratic red-tape mired in the tedium of Vietnam-era warfare. The reference to the B-52s even recalls Yossarian's B-25 unit in *Catch-22*. The escape from tedium granted by the transfer to Japan echoes Robbins' sentiments during the Korean War, beginning his journey of discovery of Eastern Philosophy, which was to have such an impact on his writing. Just as Robbins found his philosophy in Japan, so Dickie finds his mentor in Stubblefield.

As Colonel Thomas and Mayflower Cabot Fitzgerald discuss the moment of the Smarty Pants crew's disappearance, they provide some of the flavour of the era for contemporary (and likely younger) audiences, which serves to illustrate how ubiquitous criticism of the War had become by that time. Thomas wonders why the Smarty Pants' B-52, normally manned by a crew of five, was operating with only three. Mayflower responds:

> "Let me remind you that this was 1973. The war was winding to a close. Personnel were being rotated home at a higher rate than replacements were being shipped overseas. Foley's squadron was shorthanded. It was certainly not

> S.O.P., but an experienced crew of three could manage the aircraft safely and efficiently unless…"
> "Unless something went wrong. Which it did. Was every plane in the squadron flying undermanned?"
> "No. Just the one. The former C.O. is in a nursing home in Wisconsin, but he's reasonably cogent. He claims that Foley, Stubblefield, and Goldwire volunteered to undertake the mission without a full complement. However, the fellow Seward whom we interviewed in Virginia remembers it differently. He says the C.O. chose their plane to be the undermanned one because nobody particularly liked flying with them. They were *intellectuals*." Mayflower pronounced the word in a manner that suggested he'd just bitten into a worm.
> "Meaning what?"
> "Meaning they were constantly engaging in *intellectual* conversations. Ranting about things no normal, rational man could care about or understand." (117)

The question of rationality is a play on words; while the Smarty Pants crew engage in intellectual conversation, in an effort to live a more fully realised, more reasoned life, Mayflower indicates that he views the pursuit of knowledge as irrational. The two meanings of the word are held in delicate balance: the idea that man holds the capacity to reason and is therefore rational and evolved, versus 'rational' as the antonym to 'irrational'. The joke here functions in the same capacity as catch-22 itself: an admission that war is illogical is proof of one's rationality, and if one is rational one is able to participate in the war. The discussion between Thomas and Mayflower continues with the question of the Smarty Pants crew's loyalty. Thomas asks if being intellectuals necessarily meant they were Communist sympathisers:

> Mayflower frowned. "No. And yes." He paused. "You see, even Seward, who despised them, admits they were skilled airmen who performed their duties efficiently and bravely. Foley and Stubblefield were eligible to be rotated stateside months earlier, but because replacements were slow in coming, they voluntarily extended their duty. They were flying dangerous missions when they easily could have been home." He paused again. "On the other hand, their C.O. calls them the most insubordinate officers he ever commanded, and Seward remembers them continually making sarcastic and derisory comments about the U.S. government and the war effort. Does that in itself classify them as unpatriotic pinkos? Not necessarily. Again, I remind you that this was 1973."
> […]

> The colonel knew what Mayflower meant, and Mayflower knew he knew. By 1973, only a few terminally ignorant grunts, gung-ho true believers such as Captain Seward, and that gullible, malleable, pusillanimous segment of the civilian public that seems ever eager to swallow any outrageous institutional lie, only those naive nonthinkers could any longer regard the Vietnam War as anything but a shameful example of political posturing gone horrifically awry. (119)

Here Robbins provides the kind of overt criticism of Vietnam that became more and more common towards the end of the conflict and in the ensuing years, and could, perhaps, serve as instruction for the correct manner in which to discuss contemporary events.

Though Robbins did not write about Vietnam in his earlier novels – *ARA*, remember, came out in 1971 – he did preach pacifism as a tenet of his philosophy. Rarely does he explicitly critique the then ongoing war. Now, with the passage of time, he is free to lambast "terminally ignorant grunts" as well as civilians who blindly accept United States involvement in overseas conflict without questioning their intentions. There is an uncharacteristic tone of anger here as Robbins attacks those complicit in the war, which could be equally directed at the decision to invade Afghanistan after 9/11. Elsewhere he quips "…U.S. authorities have never hesitated to impose their puritanical values on other, less uptight, cultures…" (162). Indeed, part of the Smarty Pants crew's decision to remain MIA even when they could return home, was a distaste for returning to the U.S. as heroes of an illegal war:

> Of course, if they were shrewd and careful and lucky, they might sneak across the Mekong into Thailand, where – glory hallelujah! – they'd be debriefed by U.S. agents for days on end and then paraded down Main Street America as heroes of a war everybody would have preferred to forget. "If they brought us to the Rose Garden to pin medals on us," Stubblefield suggested, "we could suddenly jump on the President and bite off his ears" – but they never followed up on the idea. (142)

While critique of Vietnam and the then President Richard Nixon is overt, digs levelled at George W. Bush are necessarily subtle, though still clearly present. Lisa Ko awakes to "a news broadcast and the U.S. President was ineptly biting sound" (146), feeding on common contemporary gags about the President's mental competence. Elsewhere Robbins denounces the Bush administration's handling of Guantanamo: "Exterminating Captain

Foley was a definite option. Both Colonel Thomas and Operations Officer Fitzgerald knew how easy it would be to arrange for him to have a "heart attack" in his cell. The current administration certainly had no problem with prejudicial terminations of that sort" (94).

The novel as a whole plays with the idea that American exceptionalism is a myth, and that government policy and the American way of life may be more fraught with difficulty than the prevailing narrative permits. It also posits that looking outwards, Eastwards, and indeed looking towards former enemies, may hold the secret to happiness so elusive in contemporary America. Colonel Thomas interviews Dern Foley:

> "Since the war was over, since you were healthy and no longer being held, why did you choose to stay over there in that gook shithole? For the drugs? The loot? The Commie politics? Or what?"
> Dern had looked the colonel in the eye and smiled that flat, distant smile of his that had never been much of a smile at all, and said coldly, "Maybe I preferred that shithole to this shithole."
> Oh my! Oh fine! Suppose the media got their grubby hands on *that*. An MIA who "preferred" to stay missing. An American hero who rejected America. And who hadn't denied that there might be others like him. Talk about your nasty buzzard omelet. (92)

The idea that the Smarty Pants crew should *choose* to remain MIA is anathema to jingoistic renderings of the United States as a great superpower, the home of the American Dream.

The actual circumstances of the Smarty Pants crew's disappearance recall Orr and Clevinger's disappearance in *Catch-22*, and indeed echoes of Yossarian's rationale for disappearing (rather than being 'disappeared') are heard throughout *Villa*. Stubblefield's speech on the expectation that one will invite fire in a war zone is in stark contrast with Yossarian's repeated complaints that "they're trying to kill me":

> "You sign up to go to war, there's a clause in the contract that says, 'I agree to get shot at.' It's not hidden in the fine print, either. It's right up front. 'In consideration for engaging in combat against parties of the first part, the undersigned hereby assigns to parties of the first part the right to aim bullets, bombs, grenades, mortar shells, rockets, and heavy artillery at his miserable ass.' Land mines, booby traps, and bayonet charges are covered by a separate clause." (90)

However, Stubblefield, in contrast to Yossarian and in keeping with Orr, sees in the midst of this chaos an opportunity:

> "You get hit or you get lucky. You're killed or you're wounded or you escape – either to go home or else to get shot at some more at a later date. Sometimes, of course, you may be captured. And sometimes, in the chaos of shooting, nobody is quite *certain* of your fate. You go missing. And you can go missing for a long, long, time. Maybe forever." (90)

Stubblefield acknowledges, to an extent, the additional burden this places on the family of the deceased, but emphasises that it is "not appreciably more terrible than any of the other fruits of armed conflict," and that the possibly of being marked MIA is simply one additional thing one must consider along with death or survival, "a possibility that should be weighed before you sign that contract or accept that invitation" (90). The description of the actual moment of desertion closely echoes that of Clevinger's disappearance:

> "At any rate, their last mission: it seems Stubblefield was aircraft commander and flying the plane, Foley doubled as a copilot and electronic weapons officer, and Goldwire was both regular navigator and radar navigator. There was unexpectedly heavy anti-aircraft fire, but the B-fifty-twos were at an altitude where they shouldn't have been vulnerable. Nevertheless something – a rocket or something – caught Foley's plane. Seward saw it lose altitude, but it disappeared into clouds and he was unable to ascertain whether or not the crew ejected. They were listed as MIA." (120)

The disappearance into the cloud is extremely evocative of Clevinger in the earlier novel – he is repeatedly described as having disappeared inside a cloud until the very end when Yossarian realises Clevinger, in fact, deserted: "Can't you see? Even Clevinger might be alive somewhere in that cloud of his, hiding inside until it's safe to come out" (Heller, *Catch-22* 514). Thomas posits that Captain Seward may have been responsible for the Smarty Pants' disappearance, that shooting down an ally was not all that uncommon: "There was a lot of fraggin' going on in Nam" (*Villa* 121). Fitzgerald responds with more Heller-esque military logic: "To frag an insufferable platoon leader is one thing, this was a sixty-four-million-dollar piece of government property" (121). Contrary to the commonly held belief that there is no price on human life, Fitzgerald is hinting at a military logic that

caps that price somewhere below sixty-four-million: a gallows joke exposing the manner in which excessive application of logic can result in chaos.

In surveys conducted in the U.S. in the early 1990s it was revealed that 64 per cent of respondents believed U.S. officials had abandoned MIA soldiers in permanent captivity in Southeast Asia (M.H. Hunt xix). *Villa Incognito* was then, upon its release, adding voice to a talking point that was still very evocative to a number of Americans. Stubblefield laments the focus on MIA soldiers, claiming they are in no more dire straits than those who died in, or indeed those who survived the war: "Closure is no more guaranteed than survival. I fail to understand all this widespread public hand-wringing and continuous bellicose puffery regarding MIAs" (*Villa* 90–91). Robbins discusses the issue in somewhat unsympathetic terms, seeming almost dismissive:

> As late as the summer of 2001, it was common to see bumper stickers that read "Bring Home the MIAs"; Congress was still regularly lobbied by MIA relatives and support groups; while on the Internet the electrons piled up in burying drifts, a ceaseless MIA blizzard, some of it in the form of heartbreaking anguish and lament, some of it no more than chauvinistic posturing, the old don't-fuck-with-God's-republic yankeed doodle strut. The MIA issue – 1,966 of America's Vietnam combatants remained unaccounted for in August, 2001 – was a potato that never entirely cooled, although with the establishment of the Joint Task Force-Full Accounting office in 1992, sincere efforts were made by the U.S. government to comb every South-east Asian battlefield and excavate every reported crash site. Teams of military forensic experts and civilian archaeologists searched for bone fragments, teeth, dog tags, class rings, faded letters, and so forth, and though most sites had been systematically scavenged by enterprising locals, they occasionally yielded definitive human remains and personal effects. As a result, the cries of bereaved relatives and professional patriots were becoming somewhat less shrill. (90–91)

The manner in which grieving relatives of unaccounted-for soldiers and "professional patriots" are put together seems to paint the issue as a storm in a teacup, and the reference to 'electrons piled in burying drifts' online hints at conspiracy theory rhetoric. However, the idea of the Smarty Pants crew choosing to remain MIA significantly muddies these waters. Robbins is simultaneously suggesting that there may be more servicemen remaining in Southeast Asia, but that they may not be in captivity; they may, indeed, be choosing to remain at large rather than return to the U.S. Though the phenomenon is

commonly referred to as Stockholm Syndrome, the criticism the Smarty Pants crew levelled at the U.S. government even prior to their disappearance would indicate that this is not the case.

The events of 9/11 loom large in *Villa Incognito*. Frequent references to contemporary concerns mentioned above, namely allusions to George W. Bush's well-documented foibles, all place the present-day events firmly in 2001. There are more self-conscious references too, placing the novel more specifically in the context of summer 2001, a very evocative setting to a post-9/11 audience. Robbins delicately displaces such references to the portion of events happening in Laos, in Madame Ko's story. As the novel is building towards its historic if indirectly depicted climax – the attack on the Twin Towers – Lisa Ko is visiting her old friends at the Lao National Circus. Robbins places the meeting "at the end of the first week of September," prefacing this with language which helps imbue this otherwise humdrum calendric reference with the kind of cataclysmic energy the event itself evokes: "The 2001 edition of the Lao National Circus wasn't scheduled to open until November, when the monsoon clouds would have eviscerated themselves and, like empty wineskins, been swept away" (194). In evoking the date, the first week of September 2001, the metaphor of the wineskins provides commentary on the ultimately impermanent symbols of U.S. dominance and resilience.

The event is foreshadowed elsewhere in the novel too. At the opening to Part II, when the narrative moves Tanuki's story to the Smarty Pants crew and associated players, Bootsey and Pru Foley discuss their brother's sudden reappearance while a television newscast covers "student protests against the proposed U.S. missile defence system" (45) in the background, a nod to the military programme concerned with protecting United States from incoming missile attack. Meanwhile, in Thailand, we see Dickie Goldwire's reaction to Dern Foley's arrest and from his lover's perspective, "From the announcer's English, she could tell that Dickie was tuned to CNN. Perhaps there had been a huge natural disaster somewhere, or a terrorist attack" (51), the juxtaposition delicately implying that terrorist attacks had, by this time, become part of the natural order of things, to be considered with the same detached energy. More direct references to the 9/11 attack help to emphasise how unthinkable such an attack on U.S. soil was prior to 2001. Mayflower Cabot Fitzgerald, CIA Operations Officer, is the first to directly refer to the imminent attack, and then does so in an incredulous mocking tone:

> "A low-level person at State is insisting she's uncovered information about a major terrorist plot against the World Trade Center and/or the White House. Some preposterous scenario, supposed to happen next Monday or Tuesday. It's ridiculous, of course. We'd obviously know about it at Langley if an attack of that magnitude was actually being planned. It isn't credible. And anyway, those grubby heathens aren't capable of anything more sophisticated than car bombings. Nevertheless," he sighed, "the director wants me on hand in case some wild-eyed Abdul does try anything and the Administration needs…"
> "A spin put on it." Thomas, who at one time had considered converting to Islam, made note of the bigotry but kept his composure.
> "…a reassuring statement from the intelligence community. A waste of time, but I shouldn't be away more than ten days." (181)

Everything about Fitzgerald's speech paints the security flag as a crackpot notion: the person raising the warning is a "low-level person at state"; the use of "and/or" mocks the notion that terrorists would target either, let alone both; 'obviously' and 'actually' serve to emphasise Langley's infallibility, and Fitzgerald's well-established haughtiness. Fitzgerald's mocking dismissiveness of unsophisticated "grubby heathens", and racist jab against some "wide-eyed Abdul" highlights his disdain, but also subtly generates sympathy for the perceived aggressor – Colonel Thomas's considering conversion to Islam serves to emphasise that Fitzgerald's jibes are directed at a stock type, and that not every "wide-eyed Abdul" is a terrorist.

Heavily foreshadowed, the actual terrorist attack is not directly depicted, echoing Vonnegut's approach in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. In his on-going efforts to focus on "untamed joy", it is typical of Robbins' style that coverage of the event is mirrored through Colonel Thomas' eyes, in an incongruous setting that belies the seriousness of the event while simultaneously highlighting its inescapable intrusion on everyday life. In the opening pages of Part II on the streets of Patpong, Dickie Goldwire encounters a character he refers to affectionately as "the Professor" while searching frantically for Xing and transport to Villa Incognito. The Professor is described in a manner that suggests an academic air at odds with his true mode of employment. Robbins builds this gag carefully, describing his "rumpled gray hair", his "wire-rimmed glasses", and imagining the Professor "having tenure in the department of physics at Mahidol University" – he riffs on the theme for three paragraphs before finally subverting the stuffy academic image by revealing the Professor's purpose:

> In his masticated oxfords, the Professor would shuffle up to Dickie, as he shuffled up to all unattached males (and Western couples should they appear to be tourists), greet them politely, and then inquire – as earnestly and hopefully as if he were asking an esteemed colleague if he might wish to attend a conference on double-charged sub-atomic particles:
> "Please, mister, you want to see a girl fuck a monkey?" (61)

Therefore, when "a small elderly man in a stained and rumpled suit" greets Colonel Thomas, Sergeant Canterbury and their prisoner Dern Foley in Patpong, the audience is already expecting the punch-line, though Thomas is not. "Hey, mister," asks the Professor, "you want to see a girl fuck a tanuki?" (205). Thomas's incredulous "Say what?!" is the expected though humorous response, unlike Dickie's familiar dismissiveness of the offer, and when Dern Foley seizes the opportunistic distraction to escape, Thomas recognises that he will be impossible to find. Resignedly he turns back to the Professor saying "Lead me to it, […] And name your price" (206). It is in this ludicrous burlesque setting, as "the covering was being removed from the tanuki cage, the girl onstage was slipping off her robe" (213), that Thomas gets the call:

> "Colonel Thomas, sir, have you heard the news?" The voice belonged to Lieutenant Jenks, and it sounded shaky. Disturbed.
> "What news would that be?"
> Until that moment, Canterbury would have bet *his* retirement that a black man couldn't turn pale. Thomas whirled to him. "Come on, Sarge! We're out of here!"
> The sergeant rose quickly. "Foley?" he asked hopefully.
> "Fuck that peanut. The shit has hit the fan in New York and Washington. Terrorists. Big time!" (213)

Robbins further displaces news of the revelation to a third point of view. The audience does not directly hear Jenks tell Thomas what has happened. Instead, we see Thomas's reaction from Canterbury's perspective, sidestepping the delicate issue of describing the horrific moment in a novel predominantly about "untamed joy". As Thomas and Canterbury leave the club, the tanuki's "*pla-bonga, pla-bonga, pla-bonga*" follows them out, a reminder that joy in spite of everything is the only reasonable coping mechanism for such a cataclysmic event.

Further descriptions of the day itself focus on the shock and ennui experienced by non-affected citizens, exemplified by Bootsey and Pru, and serve to further highlight the humdrum normality of that Tuesday morning, excepting the event: "At the Queen Anne branch of the Seattle post Office, the clerks that Tuesday morning were inattentive. No customer complained, for they were equally distracted by the terrible news that poured constantly from a radio near the rear of the mailroom" (214). The shell-shocked confusion of regular people, the instinctual drive to do regular things like visit the post-office, is here perfectly described. The insistence on "joy in spite of everything" is quickly reinforced, however, when Bootsey Foley tracks down her sister only to discover her in the arms of a circus clown.

In 2013 Robbins discusses the appropriate responses to tragic events: "My response to that particular event came in *Villa incognito* in that one scene where Stubblefield is walking across – not walking but crossing the chasm on the wire with his hands and – do you recall that passage? […] That's where I had my say on 9/11 and its aftermath. And the dialogue there, in that section" (see Appendix 1). A moment later Robbins goes on to admit that he does not read his novels once they are published, and that this is problematic when discussing their content. Given this, and the content of the dialogue on the wire, which is concerned more with Dickie Goldwire's heartbreak and the identity of Lisa Ko's expected child's father than with the larger themes of the text, it is likely Robbins is referring instead to a speech, ten pages earlier, which the aerialist Madame Phom hears in Villa Incognito. Stubblefield is addressing the residents of Fan Nan Nan on the subject of Dern Foley's disappearance, and having delivered a letter from Lisa Ko, Madame Phom leaves Stubblefield to a tangential lecture on the American ego and resistance to change:

> "In their secretly nervous hearts, they've convinced themselves, poor little delusional narcissists, that their nation is the most powerful that ever was or ever will be, ignoring the still vaster empires that have crumbled in the past, conveniently forgetting that the U.S. has only existed for a mere two hundred twenty-five years, and refusing to consider for a nanosecond that in another two hundred twenty-five years it very well might be gone. Those towering skyscrapers that to everyone in this room constitute such vivid symbols of America, its wealth and its strength, can – by acts of nature or acts of men – literally topple overnight. Contradictorily, while insisting on America's abiding permanence, the many Christians among them profess also to believe that the world is scheduled to end forthwith and the sooner the better so, you see, they

> do embody the absurd, even though they can neither recognize nor benefit from it." He sighed. "I confess, I almost miss their cocky brand of schizophrenia. Yes. I do sometimes miss it. It's good tragicomedy. Holds a snakelike fascination." (208–209)

The speech is, perhaps, a little heavy-handed in its symbolic references to 9/11. In the narrative, Stubblefield's lecture immediately follows Colonel Thomas's encounter with the Professor, and precedes his learning of the attack. It may be assumed that Thomas would have been among the first to know, while the difficulty of getting news to Villa Incognito has been well established by the efforts taken to forewarn of Foley's initial arrest. The metaphor of the towering skyscrapers symbolising America's wealth and strength is fully realised in their destruction and the concurrent economic recession. The reference to tragicomedy recalls the necessity of approaching tragic events with levity. Indeed the above is preceded with some comments on the role of ambiguity in understanding the absolute, the crazy wisdom, the untangled koan discussed above:

> "In this world that God (or Mother Nature) created, it is always hazard and novelty – *hazard* and *novelty* – which assert themselves, thereby rendering notions of fixity absurd. Incongruously enough, however, when we allow ourselves to fully accept uncertainty, to embrace and cultivate it even, then we actually can begin to feel within ourselves the presence of an Absolute. The person who cannot welcome ambiguity cannot welcome God." (208)

Fixity, we are told, the towering symbols of American wealth and strength, a perfect logical pair, are subject to God/Mother Nature's mischievous penchant for hazard and novelty. Robbins seems to suggest that for Americans to comprehend the Absolute they must accept ambiguity.

The fact that Robbins' claims Stubblefield is voicing the author's opinion of 9/11 is striking, as he has almost always placed a mouthpiece for his own philosophy within his novels, sometimes directly, as in the case of Dr Robbins in *Cowgirls*, and sometimes indirectly, such as the guru-type Amanda in *ARA*. *Villa Incognito* is Robbins' senior year, his graduation from Dream School. Any earlier accusations of sophomoric musings – levelled by Siegel and Karbo – are put to rest here. Robbins self-consciously mocks the authorial filibuster, by poking gentle fun at Mars Albert Stubblefield's lecturing. Stubblefield, as the voice of Robbins' philosophy in *Villa Incognito*, is painted occasionally as a guru, and occasionally as an aging self-indulgent gasbag to a disinterested but obliging and

affectionate younger audience. As though to emphasise the importance of levity of soul, of not taking oneself too seriously, flattering descriptions are often juxtaposed with humorous digs:

> His corpus had expanded to the degree where those who cherished the popular image of Buddha must have felt reverential in his presence, while the hill-tribe animists surely saw in his massively bushy beard and the hair (still mostly brown) that reached down below his shoulder blades, some reflection of the god – or the ogre – of the gorge. […] Save for the tattoo, his chest was bare, as were his feet, the toenails of which one of the girls had playfully painted scarlet. The nail polish, Dickie thought, made Stubblefield's long, meaty toes look like the nosecones of a lilliputian space agency (*77*).

References to meaningful dialogues are the fond remembrances of a more innocent time in the early 1970s, as considered through the eyes of older men, while Stubblefield's Soul Lecture in the Villa recalls and parodies Amanda's butterfly lectures to the Indo-Tibetan Circus in *ARA*. In explaining the purpose of the soul to Hmong animists and Buddhists, Stubblefield emphasises the importance of joy in an understanding of a western definition of the soul: "Hard times and funky living can season the soul, true enough, but joy is the yeast that makes it rise" (*77*). Stubblefield, furthermore, is gently teased throughout by other characters for his proselytising, as though a mature Robbins is berating his younger self for such indulgences: Dickie affectionately refers to Stubblefield's "pedantic discourses" (*76*). Elsewhere, Robbins cuts reportage on Stubblefield's lecture in the Villa short:

> At this juncture the reader may be going, "Yeah, yeah, right, and Pinocchio's semen is the source of the best Italian furniture." Fair enough. Fair enough. We've quoted Stubblefield sufficiently here to establish that he was (1) erudite, (2) verbal, and (3) a free-thinker – and apt to sail a bit over the top in all three departments. This particular display, for example, went on at length, until he rather abruptly stopped pacing and summed up his talk thusly:
>
> "In the end, perhaps we should simply imagine a joke; a long joke that's being continually retold in an accent too thick and too strange to even be completely understood. Life is that joke, my friends. The soul is its punch line."
>
> For at least a full minute, Stubblefield stared at his feet, at the way his painted toenails stood out against the richer reds of the carpet. This was not for effect. He was thinking. The room was so quiet you could almost hear the incense

> smoldering. Finally, he lifted his beard off his torso and said, "Let's not chisel that last remark in stone. Okay? It may be high wisdom. It could be pure bullshit. There's often a thin line." (79)

Stubblefield is admitting to potential fallacies in his philosophy – and by extension in Robbins' philosophy – but in a larger sense he is alluding to the intangible nature of comedy. In describing life as a joke and levering that metaphor into a description of the soul Stubblefield's analogy recalls Today is Tomorrow's belief that the essence of the universe (the inter-mingling of darkness and light) lies in "Western man's comedic sense". He muddies the waters here considerably; the joke (life) is intangible, difficult to understand, delivered in language "too strange to even be completely understood" – all traditional reasons for comedic failure. Life, here, is comedic failure, and the soul lies in the punch-line – the moment where logical fallacies are resolved, where true meaning is illuminated, where the logical triumphs over the illogical. The "thin line" between "high wisdom" and "pure bullshit" refers simultaneously to comedic success and failure, but also to Robbins' earlier interviews and writings on the subject. Is he here admitting that his earlier comments on a comedic sensibility being central to enlightenment are "pure bullshit" or is he highlighting the importance of the thin line, the frontier, in fully understanding the nature of contradiction, and thus the nature of comedy, and thus the soul?

Kitsune, the messenger to the Gods in the first part of the novel, as well as in the epilogue, serves as an interesting compliment to the Stubblefield character. Dern Foley, the would-be priest turned drug smuggler, is keen to explore the potential of Eastern philosophy and animism. He asks:

> "Is this Eastern wisdom we've always heard so much about just another more esoteric and equally fruitless attempt to explain the unexplainable, to hang a bell on the God of Smoke and Mirrors, or is there something ultimately more… well, ultimately more effective, ultimately more profound, ultimately more, uh, *ultimate* about it?" (140).

Kitsune's purpose in the novel is to challenge dogmatic thinking through chaos and play; he is analogous with the Native American Trickster figure. Indeed it is Kitsune who facilitates the relationship with Tanuki and Miho (30), with its far-reaching consequences for the potential for spiritual regrowth in the wake of 9/11. We see Kitsune, in uniting Tanuki and Miho, cultivating the "grotesque and preposterous" in order to improve the

human condition. His trickster activities function as a joke would, with the fractured taboo, the disruption to prevailing logic bringing about spiritual growth:

> [Tanuki] was thinking about Kitsune and how the fox continually played mean tricks on human beings, yet claimed that his mischief was actually a benefit to men because, in the end, it forced them into the flexibility and resourcefulness essential to their advancement. Tanuki had always believed that the fox was merely rationalizing his behaviour, and needlessly so, since, as far as he, the badger, was concerned, pleasure was its own excuse and the advancement of human culture was never a priority (19).

Tanuki, then, subscribes to the idea that joy and pleasure exist as a means to their own end, whereas Kitsune sees some larger edifying purpose to joking, practical joking, and mischief. In the epilogue the fox laments man's folly:

> "Those damn men. But we might not have to worry about them much longer. They seem more intent than ever on committing mass suicide. […] They call it *progress*. They call it *growth*. They call it *national security* and *energy policy* and all sorts of foolish things but both the motives and the end results are the same. […] It's a dangerous situation, but that's okay: danger is the perfume of change, and change is the future's vocation. There's hope for us in this realm yet." (239–240)

Kitsune is echoing Stubblefield's belief that the universe's assertion of hazard and novelty holds the secret to enlightenment. Furthermore Kitsune suggests that the growth of the internet and the global conversation it encourages may foster more peaceful interactions on an international scale. With the advent of globalisation, he seems to suggest, Eastern philosophy can meet Western, and mankind's spiritual wellbeing will reap the benefits.

As with much of Robbins' earlier work, the ultimate lesson in *Villa Incognito* is "joy in spite of everything", here influenced by Kitsune's tricksterism, Tanuki's pursuit of pure pleasure ("He for fun," explains Lisa Ko. "Eat, drink, dance, make sex. Alla big time fun." (225)), the Smarty Pants crew's high-brow satiric attacks on U.S. Interventionism, the strong presence of the burlesque spirit of the circus, culminating in Whissen's "metaphysical high comedy" (16). The designation as metaphysical high comedy is entirely in keeping with Robbins' desire to produce literature that is light-hearted but not

lightweight. The secret, Robbins seems to be saying, is to bring the spirit of joy in Eastern philosophy (animism, Buddhism, et cetera) to the west:

> Is it Buddhism, or what, that makes these people so much happier and more relaxed about life than Westerners? In the midst of Bangkok's relentless turmoil, they just smile and say "no problem." If Jean-Paul Sartre had been Thai, existentialism would have been a sit-com. Jeeze! (*Villa* 47)

The Sartre reference perfectly embodies the idea of metaphysical high comedy. Evoking Sartre and existentialism is undeniably highbrow, dependent on a well-read audience getting the reference, and the simile incongruously juxtaposing existentialism with low-brow situational comedy produces a knowing laugh. This is just one of many examples early in the novel emphasising Eastern philosophy's penchant for highlighting the importance of joy and laughter. Ultimately this philosophy must make its way to the United States to ensure its people's happiness. Never content, on a metaphysical level, the need for untamed joy becomes more pressing post-9/11. "In our Declaration of Independence," Stubblefield explains, "we consecrate ourselves as a nation to the pursuit of happiness. That in itself is an admission of habitual discontent. One needn't *pursue* what one already possesses." (125) If *Villa Incognito* is about the pursuit of happiness, then Tanuki is its Pied Piper, and his drumming the trail to follow.

Tanuki is an animal ancestor imbued with special powers, worshipped in Japan, though not a true God (225). In Hmong animism, an imbalance in the relationship between the spirit worlds can account for illness and health, similar to how early western medicine believed in the delicate balance between Hippocrates' four 'humors' (blood, bile, black bile and phlegm). Certain rituals could be offered to the animal ancestors to restore balance between the physical and spiritual worlds, and restore health ('Hmong Customs and Culture'). A distinction is created between 'tanuki' (*Nyctereutes procyonoïdes*) and 'Tanuki', the Animal Ancestor, with the latter described in terms familiar to Western Christians: "Like Jesus, Tanuki is here and not here. He is always with us, yet conspicuously absent" (*Villa* 122). Lisa Ko's Tanuki blood accounts for her mysterious connection to the spirit world, and it is repeatedly hinted that her circus act contains some edifying element beyond pure entertainment: "And yet he'd [Stubblefield] never been able to entirely divest himself of the notion, the suspicion, that there was something below the surface of Madame Ko's circus act (indeed, of most of Lisa's actions), something obliquely instructive, a physical if subtle manifestation of an arcane philosophical system" (125). The

tenacity of the connection, the difficulty of understanding it, is what brings the seemingly frivolous performance to the frontier of language, and in order to develop an understanding of the Ultimate one must attempt to untangle the koan of Lisa's act. On a metaphysical level, an attempt to form an image of Tanuki, and Tanuki's connection to the idea of pure joy, approaches but can never reach these frontiers:

> No, it's impossible, really, to form a mental image of Tanuki in such a setting. It's just too incongruous to compute. Upon a will-o'-the-wisp, one's mind can set a snowflake derby, even a crown of thorns, but a top hat or beret is quite another matter. It is, in fact, not easy to picture Himself at all. When one dwells for very long on Tanuki, the folds of one's thoughts grow as slippery as frog skins, the pen in the hand becomes a stalactite, the screen shines green like owl piss, the keyboard sprouts a greasy mustache. As if an audio wrench has been tossed into the cognitive machinery, a faint but persistent sound attacks the inner ear: the drumming sound, one intuits, that the heart used to make before the heart was domesticated and yoked; the thump of pure *appetite* (so pure it is almost holy); the pounding pulse of some sweet and terrible unnamed joy. *Pla-bonga pla-bonga pla-bonga*. (123)

Thus Tanuki's *pla-bonga* seems to both answer and obscure the question.

In *Villa Incognito* Tanuki is the embodiment of joy, play, and burlesque, presenting in Part I as sexual hijinks, and later as a mysterious and joyous connection to the Divine. In a lengthy passage describing Madame Ko's circus act Robbins employs language familiar to Humor Studies scholars:

> Ultimately, the appeal of Madame Ko's act rested not on skills but on appearances, not on clever tricks but on the paradoxical and unconquerable dignity with which those bulbous beasts, so awkward, lumbering, and cartoonish in demeanor went through their routines; and, moreover, on the abject pleasure they seemed to take in themselves. To see wildwood oddities break spontaneously (to their mistress's feigned chagrin) into a hippy-hoppy little dance, a jaunty Chaplinesque jig rife with pathos and a kind of implied defiance, and to hear them suddenly accompany their slapstick steps by thumping their parabolic paunches with a rhythm at once anarchistically explosive and as equanimously elegiac as the fugues of Bach (*pla-bonga, pla-bon-bon-bonga-ga-ga*), was to confront – spotlighted and in in three dimensions –

> what Alfred North Whitehead must have meant when he wrote that "the notion of life implies a certain absoluteness of self-enjoyment."
>
> Maybe the affecting aspect was that Madame Ko's tanukis sparked in an onlooker's muscles a kinetic memory of the innocent freedom of early childhood, when one could let one's body go all akimbo on the slightest whim, could bounce, flop, and skip about in pure corporeal joy without embarrassment, judgment, or restraint.
>
> Or maybe there were more "mature" associations, memories, say, of being falling-down drunk at the company picnic but now crazy little animals were serving as surrogates, allowing one to vicariously relive those deliciously liberating and rebellious moments while maintaining one's veneer of civilized respectability, protecting, in the process, one's marriage, one's standing in the community, one's job.
>
> Or maybe, on a strictly subconscious level, circus-goers recognized in the antics of the tanukis – antics that appeared goofy and bumbling yet, at the same time, brave and successful – an analogy to their own blindly hopeful gyrations in a complex, impermanent universe where every happy dance was danced in the lengthening shadow of death. And maybe they were inspired, if only for a night, to emulate the tanuki capacity for self-enjoyment, a gift that ought to be the birthright of every Homo sapiens. (195-196)

This powerful passage defines Tanuki's power in terms applied to incongruity theory (the juxtaposition of disparate elements), play theory (spontaneous physical expressions of joy), superiority theory (the recognition, by a "mature" onlooker, that they are inherently superior to the object of humor, while holding the potential to descend to frivolity) and finally gallows humor (the 'happy dance […] danced in the lengthening shadow of death).

Finally, as though to hammer the proverbial last nail in the coffin, Tanuki is often the voice of the repeatedly fumbled "Knock! Knock!" joke. The knock knock joke's setup is well known, however in *Villa Incognito* the structure is constantly subverted, disrupted, and unresolved. It occurs first in the opening of the novel:

> Knock! Knock!
>
> "Who's there?"
>
> "Tanuki"
>
> "Tanuki who?"
>
> "Don't be stupid. Tanuki. Himself. (4)

Though the joke never corresponds to the usual structure, it is occasionally humorously used to announce a character's arrival – with our cultural expectation of the joke's process the unexpected use of the first half of the setup, subverted by the realisation that it is to be taken at face value, produces a laugh:

> Knock Knock!
> "Who's there?"
> "It's me. I lost my key. Let me in quick! I have to tinkle." (70)

When not accompanied by an arrival, the joke is a reminder of Tanuki's hold on the narrative, and thus of the presence of untamed joy:

> Knock Knock!
> "Who's there?"
> "The All-Controlling Agent of Destiny and Change."
> "Are you really the All-Controlling Agent of Destiny and Change?"
> "Of course not, you ninny. There's no such thing. I'm the Mindless Tosspot of Random Chance. If you detect patterns in my swath, in my wake, that's your prerogative, I guess, but should you base important decisions on those 'patterns,' you could be in for a surprise." (105)

Robbins is here commenting again on the nature of humour. In yet another fumbled knock knock joke, by now a trope well established in the narrative, he not only highlights the subversion of the expected structure, he also gently mocks anyone seeking consistency in this subversion. It is as though he is cautioning against seeking meaning in the joke, and instead placing faith in the Mindless Tosspot of Random Chance.

If the knock knock joke skirts any attempt to assign meaning to laughter, Tanuki's drumming may provide a steadier rhythm. Tanuki's *pla-bonga* echoes throughout *Villa Incognito*, in a manner recalling the Clockworks' hold over *Cowgirls*. It is an expression of joy, associated with love-making, drunkenness, and a reminder to "adopt a party mood, thumb your nose at the world, and have fun" (Whissen 15):

> No regrets. They just pushed onwards, onward toward whatever lay in store. At one point, however, Miho came to a sudden and complete stop. From somewhere above them, far up the mountainside, she and Kazu – who had just as abruptly ceased fretting – heard a familiar sound, a faint rhythmic echo of some terrible unnamed and untamed joy.

> *Pla-bonga. Pla-bonga. Pla-bonga.* (*Villa* 39)

Thus Tanuki's brand of joy, unnamed and untamed, is the perfect antidote to the post-9/11 American spirit.

America's unhappiness and dissatisfaction with the proverbial American Dream is alluded to repeatedly throughout the novel. The Smarty Pants crew chooses to remain MIA, preferring "that shithole to this shithole" in the words of Dern Foley. Those who choose to remain are either too indoctrinated (Fitzgerald) or too stupid (Pru and Bootsey) to escape. The day-to-day reality of the American way of life is compared unfavourably to the more fully realised existence of the residents of Villa Incognito, and even the pursuit of pure joy of the Circus performers. Lisa Ko laments this to Stubblefield, highlighting also the pre-trauma experienced by American citizens in the lead-up to 9/11:

> The Asian woman described, to the best of her ability, hip-hop and Harry Potter, election fraud and Plymouth Cruisers, body piercing, reality TV, Britney Spears, glass art, working-class golf, kiddie obesity, and something called "political correctness"; and after she had reported on current fads, styles, and preoccupations, she briefly addressed the state of the union. Shaking her head, she said, "Your country seems to have everything and yet has almost nothing. It's unbelievable. In that vast, beautiful, powerful land of unprecedented abundance live some of the most unhappy people on earth. Oh, generally speaking, they complement all that affluence by being generous and energetic and, except for their ruling class which is wormy with evil like ruling classes everywhere, rather decent. But they're chronically depressed and dissatisfied. Chronically. Have you heard of Prozac?" (124)

Furthermore we have Stubblefield's comments about the pursuit of happiness, as opposed to continued existence in a happy state. Fitting, then, that both Lisa Ko's child (Tanuki's progeny) and the tanukis that had escaped the circus, should end up at Grant Pass, Oregon, while both Lisa Ko and Tanuki return to Lake Biwa, Japan. As the animal ancestor and his great-great grandchild return to their ancestral home, where by all accounts Lisa will never be seen nor heard from again, the new generation finds itself in the New World, in the wake of 9/11. The point is perhaps somewhat belaboured:

> "The tanukis are fine, little darling," she thought she heard the voice purr in her ear. "You've had your fun together, you and them, your fling in the illusory arena. Now allow them to be true animals again, free of hoops and the drug of

> applause. Let them do what they will in the New World, wild and free. It's what Tanuki's been needing. It may be what America needs, as well." (158)

The escaped tanukis are not the animal ancestors, granted, but the circus performing *Nyctereutes procyonoides* trained by Madame Ko. Robbins' obsession with the circus is well-documented, both in his novels and in *Tibetan Peach Pie*, as discussed earlier. Furthermore the frivolity, exoticness, and joy expressed by seemingly pointless circus acts embodies Robbins' definition of Crazy Wisdom:

> "Just look at him," Stubblefield went on, as in the distance the solitary figure jumped through a hoop and landed back on the nearly invisible wire. "What you're seeing is the perfection of a conscious act of craziness. What you're seeing is pinpoint focus combined with mad abandon in such a way as to cause the specters of death and the exaltations of life to collide at some kind of cross-roads. The sparks that fly from that collision are like little shards of God. If you can hold them in your mind for more than five seconds, you can understand everything that ever was or will ever be." (175)

Here is a perfect description of the koan discussed at length above. If one can hold for a moment in one's mind a complete understanding of the delicate balance between madness and wisdom, one can experience enlightenment. This moment of understanding is key to the triumph of joy over despair, and the transcendence of good over evil. Echoing his challenge in "Defiance of Gravity" that the soul must be as light as a feather to enter Heaven, in *Villa Incognito* he claims:

> In the stiff black book that the "European Devils" carried with them wherever they went, it was written, "God can forgive everything except despair." The missionaries steadfastly avoided discussing such statements with the Zen priests who politely debated them ("The blue-eyed ones can attain neither wisdom nor tranquillity," said one of Miho's sensai, "because they're too busy clapping their hands in glee over the suffering of the damned."), and certainly the illiterate, disinterested Tanuki could not have come across it. Nevertheless, he possessed the instinctive knowledge (an opinion that, admittedly, had to be awakened from time to time by Kitsune) that despair is ultimately destructive to oneself and a burden to others; and that if one persists in it, the gods will sooner or later lose patience and give one something to really despair about. (121)

Robbins seems to be warning, somewhat savagely, that an insistence in burdening oneself with the tragedy of everyday life, will ultimately beget true tragedy. However, this arrives very early in the narrative, and the novel concludes one year post-9/11 on a decidedly hopeful note. It may, thus, be more appropriate to conclude on a note of acceptance rather than judgment, with a riddle passed down from Tanuki to Miho, Kazu, and eventually Lisa Ko: "It is what it is, you are what you it, and there are no mistakes." (38)

4.5 Conclusions

While Joseph Heller and Kurt Vonnegut released their anti-war novels to an increasingly frustrated and politically active college-aged readership, Robbins' early novels embodied rather than commented on the spirit of the times. Though only around ten years younger than Heller and Vonnegut, Robbins' war was Korea, and he was a non-combatant. In terms of literary history, however, all three authors could be considered contemporaries, and stylistically their similarities are numerous, and could broadly be labelled post-modern: Robbins employs much the same episodic style as Vonnegut. In *Villa Incognito* Robbins highlights the non-linearity of time: "…events are seldom as linearly linked as those who tout 'history' would prefer to believe, although in this case, the trail is rather easy to sniff" (101). In terms of narrative structure, Robbins techniques echo Heller's, which he describes here specifically in relation to *ARA* but which is applicable equally to the rest of his oeuvre:

> …its structure *radiates* in many directions at once, rather than progressing gradually up an inclined plane, like most novels, from minor climax to minor climax to major climax. There are lots of little *flashes* of illumination strung together like beads. Some of these flashes illuminate the plot; others merely illuminate the reader. (McCaffery et al. 34)

Kent highlights the development of this non-linear story-telling in his discussion of *Cowgirls*, recalling Vonnegut's explanation of the Tralfamadorian concept of time:

> The manipulation of time contexts even prompts the narrator to intrude and deal with readers' expected confusion or impatience by informing them that some of the events in parts 1, 2, and 3 of the novel occurred after Sissy "had come to the Rubber Rose and gone again." The narrator both justifies the book's arrangement of events and sympathizes with readers' need for order… (271)

Thus Kent's commentary on *Cowgirls* provides the impetus behind Vonnegut relating, chronologically, Billy Pilgrim's life story at the opening of *Slaughterhouse-Five*: it is almost a betrayal of avant-garde technique, pandering to audience's need for structure. Kent connects this to Robbins' psychedelic model (269) – which may provide further insight into Heller and Vonnegut's appeal to campus audiences. There is development too in the anti-hero figure, from Yossarian and Billy's weak and/or insane foils to the earlier valorised war hero, to Robbins' focus on misfits, hippies, and dropouts. Their goals are the same: to parlay their personal transformations into societal changes.

There are, additionally, several references to *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Catch-22* in *Villa Incognito*, though they may be purely coincidental. The correspondence between the disappearance of Clevinger in Heller's novel and of the Smarty Pants crew's in *Villa* has already been discussed, though the difference in treatment of the moral implications has not been considered at length. Suffice, for now, to highlight critics' divisive reaction to Yossarian's desertion, and Heller's attempts to provide moral justification for his actions. Compare this to the public outrage for MIA Vietnam soldiers contemporaneous to Robbins' writing of *Villa Incognito*, the moral distinction between MIA and deserter status, and Robbins' argument that desertion is the much more morally righteous act. Additionally, there is the following extract from Stubblefield's Soul Lecture:

> "If you need to visualize the soul, think of it as…" he paused to ponder. "Think of this as a kind of train. Yes, a long, lonesome freight train rumbling from generation to generation on an eternally rainy morning: its boxcars are loaded with sighs and laughter, its hobos are angels, its engineer is the queen of spades– and the queen of spades is wild. *Whooo-whooo!* Hear that epiphanic whistle blow." The audience giggled at the sound effects. "The train's destination is the godhead, but it stops at the Big Bang, at the orgasm, and at that hole in the fence that the red fox sneaks through down behind the barn. It's simultaneously a local and an express, but it doesn't transport weaponry, and it certainly ain't no milk run" (78).

This cannot really be coincidental, because the references to the earlier anti-war novels are too plentiful: the train, the boxcars, the hobos and angels recall Billy Pilgrim's journey to the POW camp; the milk run recalls Yossarian's much feared and ultimately uneventful Bologna mission. When Dickie's life flashes before his eyes one of the "parade of

supporting actors" is "the psychotic commanding officer of his B-52 squadron" (96) an obvious though also potentially unconscious reference to Colonel Cathcart.

However, we are not concerned with the broad definition of these novels within postmodern culture, we are concerned with their humour, and there is sufficient consensus among critics that their literary lineage is fairly assured. Robbins' place within the lineage of the Black Humor model is much more intriguing. Remember that when Jerome Klinkowitz declared the final word on Black Humor in 1974 Robbins had only published *Another Roadside Attraction* (1971), and audiences may not have read this novel within the parameters then established for that genre. If we consider Black Humor a comedic technique within the novel form, as the introduction to this study argues, it is much more fruitful to consider the development of this technique than to assign it, as Schulz does, to the 1960s. In this chapter Robbins' commentary on Freud's gallows humour was considered within the context of his advocacy for crazy wisdom. However, there is little distinction between the comic values and techniques of these philosophies. According to Mark Siegel:

> Northrop Frye has suggested that black comedy is essentially one phase in a comic cycle which reflects a time when a culture's vision of itself is so bleak that no solutions seem probable. If this is true, Robbins may be signalling the upswing in the comic cycle to a more positive vision in which social changes must be fought for, but in which success is possible. While *Another Roadside Attraction* ends in tragedy and the dissolution of the bonds between the characters (some are dead, some go their separate ways), its final note is one of limited optimism: the narrator says that your reading this manuscript is a sign of hope and possibility. While the end of *Cowgirls* also sees the death of two characters and the dissolving of a number of other relationships created during the course of the novel, these relationships were described all along as being transitional steps toward fulfilment. Furthermore, the main character and the narrator are apparently joined in marriage, the classic comic affirmation that promises the unification and survival of society.
>
> Robbins deals straightforwardly with the deaths in his novels because he believes that "the fear of death is the beginning of slavery." Black comedy often titillates us with the fear of death, often increasing our horror even as we laugh. Robbins wants to eliminate some of that fear at the same time that he wishes the reader to be conscious of his own mortality. (*Tom Robbins* 41)

The move from early to late American Black Humor over the course of the second half of the twentieth century is probably best understood in the distinction between Heller and Vonnegut's laughing acceptance of life's inherent tragedy, towards Robbins' joy in spite of everything.

Villa Incognito falls under Hölbling's classification of the post-modern war novel in which war is treated not as a single historic event but as a persistent fact of modern American life (218) where the narrative focuses not on a single event, battle, or combatant but expands outwards, critiquing the military machine. *Villa Incognito*, however, takes this further than *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, as the unrelenting tides of time and contemporary historic events intensify the military's ominous presence. Robbins' novel does not stop at critique of the military, but expands outwards, condemning the American psychic state, which entrenched in paranoia and clouded by its own inflated sense of self-worth allows this machine to flourish. Robbins' comedic treatment of the Smarty Pants crew's volitional MIA status provides a moral justification for their actions: if one is fully alive and fully rational, it is absurd to participate in an absurd war, for an absurd military, for a morally bankrupt society, and the only sound, logical and peaceful option is to opt out.

Chapter 5. Tony Vigorito

Robert L. Nadeau suggested that writers of popular fiction can prompt cultural and philosophical revolutions when they borrow ideas from science, fictionalise new concepts, and present them to a larger audience (73–74). It may be argued that this is what Tony Vigorito attempts to achieve in *Just a Couple of Days* (2001). His first novel, *Days* is concerned with the fallout from the unsanctioned field test of a genetic weapon – the Pied Piper Virus – which destroys its victims' symbolic capacity. Drawing on the ideas of Ferdinand de Saussure and others, Vigorito attempts to fictionalise the arbitrary and tentative connection between signifier and signified. In so doing Vigorito contributes to a generation of writers who used humour to discuss war, weaponry, the military, and the conditions of absurdity they inspire. His contribution is a self-conscious reflection on the nature of language, humour, laughter and absurdity.

Just a Couple of Days serves as a culmination of and a new departure for the kinds of ideas developed in comedic war literature over the preceding forty years. Though released in 2001 – remarkably in September of that year – the novel touches on many of the same counter-culture concerns that drew readers to *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*. The warzone itself may look very different: ground zero is contemporary America, as opposed to World War II-era Europe or Asia. The act of aggression is one of domestic terrorism, and does not take place in any of the stalwart settings of war literature, such as a traditional battlefield, prisoner of war camp, or Air Force base. The soldiers are scientists, academics, intellectuals, and the situation room is a university. The weapon is genetic, a virus: there are no guns or tanks; there is no intentional bloodshed. However, in referencing student protest, Kent State, and Mutually Assured Destruction *Days* effectively evokes the earlier works. This novel too acquired cult status: originally published independently by Bast Books, it gained huge readership via word-of-mouth. Though touching on similar concerns to the earlier novels, *Days* is also a product of its time' almost eerily so. General Kiljoy declares the release of the Pied Piper Virus "the worst breach of national security in world history" (Vigorito, *Just a Couple of Days* 273), yet the novel was published just over a week before the 9/11 attacks.

As a late example of the comedic anti-war novel, Vigorito draws on Heller and Vonnegut's use of laughter to alleviate the strain of war, and offers it as a means to achieve nothing less than Perfect Communication. The Committee for Peaceful Conflict's (CPC)

attempts to weaponise laughter backfire entirely, as it is through laughter that mankind is liberated from the societal structures and petty misunderstandings that lead to conflict. Without language-based systems such as religion, money, land, power or nationhood, there is simply nothing left to fight about. Vigorito raises questions about the different types of laughter – not only laughter at comic amusement (such as jokes and gags in literature), but also ideas of manic, hysterical or psychotic laughter. Though the novel is comedic – and Vigorito's use of humour and joke-work will be discussed – *Days* also forces us to consider laughter as a physiological impulse: such as tickling, laughing gas, or maniacal laughter. The laughter in *Days* is, quite literally, infectious.

Vigorito is arguing for a light-hearted acceptance of tragedy as an intrinsic part of life, demonstrating a development from Heller's attempts to rail against the intricacies of language, to trap the hero inside the butt of the joke. Vigorito weaponises language itself, and ultimately his solution is to destroy language, leaving only laughter. He asks his reader to question our symbolic capacity, the meaning of meaning, and watches society dissolve as we attempt to unravel the question of why we laugh. *Days* is the perfect summation of the dominant themes of the comedic protest novel, and representative of the many strains of humour discussed: humour as reaction to horror, humour as release from pain, and humour as an aesthetic experience.

5.1 Vigorito's Joke-Work

Just a Couple of Days considers the myriad reasons for why we laugh, and effectively illustrates some of the theories that have been debated by humour studies scholars throughout history. It features laughter as reaction to horror, laughter as release from pain, laughter from comic-amusement and humour as an aesthetic experience. Victor Raskin argues that the most dominant theories of humour complement rather than contradict each other: Superiority Theory, Incongruity Theory and Relief Theory "characterize the complex phenomenon of humor from very different angles, […] they seem to supplement each other quite nicely" (qtd. in Morreall 7). Superiority, Incongruity and Relief are illustrated in *Days*, in such a way as to demonstrate their inter-connectedness. The following will provide some of the theoretical background for the various laughter responses in the novel.

Laughter at non-comic amusement features more prevalently in *Days* than in any of the novels discussed thus far. In part, it serves as a vehicle for considering the nature of

laughter. However, it also considers laughter as a weakness, something with the power to disarm someone. This idea of laughter as an incapacitating agent is not new, and early superiority theorists such as Basil the Great associated raucous laughter with a lack of self-mastery (qtd. in Morreall 5). Laughter itself serves as an incapacitating agent. According to Morreall:

> Not only does amusement not motivate specific actions, but the more amused we are, the less capable we are of any action at all. Heavy laughter eliminates the rigidity of the torso, which is essential for gross motor skills. Our breathing is interfered with, our limbs shake, and we lose muscle tone and coordination. Wallace Chafe has even argued that the biological function of laughter is to disable, to incapacitate us. (31)

The idea of laughter as an incapacitating agent would certainly strengthen the effectiveness of the Pied Piper virus as a weapon, and several different types of non-comic laughter are discussed below, including the grim-grin reflex, maniacal laughter, and laughter as a physiological response to external stimuli such as nitrous oxide, marijuana, or in this case a genetic weapon.

Laughter, as it has been discussed so far in the comedic anti-war novel, is largely a response to comic amusement, even if that comic amusement arises from ostensibly dark humour. The grim-grin reflex discussed in *Dayᔕ* differs in tone to Black Humor. Though both are a reaction to tragic circumstances, the grim-grin is an involuntary reflex unrelated to comedic stimuli, while the Black Humor laugh is a response to a humorous incongruity (Carroll) in tragic circumstances, where additional factors (such as the audience's awareness of the novel's classification as Black Humor) contribute to its acceptance as humorous. The impetus towards laughter and play at the end of *Dayᔕ* is not the result of a social construct, as society itself has been deconstructed through laughter. It is a reflex: not a response to comic amusement but rather at transcendence of the comedic into a state of pure joy. Why is it that as the Pied Piper's victims' symbolic capacity breaks down they dissolve into laughter? Is it that the Pied Piper contains an agent – such as nitrous oxide – that causes laughter in response to a stimulant external to comic amusement? Is it that as semantic capacity dissolves, the victims sense of order and society throws up more and more incongruities, and absurdities, as they struggle to make sense of their dissolving world? Or is laughter simply an evolutionary imperative to assist in the transmittance of the virus, which will bring about mankind's next great genetic leap?

Several times in *Days* Dr Flake Fountain refers to or alludes to the "grim-grin", which he describes as an irresistible urge to smile in serious or tragic circumstances. Though the term "grim-grin" does not appear to be widely used, several psychological studies have been published on the phenomenon of smiling in negative situations, perhaps most notably by Paul Ekman, a leading expert on facial expression, and Wallace V. Friesen. They describe the false masking smile thus: "In a masking smile strong negative emotion is felt and an attempt is made to conceal those feelings by appearing to feel positive" (Ekman and Friesen 244). Masking smiles differ from felt smiles (such as those caused by comic amusement) in their physical manifestation, "marked by differences in the muscles involved, and in their laterality, locality, and timing of the actions" (245). In a 2007 study Matthew E. Ansfield explored the theory that in extremely negative emotional circumstances the strain of suppressing negative emotion may, ironically, increase emotional distress, resulting in a more pronounced masking smile (Ansfield 765). In Ansfield's study, subjects were exposed alternatively to humorous and distressing images – some on their own, some with another participant – and their reactions were filmed. Additionally their perceptions were surveyed after the experiment. Ansfield's research confirmed that "not only did participants in social conditions smile more than those in the nonsocial conditions, but they also reported significantly greater emotional distress" (773). Though "outside social perceivers" (people observing the first experiment) did have a negative impression of those who smiled in response to the negative circumstances, Ansfield suggested this "may be a result of a misinterpretation of the senders' actual feelings due to the difficulty in distinguishing between nonenjoyment and genuine enjoyment smiles" (774). Unfortunately Ansfield's study does not pose theories as to why smiling is a common or even reasonable response to a negative situation. Though he states that smiling regulates the experience of negative affect, he also admits the limitations of the study: "Of course, the current research does not elucidate the exact psychophysiological mechanism by which smiling when distressed seems to offer people emotional recuperation from negative emotional experiences" (773). Dominant critics of relief theory would also suggest that laughter is a form of release, though of course much of this theory refers to laughter in response to joking, not laughter as an irrepressible urge to non-comic amusement. It may be that the physical act of smiling releases endorphins that lead to relaxation; it may be that smiling is an attempt at the "play face" exhibited in primates.

Noël Carroll discusses the appropriateness of laughter as an indicator of the presence of humour as touted by Superiority Theorist Thomas Hobbes, and certainly the aspect of

laughter in *Days* discussed thus far would indicate that laughter is not necessarily indicative of humour. Furthermore the traditional contradictions to Superiority Theory, including tickling, nitrous oxide, cannabis, nervousness, et cetera, clearly suggest that laughter can exist without humour. Carroll also highlights infectious laughter: "Indeed, the most effective elicitor of laughter is laughter, but bouts of contagious laughter need not be incited or sustained by guffaws in response to humour" (Carroll). So, it may be said that at the onset of the Pied Piper Virus, after linguistic capacity begins to crumble and normal speech patterns give way to puns and Freudian slips, the laughter of the Pied Piper victims stems not from comic amusement but from a physiological impulse, uncontrollable and incapacitating. The nature of laughter is discussed in *Days*, demonstrating a basic understanding of the origins of laughter:

> Anthropologists have observed that laughter is humankind's most distinctive emotional expression. We share anger, fear, loyalty, grief, and myriad other states of mind with other creatures, but laughter is an emotional delicacy only humans can taste. Chimpanzees, our closest genetic relatives, will pant and puff if tickled, but that's as close as it comes. Other animals become overjoyed, certainly, witness a dog wagging its tail, but the expression of that affective state in laughter is ours alone. (And never mind hyenas, by the way. Hyenas do not laugh. That's just the sound they make.) Joyous vibrations barge in unannounced and bring nothing but breathless belly aches and wailing convulsions to our sentimental pot luck. If we're lucky, chuckles very quickly take over the entire affair, and paroxysms and conniptions seize hold of our musculature and shake us free of obligation like a dog shaking out of a leash. We hyperventilate until we're wailing like a mad-man in a marathon. We snort like swine at a trough of corn husks dipped in honey. Tears run down cramped faces, we roll, we holler, we beg each other for mercy. It is brutal joy, as if a benevolent faerie has grabbed us by the heels and given us a few snaps, shaking dust off a doormat too many people have wiped their feet on. (Vigorito, *Just a Couple of Days* 156–157)

Vigorito is here conflating laughter as a physiological phenomenon with laughter in response to comic-amusement. It may be true that we are the only species to experience laughter as response to comic-amusement, as we are the only species with a sophisticated enough sense of reason to perceive incongruity. However, to consider the laughter described here as "joyous vibrations" as antonymous to a dog wagging its tail or a

chimpanzee panting and puffing is to compare apples and oranges. The human equivalent of these is the masking smile (Ekman and Friesen), the play face (Morreall 38), not laughter in response to joking. In *Days*, Vigorito goes on to describe how laughter at comic-amusement eventually abates, suggesting that self-consciousness eventually takes hold, that we perceive others observing our state of disarray, and regain composure: "the merriment is interrupted by a faraway shriek, sounding asinine and absurd, and we realize the ridiculous sounds are our own" (157). The Pied Piper strips the individual of their capacity for self-awareness, as without the ability to communicate we lose the ability to view ourselves from external perspectives. As a result the laughter prompted by comic-amusement does not naturally abate, but instead continues, grows, and becomes infectious:

> Such was not the fate of Blip, Brother Zebediah, and Manny. From the moment they simultaneously erupted into roaring guffaws, swells of laughter gushed forth one on top of the next, a gleeful volcano of hilarity, dormant far too long. Brother Zebediah was particularly explosive. For the faerie, he was an especially dusty rug, perhaps owing to a lifetime of holding back nearly unbearable church pew snickers. The seismic stresses along the stern and rigid lines of his face (The San Anxiety Fault) were colossal, and when they broke, brand new canals and topographical features were etched into his American Gothic physiognomy. Fresh, cocky skid marks strutted their stuff in front of the well-worn treads, the times they are a-changin'. (157)

As a counterpoint to the victims of the virus, stripped of self-awareness, the non-affected spectators in the observation lounge experience initial amusement, which quickly abates, lending a "canned" quality akin to a studio audience.

Though the incidents of laughter at non-comic amusement do provide fodder for interesting discussion of laughter as a physiological response, let us not forget that Vigorito's novel is also quite funny. His most commonly deployed comedic tropes are humorous metaphor – a technique Tom Robbins is oft praised for – and the type of word-play commonly referred to as the Freudian Slip. The necessary components for joke-work are present: the jokes are inherently funny and are delivered in a medium where humour is permitted (Palmer 21).

Though Vigorito claims to have come across the work of Tom Robbins around half-way through writing *Days*, he does replicate Robbins' technique of using metaphor humorously. Indeed, humorous metaphor is one of Vigorito's most frequently used comedic techniques.

In *The Logic of the Absurd* Palmer describes how metaphor and joking function in strikingly similar ways (the presence of an incongruity) and Sigmund Freud and Neil Schaeffer's attempts to address these similarities. According to Palmer, Schaeffer highlights two distinctions between joke and metaphor:

> …firstly, the ground of context – the poetic context predisposes us to look for serious connections rather than hilarious ones; secondly, in terms of the distinction between a search for truth and a search for pleasure – metaphor points us in the direction of truth, which takes effort, while humour points us in the direction of pleasure, which involves no effort. (36–37)

However, Schaeffer's hypothesis ignores two things: 1. the use of metaphor in comedic novels – Schaeffer's formulation suggests that metaphor can only exist in "serious" artwork; and 2. the humorous use of metaphor – Schaeffer's suggests that metaphor and humour are mutually exclusive, that if one is present the other cannot be. Palmer discusses these issues in order to illustrate the difficulty of defining humour, and concludes that a binary approach may be over-simplifying the matter, and that contextual cues (such as a title) "prepare us for different types of pleasure" by letting us know if we are engaging with a poem or a farce (37). However, in describing the logic of the absurd Palmer draws closer connections between joking and metaphor: "…in metaphor words are used in a way which deviates from their usual usage, in the sense that they are placed in contexts in which they apparently should not be used" (61); in comedy "the comic use of the word or filmed event involves a contradiction of the word's normal use" or a contradiction of audience expectation. Secondly, this deviant usage causes a surprise in both metaphor and joking. Finally, in spite of the surprise felt by this deviant usage, we recognise a kind of similarity, a "measure of plausibility" (61). However, not all metaphor is humorous, so what is it that distinguishes the two forms of deviant usage? Palmer concludes that in joking the implausible syllogism dominates the plausible, but in metaphor this formula is reversed: "when a metaphor gives us a new 'insight' into something, what has happened is that the reading which makes the statement plausible dominated over the one that makes it implausible, or – in Ricoeur's terminology – semantic congruence dominates over semantic incongruence" (70). Consider the following example from *Days*: "They pumped me with questions as if they were the Heimlich cousins, and before I knew it I was spitting pabulum all over the table and coughing every boring detail across the room" (43). Here we have a rich metaphor that also functions as a joke. In the first part we are familiar with

the slang term "pumping someone for information" but we also know that "pump" can mean to raise or remove, and evokes a repetitive motion, perfectly illustrated by the abdominal thrusts required of the Heimlich manoeuvre. Thus, the Heimlich manoeuvre serves as a metaphor for intense questioning, and the plausible statement dominates the implausible, allowing us to view the act of rigorous questioning in fresh light. However, this metaphor is extended into the absurd, into the territory of the joke. We know that the Heimlich manoeuvre forces a person who is choking to evacuate the obstruction ("pumping") and since the Heimlich manoeuvre is generally required as a result of improper ingestion it tends to take place at a dinner table. "Pabulum" refers to nutrients such as food but also, pejoratively, "bland intellectual fair" ('OED'). Thus Flake spits and coughs bland intellectual fair at the dinner table, prioritising the less common pejorative usage and thus placing the illogical syllogism ahead of the logical' producing a joke which functions within the parameters of a metaphor.

Let us consider a second, less complex example: "There had been considerable hostility between the ecologists, drawn to biology via the poetry of Emerson, Thoreau, and Muir, and the molecular geneticists, drawn to biology via the promise of research stipends the size of sequoias" (28). Flake is describing the rivalry between two branches of biological science and humorously juxtaposing their motivations. The biologists are painted as idealists and poets, the molecular geneticists (of which Flake is a leading expert) as financial opportunists. Using the simile of the sequoias to describe the size of the research stipends available creates the incongruity, which allows it to function both as a metaphor and as a joke. In the first instance we know sequoias are large, and in viewing the research stipends in such tangible terms as a tree we preface the plausible over the implausible, and see the largeness of the money in fresh light. The same statement functions as a joke, in that we are already familiar with the idea of discussing money in terms of trees, though usually to make the opposite point: i.e. "money doesn't grow on trees". By comparing the research stipends available to the molecular geneticists with the idealism and poetic appreciation for nature of the ecologists the latter are denigrated, prompting laughter at their expense. A key element here is surprise, and it is this which foregrounds the illogic over the logic – we know the ecologists love the trees, we know the molecular geneticists love money, thus using trees to describe the amount of money available privileges the illogical syllogism over the logical.

Though Vigorito's use of metaphor, like Robbins', is rich with hidden meaning and most commonly deployed in a comedic manner, this is not to suggest that it is the only

form of humour present in the novel. Occasional jokes are based on the incongruous juxtaposition of the logic and the illogic. Let us consider the following example from the CPC: "For your protection and reassurance, a team of agents has been watching your every move" (82). The joke does not function as a metaphor, and the punch-line arises from the delicate balance between the illogical syllogism and the logical. Being guarded by an authority figure such as a police officer or government agent may be protective or reassuring, but the term "watching your every move" is more commonly understood to be a gesture of surveillance rather than protection – thus while presented as reassuring the guards are in fact sinister. Just as the jokes in *Catch-22*, this joke must be considered in an absurd circumstance: that of military logic.

Examples of Freudian Slips will be discussed in depth below, though it is necessary at this juncture to provide a reminder as to how such jokes work. The jokes commonly referred to as "Freudian Slips" are unconscious acts of joke-work. While this is somewhat muddied by the fact that Freudian Slips in fiction are of course the conscious constructs of the author, it bears discussion as Vigorito's use of the Freudian Slip at the moment of the dissolution of symbolic capacity demonstrates an astute awareness of Freud's *The Joke and its Relation to the Unconscious*. Joke-work and dream-work function in somewhat similar ways, in that they allow us to express a repressed emotion. In expressing these (generally sexual) thoughts as jokes, "there is a release of psychic energy, not the energy of repressed feelings, but the energy that normally represses those feelings" (Morreall 18). Thus the Freudian slip allows a release of psychic energy normally used to suppress such thoughts, which is why the worst perpetrator of such jokes in *Days* is the evangelistic Brother Zebediah. As will be discussed below, while the Freudian slips uttered by Brother Zebediah indicate a release of his repressions, they also function as classic incongruous gags in the novel.

Finally the more traditional comedic technique of stock character types cannot be overlooked here, and Vigorito does provide an extended satire of these comedic butts. Vanessa Lee highlights the use of stock characters: "In the early chapters, there are several obviously stereotyped, satire-appropriate characters – the overly eco-friendly hippies, the tyrannical university president, the all-knowing government agent…" (Lee). Much like the earlier comedic anti-war novels, *Days* functions as an extended satire of the military-industrial and university-industrial complex, and by conflating the two offers powerful commentary on the extent of their power and the depths of their corruption. Just as in *Catch-22*, stock characters are given self-consciously descriptive names. The chief

antagonist, General Kiljoy, attempts to eradicate his enemies through laughter – literally to kill with joy. The University president, Tibor Tynee, exemplifies classic Napoleon complex; though small in stature his ego is so large he names the university after himself. Dr Blip Korterley's moniker is apt as he is the force of disruption, the "blip" in proceedings. Finally Dr. Flake Fountain's name is doubly fitting; he admits to his own personal failings in terms of his academic and moral conviction – he is a "flake" – and he is also the purported author of the text that we are reading – the fount of knowledge.

Just a Couple of Days then offers humour on the macro as well as the micro level, while providing interesting commentary on the various types of laughter it describes and evokes. Using humorous metaphor and more traditional, less complex joke-forms it is a resource for the observation of non-comic amusement, presented in a comically amusing manner. The ways in which these discussions manifest in the text will be now be illustrated.

5.2 Close Reading of *Just a Couple of Days*

Questions about the causes and effects of laughter pervade *Just a Couple of Days*, forcing us to consider the very different tone of our own laughter as response to Vigorito's comedic writing, and the maniacal laughter of the victims of the Pied Piper Virus. *Days* contrasts the idea of laughter as response to comic amusement with laughter as a physiological reaction to external stimuli, and in doing so it perfectly illustrates how laughter is an improper indicator of humour. The course of the virus, from the initial laughter stage through to the complete dissolution of semantic capacity, is markedly different in victims with criminal backgrounds versus those of Dr Blip Korterly, Manny Malarkey and Brother Zebediah. General Kiljoy explains the inclusion of these three "guinea pigs", as well as three scientists whose moral objections to "Operation Small Change" superseded their fear of repercussions: "One hundred death row inmates is not a very representative sample. The Pied Piper virus could conceivably have different effects on non-criminals, although so far their reaction has been standard, just like the scientists" (Vigorito, *Just a Couple of Days* 161). The phrase "so far" is key, as we later discover. In contrast to the inmates' dissolution into insanity, the non-violent criminals as well as the wider population come together symbiotically, united rather than divided, by the Pied Piper's effects. Only ten per cent of the general population perishes due to "widespread panic, random rioting, a lot of suicide" (274) compared to the 44 deaths among the 100 original test subjects (166). In casting the death row inmates as animal-like, caged in "holy

hell", their laughter evokes the rhythmic barking sounds of aggressive primates, while the state of play and comic amusement of the non-criminal victims appears Utopian. The play-face – a reassuring gesture of bared teeth – indicates that the play is not serious among the non-violent victims (Glasgow 8–9). There is also word-play to consider. Blip, Manny and Zebediah's laughter arises initially from comic amusement, during the breakdown of their semantic capacity, with puns based largely around the traditional 'Freudian slip'. As such *Dayo* forces us to consider, and effectively illustrates, the myriad reasons for why we laugh: humour as reaction to horror, humor as release from pain, and humour as an aesthetic experience.

General Kiljoy best explains the Pied Piper's effects:

> "What our virus, we've called it the Pied Piper," he chuckled, "what the Pied Piper virus does is take away a person's ability to talk. It's not like laryngitis, where a person can still write and understand what others say. When a person is infected with the Pied Piper virus, their entire *symbolic capacity* is eliminated on the cognitive level. They lose the ability to use and understand symbols, language, words, so that what we are doing right now," he gestured around the three of us, "becomes absolutely impossible." […] "What we like to say is," he leaned forward and did his best impression of an Inquisitor. "We have ways of making you *not* talk." (99–100)

Blip later refers to the virus as a "weapon of mass anomie," explaining that anomie "roughly translates as the social universe, language, society, norms, the space we share in which we interact. Anomie is the disintegration and destruction of that universe" (143). The ideas of language and meaning will be discussed below, but for now we are concerned with laughter and the trajectory of the Pied Piper virus. The virus appears to develop as follows:

1. Phase 1: Symbolic capacity begins to dissolve – the Freudian Slip Phase
2. Phase 2: Laughter in response to comic amusement
3. Phase 3: "Crazy Laughter" – lasts for a half hour
4. Phase 3: Hysteria – All Holy Hell
5. Phase 4: Non-symbolic mass communication – the Play Phase

Kiljoy explains that as the virus progresses the hysteria ebbs and flows, subjects experience relapses, and "each progressive stage is longer and more severe" until, after about a month, their symbolic capacity is completely disabled (159). We see the existing

victims of the Pied Piper Virus, the initial one hundred death-row inmate test subjects, in Phase 3: Hysteria. Likely influenced by their violent backgrounds, this is truly sinister, maniacal, and threatening. However, to incentivise Flake to develop an antidote, Blip is infected with the virus, along with two other test subjects, allowing Flake to observe the dissolution of symbolic capacity: Phase 1 of the virus's trajectory. This immediately begins to manifest itself in wordplay and Freudian Slips.

Blip Korterly is a unique test-subject in that he is made aware of what is happening to him after he has been infected but before the virus has seriously affected his language skills. Being a professor of sociology he is well equipped to understand the ramifications of his impending loss of symbolic capacity, as well as the virus' wider societal repercussions. He is the first to predict the potential evolutionary effects of the virus, and to recognise that societies have fallen in the past only for something new and exciting to emerge: "All societies fail, and we're attempting to create a worldwide society. We're setting ourselves up for ultimate disaster. The harder they are, the bigger they fall" (151). In mixing up the common phrase "the bigger they are, the harder they fall" Blip is unwittingly creating a joke: the reader experiences a cognitive shift where we simultaneously understand 1. that this inversion is an effect of the virus and 2. that Blip's error has a kind of logic to it after all: "hard" can be the antonym of "soft" and thus something can fall hard, but "hard" can also mean "tough" and thus comment on the kind of society Blip comes from, as we become increasingly aware that the fate of mankind is subject to the ambitions of the power-hungry General Kiljoy. At the same time something can have a "big fall", meaning it fell from a great height. Thus, in this situation, "the harder they are, the bigger they fall" makes just as much, if not more sense than the original phrase. This is Blip's first unconscious play on words, and hereafter such slips occur with increasing frequency. Indeed this section is rife with word disassociation, creating something of a linguistic riddle for the reader. Blip continues:

> "Crisis, man! It's arrived. The lawnmower's here, see? Our anthill's being decapitated while we pretend everything's buttery. We're sewing ourselves into a corner, you know what I'm saying? Doom is on the loom, man, knock on wood." He rapped the side of his metal chair. (151)

"Crisis, man!" could be the more common exclamation "Christ, man", referring dually to the arrival of a crisis, as well as the biblical end of days. By "lawnmower" Blip is likely referring to the reaper. "Reap" forms part of the common phrase "to reap what you sow"

which is the linguistic bridge between lawnmower and "sewing ourselves into a corner", more correctly "painting oneself into a corner". "Doom is on the loom," continues the sewing theme, bastardising "doom and gloom". "Knock on wood" Blip manages to articulate, though does not make the connection between the expression and what it symbolises, knocking on a metal chair. "Everything's buttery" may refer to "everything's gravy", meaning "everything is good". "Anthill" is possibly a red herring; answers on a postcard please.

Another example of such linguistic inversion occurs when Flake is observing the infected death-row inmates in "holy hell". Describing four inmates in a cell he claims: "All four were laughing profusely and sweating hysterically" (164). A play on the more common usage "laughing hysterically" and "sweating profusely" the inversion is in this case perhaps more descriptive. The maniacal laughter of the death-row inmates has already been established in truly horrific terms, a "spring thunderstorm of shrieks and bellows and howls that filled the aural cavity left by the rapid dissipation of the cryogenic helium. It sounded like a laughing gas party at a dentist's convention, with just as many root canal patients there, too, only they didn't sound like they'd been privy to the nitrous oxide" (163). Their laughter is the definition of profuse, and to describe it as hysterical would be to lessen the horrific effect; when used in conjunction with "laughter", "hysterical" is generally understood to mean "extremely funny". "Profuse", on the other hand denotes "an excess of" and the inmates' laughter is certainly excessive. "Hysterically" in conjunction with "sweating" on the other hand does not imply "extremely funny sweating", but rather the cold sweat of fever, terror, and horror. Curiously, this inversion comes from the non-affected narrator, so could either be considered a literary flourish, or the effect of mimicking the speech patterns of affected victims in much the same way one may find oneself mimicking grammatical quirks when in conversation with non-native English speakers.

By the time Blip rejoins Manny and Zebediah in the observation room the other two prisoners' semantic capacity has begun to dissolve as well. In true slapstick fashion, Manny is "laughing hysterically" – here used in the traditional sense, in response to comic amusement – because Brother Zebediah has passed wind (155). There follows around thirty minutes of manic laughter during which Flake is taken to observe "Holy Hell", and by the time he returns to the observation room the laughter has abated somewhat, and confused conversation has resumed. Personal pronouns cause particular confusion, notably with the abstract concept of "Him" in reference to Christ. Zebediah attempts to

defend his scatological slip: "'It's not my fart, you know,' he said abruptly, but neither Blip nor many paid him any heed. 'Fault,' he immediately corrected himself. 'It's not my *fault*.' He brushed frantically at his ear, as if a mosquito had flown into it" (175). Zebediah is particularly inclined towards Freudian Slips, a prime candidate for such unintentional word-play according to Freud's theory of release, given his religious zeal and proclamations of chastity and restraint. Perhaps the most amusing of these is "semen on the mount" (177). With the dual meaning of "mount", more commonly employed today as "to climb upon" rather than an abbreviation of "mountain" the association with 'semen' is very clear. Manny teases Zebediah relentlessly about this, prompting Blip to offer his own joke upon the same theme:

> Blip leaned forward and posed a riddle. "What do you call a rerun of the semen on the mount?"
> "A rerun of the semen on the mount," Manny repeated. "What do you call it?"
> Blip made the sign of the cross and grinned. "The second coming." (178)

The joke is undeniably clever, and quite the linguistic feat for someone in the process of losing their symbolic capacity. It amuses not just the affected victims, but the non-affected observers:

> There was a tangible beat after Blip's heretical punchline, followed immediately by the uproarious laughter of everyone present, Brother Zebediah included. The studio audience chuckled as well, though our laughter was quick to fade. Blip, Brother Zebediah, and Manny, however, continued to laugh far past the point of lethargy. (178)

This counterpoint between laughter at comic amusement during the breakdown of the victims' symbolic capacity, prompting the sustained laughter of the Pied Piper's victims, and the controlled laughter of the non-affected victims seems like a good juncture at which to discuss non-comic amusement in *Days*.

As already discussed, the laughter of the early Pied Piper Victims is described in terms that could equally be applied to the act of screaming in terror. One of the earliest descriptions of the laugh comes from Blip Korterly, prior to his arrest and exposure to the virus: "I couldn't tell if it was horrified screaming or hilarious laughter. What I think is that they're torturing prisoners down there, Flake. That's what the screaming is. And the guards are laughing at them, they think it's funny" (68). The incapacitating effects of

laughter have been discussed above, however Blip is mistaken. The Pied Piper victims are held in an automated prison and no guards stand watch over them. The laughter he hears does not emerge from sadists relishing in the pain of others, but rather erupts from the infected victims. Indeed, using laughter as an incapacitating agent strengthens the effectiveness of the Pied Piper virus as a weapon: the act of laughing helps spread the virus more quickly among the population: wide-mouthed, head raised, the guffaws emitting from the victims are as infectious as a sneeze. In Flake's investigation of the virus's lineage he learns that the Pied Piper combines influenza with the Dancing Plague or St. Vitus' Dance, which swept Europe in the eleventh and sixteenth centuries: "Its acute symptoms, relapses of gut-yanking hilarity and a mild pulmonary edema, serve to launch billions of copies of the virus into the local atmosphere" (111). This is, quite literally, infectious laughter.

Flake's first experience of the victims' howls reflects the delicate line between laughter and terror:

> It was a horrifying noise, yet it made everyone smirk. Many of the howls sounded like uncontrollable eruptions of ferocious laughter. It was the laughter of the Furies, the hilarity of hell, the roaring guffaw of pure terror. It sounded like a high school gymnasium full of people *literally* dying of laughter, shrieking and convulsing and reverberating. Though distant and somewhat muffled, it was surely the soundscape of the lake of fire, the annunciation of damnation. (127)

Fountain's description is rich with suggestion. He alludes again to infectious laughter, not in this sense the infectiousness of disease, but rather the impulse to laugh when someone around you is laughing. In mentioning the Furies he suggests the desire to join in, to discover what's so funny, to be lured into the virus's embrace. Words like "hilarity" and "hell" are juxtaposed, as well as "roaring guffaw" and "pure terror". Even "shrieking" takes on its joint meaning, in the sense of shrieking with laughter, or shrieking in terror. It's a trope he employs again and again to illustrate the fine line between horror and hilarity. Later he describes Manny Malarkey's hysterical laughter, and the moment where comic amusement gives way to "maniacal mirth" (155):

> Manny's laughter fizzled out with an extended, high-pitched sigh. The three of them looked at one another in mutual bewilderment, goofy grins playing upon their lips and simpering smiles prancing around the crow's feet of their eyes,

> cavorting upon the muscle spasms in their foreheads. Before they had time to wonder why they were smiling like idiots, the grin-jaw rollicking all over their countenances frolicked into their mouths, declared their entire bodies a playground and, with a salute and a somersault, let the three of them know who was now in charge. (156)

The use of "in charge" here evokes the reasoning of humour theorists opposed to superiority theory discussed above. Vigorito is demonstrating a clear distinction between the moment that laughter at comic-amusement – however exaggerated – fizzles out and laughter as an unexplained physiological phenomenon takes over. The laughter that "declares their […] bodies a playground" does not originate from the same sources as the earlier fits, but rather is akin to the effects of laughing gas or marijuana – the effect of the Pied Piper. Or, to borrow a line from Sophia: "At the gates of heaven lie the hounds of hell" (*77*).

Days frequently explores more esoteric theories of humour and laughter in its attempts to explain the Pied Piper's effects. In addition to Vigorito's authorial filibusters on the nature of humour, Flake in his capacity of narrator, describes the non-comic reflex he refers to as the grim-grin:

> Sophia once told me about a psychological phenomenon medical doctors sometimes experience when they are required to inform a patient of a terminal illness or a family about at unsuccessful surgery. What sometimes happens is that when they are giving the grim news, they are suddenly seized with an irresistible urge to grin or even burst out laughing. This mortifying reaction is called grim-grin in some circles. Psychologists think it may be a defensive reaction against excess emotional trauma, but Sophia always insisted that Western doctors are fundamentally sadistic and sometimes can't hide their pleasure. For reasons that will become clear, I prefer the psychological explanation for myself. (213)

Sophia is likely misinterpreting Western doctors' masking smiles due to external factors, such as distrust for Western medicine. When Flake, Kiljoy, Tynee and Miss Mary believe they may have been infected with the Pied Piper, they display the same grim-grin or masking smile phenomenon:

> For now, our immediate concern was the seeming possibility that, despite our efforts, we had somehow been exposed to the Pied Piper virus. This only added

> to the routine awkwardness of just being in an elevator, and made everyone extremely paranoid. We were all fighting the urge to smile like as the devil himself. It seemed a ridiculous struggle (214).

The emotionally traumatic situation – the potential exposure to a virus which they are, to varying degrees, responsible for creating – coupled with the uncomfortable social situation of sharing a cramped space with relative strangers increases the impulse to smile. Ansfield's study, discussed above, also indicated that men smile more than women in negative emotional circumstances, despite previous evidence that women smile more than men in all situations (773). This phenomenon surfaces again when Flake encounters the frozen and shattered remains of Agent Volt, and attempts to conceal his reaction:

> Reacting to the potential emotional trauma, I'm certain, grim-grin promptly grabbed my jawbone and had every intention of flinging rude guffaws out of my grinning gullet if I hadn't acted quickly and pretended for Miss Mary's, as well as my own, benefit that I was seized with the dry heaves. Retching was a reasonable reaction, to be sure, but the scene really wasn't as gruesome as it sounds. True enough, Volt the Nothing was in pieces […] but it wasn't a bloody mess. He was still frozen solid, so there was very little actual blood. Besides, it just didn't seem real, since, like most things that day, I had no category in which to place any of it. The sight was so ludicrous that I could only imagine he was a wax dummy that had toppled over. (225)

Similar to the Black Humor laugh of the warzone more prevalent in the earlier works, Flake's reaction to the genuine horror of the shattered remains of a person very much alive and breathing mere hours before is to smile, laugh, and file it under "ludicrous". Volt's absurd and improbable death functions like a joke: we know that frozen things can shatter, we know that people can freeze, thus it may seem logical that frozen people will shatter. In normal day-to-day life Flake has "no category in which to place any of it"; however in the absurd world he currently inhabits it presents as logical. It is no joke, and Flake demonstrates the truest depiction of the masking laugh, albeit in this instance doubly masked by feigning nausea.

These ideas of laughter and smiling as a means to cover emotion are familiar to proponents of relief theory. The idea of laughter and revelry as emotional release is also fictionalised in *Dayo*, particularly when Flake reflects on the Pied Piper's earlier manifestation: the Dancing Plague. The Dancing Plague, or St. Vitus Dance does, as

Flake infers and the copyright page attests, have basis in historical fact. On Christmas Eve, 1027, in the German town of Kolbig a group of eighteen peasants disrupted religious proceedings by dancing in the Church Yard. The priest, Rupprecht, placed a curse on them "that they should scream and dance, without ceasing, for a whole year" (Major 41). In 1374 a similar outbreak occurred in Aix-la-Chapelle, a few days after St. John's day, a pagan holiday adapted from Nodfyr's celebration, which involved riotous dancing (43). The "plague" is described in terms similar to the victims of the Pied Piper Virus:

> They formed circles, hand in hand, and danced around in wild delirium for hours and hours, quite oblivious to the jeers and taunts of bystanders. Many onlookers, after jeering, were also seized with the strange delirium, joined hands with the dancers and outdid them in screaming and jumping. Finally, one by one, the dancers fell to the ground from sheer exhaustion, but continued to groan and to roll about. (Major 43)

The disease became associated with St. Vitus through the German God Svantevit, which changed to Sankt Vit and finally St. Vitus. It was believed St. Vitus caused the attacks, and that appealing to that saint was the only cure from the Dancing Plague (48). Further outbreaks continued throughout the Middle Ages, and even in Maryville, Tennessee as late as 1803 (56). The sixteenth-century physician Paracelus named the condition *chorea* (Greek for "dance") and it is known today as chorea major, a type of hysteria. The Dancing Plague is also the origin of the southern Italian song known as the Tarantella, composed to soothe victims of tarantula bites (52). The Dancing Plague, a kind of nervous hysteria, bears similarities to The Children's Crusade, originating in Cologne in 1212, where an army of 20,000 children, led by a twelve-year-old boy named Nicholas, made their way across Europe to the Holy Land to rescue the Holy Sepulcher (67), singing and dancing as they went. It is the origin of the Pied Piper legend (60), and it is from this Crusade that *Slaughterhouse-Five* takes its subtitle.

To return to *Days*, the Pied Piper virus originates, *Jurassic Park*-style, from a fossilised specimen extracted from a corpse in Hamelin, Germany, by the CPC, which Flake states is "the alleged location of the Pied Piper's legendary parade in 1284" (106). The description of the Hamelin hysteria in *Days* references "furious dancing and raving, convulsive chorea, and irresistible hilarity" with victims purporting to see the Virgin Mary, God, and in one particularly extreme case resulting in 1,000 reported pregnancies. Flake's research also notes that the victims wake up unharmed and that "many survivors […] claimed catharsis,

and that they were healed of other ailments" (107). Flake's report differs from Major's historical account on several minor points; Flake's reference to victims of Dancing Plague cured before an image of St. Vitus in the town of "Zabera" in 1418 undoubtedly refers to St. Vitus chapel in Saverne in France (Zabern in German), in which a Strasbourg woman was supposedly cured of Dancing Plague in 1518 (Major 46). However, Flake's research and Major's historical account agree on the origins of such mass hysteria: the miserable realities of mediaeval life, religious oppression, and the recent effects of the Black Plague. The result was that "spontaneous outburst of wild celebration would take hold of the population and sweep across the countryside as a sort of emotional release" (Vigorito, *Just a Couple of Days* 108). Whatever the finer details of Vigorito's rendering of the historical details of the Dancing Plague and the Children's Crusade, the idea of cathartic release from revelry is well documented, from Bakhtin's concept of carnival to Freud's Relief Theory, of which the grim-grin is a symptom. In observing the victims of the Pied Piper once the virus goes, well, viral, Flake reports:

> Despite the ostensibly grim reality of the situation, it was great fun to watch, and actually left me feeling elated. These were not the gaunt survivors of an experiment in germ warfare gone horribly wrong. These were thousands of strangers and neighbors doing some thing, some fantastic dancing thing I could scarcely comprehend. (276–277)

The fate of the Pied Piper's victims is ultimately hopeful, and suggests that in addition to the drive to seek food and shelter (274), the drive to play is also independent of our ability to communicate.

Having explored laughter as a result of non-comic amusement, the masking smile in negative circumstances, and revelry as a form of mass hysteria, we must also consider the many examples of positive and uplifting laughter in *Days*. Blip and Sophia's relationship to laughter resembles that of Tom Robbins; laughter is indicative of inner peace, echoing the ancient Egyptian superstition that the soul must be as light as a feather to enter Heaven (Robbins, *Wild Ducks* 186). In discussing Blip and Sophia's religious beliefs Flake explains: "Mostly they practice good cheer, which, they maintain, is the obvious purpose of existence" (Vigorito, *Just a Couple of Days* 51). Their relationship is "born on the soft kiss of a pun" (80); Sophia bears a "FREE HUGS" sign prompting Blip to enquire, "Who is Hugs?" The narrator explains the joke in terms familiar to humour theorists, particularly Freud's breakdown of non-tendentious jokes, albeit rendered rather more eloquently:

> It happened like this: *Free Hugs*, confident with his identity as a gallant suggestion, suddenly slammed into *Who is Hugs?*, some smart-assed interrogative who turned him into an emotional imperative by her very presence. What a ridiculous rendezvous! Christ, the two utterances really didn't have anything to do with one another, drawn together by some clever misunderstanding, some sly twist of fate. But sense or nonsense, that which motivates the plane of language cannot be resisted any more than that which motivates the plane of life. The soul knows this, of course, as does its equivalent in the communicative cosmos. It keeps its head in the heavens, and has but one toe in the untamed tides of this world, just enough to animate the mind, which fails to see what is perfectly apparent. (79–80)

The "ridiculous rendezvous" refers to the joke's moment of incongruity; the juxtaposition of both interpretations of "free" as a verb or as an adjective. The suggestion that the joke, in bridging two interpretations, somehow also bridges the physical and the spiritual world, is reminiscent of Robbins' suggestion that an understanding of the subtle line between logic and illogic in the moment of a joke is key to an understanding of the meaning of life. Or, as explained in the prologue: "Truth is a precarious balance between poignancy and peace. Truth lies within the perpetual balance of Yin and Yang" (3). Blip echoes Robbins' suggestion that laughter is a gateway to Heaven when he advises Flake to laugh more:

> "You don't laugh enough. I'll bet you get cramps in your cheeks when you laugh too hard. That means that you're not laughing enough. Your face should cramp up when you frown, not when you smile. When you smile, the corners of your mouth point the way to heaven." He stepped back and admired his work. "Did you know that all your laugh lines ultimately emanate from a single point on your face?" He touched his green eyeliner pencil to a central point on my forehead. "That point is your third eye." (50)

Blip's belief that laughter and "greatness of spirit" (to borrow Freud's phrase) has transcendent value positions him as a sort of saviour figure whose role is to free the world through laughter. He is the vessel by which the Pied Piper Virus is transmitted outside the laboratory and introduced to the wider population.

Blip's suggestion that telepathy or "empathic communication" may emerge in place of language appears early in the novel, prior to the introduction of the pied Piper Virus. Ideas involving the benefits and pitfalls of communication are suggested in Part 1 of the novel, in

which Blip and Sophia's roles in Flake's moral, spiritual and metaphysical education are established. Following a lively discussion of genetics over the dinner table, Flake explains that, "Blip's favourite toast and blessing over the meal was, 'To excellence in human communication'" (42). The audience mistakenly interprets this as a toast to "exuberant conversation," but it becomes apparent that Blip favours a form of communication where meaning is not marred by our inability to accurately interpret symbols. Chekhov's gun is again placed on the stage when discussing the unusually delayed development of Blip and Sophia's daughter Dandelion's language skills. The parents believe she may have aphasia, "a disorder of language affecting the generation and content of speech and its understanding," which is caused by damage to the part of the brain responsible for language, as opposed to a disorder of articulation (Martin). Blip and Sophia see this as a strength, rather than a weakness: "They were not particularly concerned about this possibility, reasoning that it would keep them honest, since you cannot lie to someone who doesn't understand language. 'She perceives your actual emotional presence, not what you claim it to be,' they cautioned. 'So no B.S.'" (52). We thus have a basic medical understanding of the Pied Piper's effects, as well as a suggestion of its potential benefits, prior to its introduction: aphasia is presented as a sort of super-human ability to understand another person's true meaning, and this concept is furthermore associated with childlike innocence in the form of Dandelion. Following Blip's exposure to the virus, while discussing its potential effects with Flake in the observation room, he comes to the conclusion that communication may be precisely the source of mankind's woes, and that the abolition of communication may be the solution: "Language is a piss-poor attempt at telepathy is what it is. We try to put our thoughts in each other's heads through language. […] But half the intended meaning gets lost in the transmission, and the other half is filtered through existing assumptions. Everything is a half truth!" (178) Feeding into an existing body of literature which criticises the status quo and protests existing structures by choosing either to opt out (such as Robbins' counterculture heroes) or revolutionise, Blip is here exploring the reasoning for forcing the Pied Piper's hand: he will ultimately be the spark which ignites this revolution.

By spreading the Pied Piper virus to a wider audience Blip effectively forces evolution's hand; mankind must evolve beyond language, society must crumble, for effective change to occur. With Blip's guidance, Flake realises the wider reaching consequences of the dissolution of symbolic capacity far quicker than the members of the CPC. When debating the merits of terminating Operation Small Change, Miss Mary expresses concern about

her loss of investment, which infuriates Flake: "Money is a symbol. […] What good is money if people have no symbolic capacity?" (197). The CPC's plan to destroy individual's symbolic capacity appears naïvely limited to human communication. "If we were at war with another nation," explains Kiljoy, "and if we were to destroy every individual's symbolic capacity, that society would immediately cease to exist. If one person can't communicate with another, they can't coordinate their actions. The ultimate infrastructure of their society is obliterated, without a single building, bridge, or railway being destroyed" (100). Someone unfamiliar with the basic tenets of structuralism may not realise the larger implications of such an incapacitation. It is not simply a matter of an enemy military leader being unable to command his troops, but rather the dissolution of all shared symbols: economics, government, the idea of nation itself. General Kiljoy and the members of the CPC fail to realise that their weapon is ineffective, because destroying an enemy nation's symbolic capacity destroys their concept of nationhood – the Pied Piper does not allow one to triumph over one's enemies, rather it removes an enemy's will to engage, rendering its use as a weapon "about as useful as a squirt gun" (277). General Kiljoy, failing to see the positive implications of a loss of a sense of nationhood, views the Pied Piper as a weapon. Blip, on the other hand, views it as a gift. When Brother Zebediah preaches, "Nothing can hold Babylon together. … Babylon will be judged. Babylon will fall," Blip replies: "You're right about Babylon […] but the only thing holding this country together is an uncritical acceptance of the dominant, maladaptive, social paradigm" (130). While a social revolution may have remedied the situation in the 1960s, the social paradigm to which Blip refers is now so ingrained it cannot be changed: it must be destroyed.

Flake clings stubbornly to this maladaptive social paradigm, though he has been instilled with the necessary skills to embrace change through Blip and Sophia's teaching in their roles as spiritual guides or guru figures. Flake's spiritual development over the course of the novel is towards acceptance of the idea that radical change is necessary and achievable. Flake's position shifts quite radically as he witnesses the Pied Piper's victims coexisting symbiotically, in "perfect communication" (314). Genetics plays a significant role in the novel, just as physics features in Robbins' work. Vigorito, like Robbins, fictionalises scientific concepts and presents them to a wider audience, and the CPC's decision to develop a genetic rather than chemical weapon offers powerful commentary on developments in the methods of warfare during the second half of the twentieth century. Flake begins to understand the pitfalls of language, that it is an indirect route for the transmission of ideas:

> Words are both clumsy and easy to manipulate. Communication is indirect and covert, and true intentions and meanings are invisible. This is what makes deceit possible. If communication were direct and overt, that is to say empathic, we would exchange one another's perspectives immediately and without dispute. Intentions would never be misconstrued. Mistrust, deception, or disintegration of meaning would be impossible. Hence, I assert that the Pied Piper virus does not destroy the ability to communicate, for humans can scarcely communicate in the first place. If we could, there would never be a disagreement, misunderstanding, or war. (279–280).

The suggestion that empathic communication is the next logical evolutionary leap bears further consideration, as *Dayꝺ* essentially provides the genetic reasoning for the evolution of the mode of communication used by the Tralfamadorians in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. The idea that a total understanding of the meaning of life lies in the delicate balance of logic and illogic at the nucleus of a joke has already been discussed at length, particularly in relation to Tom Robbins' work. This idea is fictionalised in *Dayꝺ*: the developments prompted by the Pied Piper Virus mark a revolution on not just a social scale, but on a genetic scale. Flake describes how the neocortex evolved, granting mankind the capacity to learn: this extragenetic information is known as "knowledge" (326). In an authorial filibuster so digressive the second consecutive chapter on the matter begins "This chapter is entirely optional. It is purely academic…" (331) the geneticist Flake posits that since evolution comes about through mutation, and since miscommunication is a cultural mutation, in perfecting human communication the Pied Piper removes our genetic advantage: that is our capacity to learn (332). He suggests that this will prompt a new phase of evolution, to a higher state of being, and he emphasises laughter's role in this genetic leap:

> In the same way that the evolutionary shift from the genetic to the cultural carried with it a tremendous leap in the rate of change, the shift from the cultural to the God-knows-what must carry with it a similarly exponential leap, a million-trillion titters and tee-hees coalescing into one gigantic guffaw. I'm talking about a transcendental quickening, an eschatological escape into a higher state of being where we evolve all but instantaneously. Beyond language, there are no cultural habits of thinking to slow us down. We evolve in immediate response to all new stimuli, asymptotically attaining a fractal Truth where we see that all is one and we can do no greater good than to observe the universe and ourselves at play. (332)

Significant, then, that playfulness is considered the key trait of this evolutionary leap towards higher understanding. Kiljoy makes reference to "drives independent of the ability to communicate": food, shelter, and "the sanitary disposal of corpses" (274–275) however, in observing the Pied Piper victims' behaviour it becomes apparent that laughter and play are also drives independent of communication. Laughter, once again, is proven to be the most effective weapon in defence of the Self.

Blip is proposing a revolution on not just a social scale, but by virtue of the Pied Piper's construction on an evolutionary scale also. For his reasoning as to the link between imperfect communication and conflict Blip draws on the Book of Genesis. He explains that Original Sin, eating from the Tree of Knowledge, refers to the last great evolutionary leap in terms of human communication, the development of the neocortex: "The neocortex supports this extragenetic information, more commonly called *knowledge*. It is this which makes our heads so big. The neocortex is what makes childbirth so painful for our womenfolk, God's purported punishment for eating of the Tree of Knowledge. The neocortex is what got us kicked out of Eden" (326). Blip views the end of human communication brought on by the Pied Piper as the removal of Original Sin; in bringing about this evolution Blip further establishes himself as a Christ-like redemptive figure. Humans, he reasons, are social creatures, and thus their sense of self is established in communion with others – we view ourselves not as we truly are but as others perceives us. Referring to Adam and Eve, Blip explains to Flake: "…they only realized they were naked because they became self-aware. They imagined themselves from each other's perspective, and became bashful. You're the most self-conscious when you're embarrassed, see? When you're painfully aware of how others see you. *That's* the basis of society, *imagining*, not knowing, each other's perspective" (144–145). If our ability to communicate with other people is removed only a deeper sense of Self will remain, stripped of ego, a true representation rather than a reflected image. Blip continues:

> "If my symbolic capacity goes, so does my self-awareness."
> "But what does that mean?"
> "It probably means a total dissolution of the ego."
> "But what will it feel like?"
> Blip smirked and shrugged. "Who knows? Probably the same way death feels."

By extension of Blip's theory that the evolution of the neocortex is the basis of Original Sin, and in his guise as Christ-like figure helping man evolve beyond need for the

neocortex, thus delivering man from Original Sin, Blip is bringing about the Apocalypse. In the military sense, understood by the likes of General Kiljoy, Mutually Assured Destruction dictates that the virus be released globally once containment has failed: "The United States of America is not about to just vanish from global geopolitics without a fight. If we go down, the enemy goes with us, whoever the hell and wherever they hell they may be" (302). When Miss Mary asks what that would mean Kiljoy explains "It's the end of the world as we know it" (303). This alludes to the metaphysical level; with the Apocalypse comes Revelation, total human understanding of the meaning of life, otherwise known as transcendence. When Blip hypothesises that the loss of symbolic capacity and dissolution of ego will resemble death he is not mistaken. Though the victims of the Pied Piper continue to live in the physical sense, they are, in another sense transcendent beings. Stripped of ego, self-consciousness, and imperfect communication they are free to exist in a Utopian vision: Heaven on earth. Thus in the last entry of *The Book of Billets-ðoux*, presumably as Sophia is freshly exposed to the virus, Sweetlick (Blip) advises Rosehips (Sophia) to cast aside her ego:

> Rosehips: Leggo your ego?
> Sweetlick: Hoo-wee absolutely! Judgment day is simply whether or not you can let go. The less self-absorbed you are, the easier it is to let go.
> Rosehips: I feel funny.
> Sweetlick: It's going to get funnier than you can possibly imagine.
> Rosehips: But what is it that's so funny?
> Sweetlick: The stupidity of your social self. You will laugh, as everyone, at the foolishness of your self-presentations, and at the idiocy and inadequacy of language. (321–322)

It is through the dissolution of consensual reality that Flake finally accepts the dissolution of his own ego, though not without one last academic hurrah. Just as Blip becomes preoccupied with his last words, so too does Flake, and his insistence on committing them to paper before capitulating to a new reality in which words are meaningless is the last stand for his admittedly large ego. Though these comedic anti-war novels are heavily peppered with authorial filibusters, Flake's final thoughts are some of the most digressive yet – it is almost as though he is parodying the trope. Through lengthy theorising on the purpose of life – ironically procrastinating from going outside and seeing for himself – Flake surmises that "love" is the only conceivable social direction for humanity, as selfish

cooperation is not sustainable. He concludes that if we do not love we will, as a species, die away: "There is no future in death and destruction. If we cease to exist, then the future ceases to exist as far as we are concerned, and all speculation necessarily becomes moot" (331). It is an extremely elegant logical fallacy, and a conclusion that may only be reached through the transcendent power of laughter:

> Fear not the Piper. Fear not your Self. Paradise is yours to regain. Ride the gales of divine laughter, the maelstroms of sacred mirth. It is your right, it is your purpose, and it is so easy. It's child play. It is one small step for a human, one giant glide for humankind. (340)

5.3 Conclusions

Focussing as it does on the nature of humour and the function of laughter within society, *Just a Couple of Days* is a rich resource for understanding the comedic anti-war novels that precede it. Vigorito's warzone is at the furthest remove from actual events of the novels here under discussion, and thus grants the greatest degree of comic insulation against disturbing affect. *Days* does not reference a specific warzone or historic event, rather riffs on the encroaching militarisation of American society, seeing this through to an absurd conclusion. Furthermore Vigorito did not personally experience combat; instead he is a product of the post-World War II American society in which war is a constant state.

References to and lendings from the earlier comedic anti-war novels abound. Vigorito's narrator, the imprisoned Flake Fountain scribbling furiously while awaiting his fate, echoes Vonnegut's narrative technique in *Mother Night* and *Jailbird*. Drawing attention to the essential bookishness of the text is well established by Vonnegut, such as when he promises that *Slaughterhouse-Five* will end with *Poo-tee-weet*. In *Days* this comes with a promise to the reader that they can, should they wish, uncover the outcome of the narrator's present perilous state:

> Consider: as I record these thoughts and events, I know not where, nor how, it may end, if at all. You who are reading these lines, on the other hand, are an entirely different person than I, and you may, with or without my permission, casually flip to the end to sneak a peek at the last paragraph. For what it's worth, you do not have my consent, thought this is surely an unenforceable request. Indeed, by writing this, it occurs to me, I may have done little else but

> draw your attention to something you may not have considered previously, like a chest which reads "do not open."
> […]
> If you are reading this (itself an improbability given the manner in which my situation has developed), it is likely that I have finished it. However, as I write this, you must understand, I am living with the anxiety of not surviving (or perhaps not retaining the ability to craft such words) to see the completion of my work. Thus, I implore you to exist with me, here, in my temporal dimension, and resist the temptation to take liberties with your free will. Patience. Everything in time. Remember, after all, that taking liberties with free will is what got us kicked out of the Garden in the first place. (152)

Vigorito's use of layered metaphors that serve also as micro gags as discussed above is a stylistic technique Robbins employed throughout his career. The use of complex puns in naming stock character types (Kiljoy) is a legacy from Heller (Scheisskopf), among many others. There are also countless gags at the expense of tyrannical bureaucratic minds, the central *schtick* of *Catch-22*. Flake's interaction with Sergeant Wilt recalls Appleby's frustrated bargaining with Sergeant Towser for an audience with Major Major (Heller 122):

> "Can I speak to your captain then?"
> "Captain'll tell you the same thing I've told you."
> "But you haven't told me anything."
> Sergeant Wilt shrugged. "What can I say when there's nothing to say?" (Vigorito 30)

Ultimately, however, *Days* forms part of a literary legacy of comedic anti-war novels that provide the reader with unique insight into the horror of war through laughter. It is also an academic exercise in the nature of laughter, so while explaining the psychological basis for the grim-grin reflex the novel also tricks us, through jokes, puns, metaphors and the occasional groaner, into grimly grinning along. While Robbins' counter-culture heroes chose to opt-out, Vigorito's heroes use laughter to bring about not just personal change but revolutionary change on a societal level.

Vigorito's novel is a late development in Black Humor, and may in the future prove to be something else entirely as the self-conscious commentary on the nature of humour draws theory and practice together. However, within our understanding of Black Humor

as a joke drawing incongruous elements together in tragic circumstances, the novel certainly fits. As an anti-war novel it offers powerful commentary on developments in the methods of warfare during the second half of the twentieth century. Finally, *Day* is eerily poised on the precipice of a new phase in the American anti-war novel; as fictional responses to 9/11 emerge, with the passage of time we are only just beginning to earn the degree of insulation required for comedic treatment of that event.

Chapter 6. Conclusion

If we consider Black Humor a comedic technique used in response to tragic circumstances throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, as opposed to a static mode confined to the 1960s and somewhat bursting at its seams, it becomes a three-dimensional thing, imbued with nuance and cadence, recognisable in more than just thirteen pre-determined authors. As comedy it is subversive, as satire it is moral though not rigid, but its true power lies in its ability to provide psychological release from painful affect. It is complex, as it forces us to unravel a koan, which delicately balances incongruous elements in an absurd situation. As such it is, indeed, the preserve of great thinkers.

In tracing the use of this technique from Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1961) and Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), to the later generation exemplified by Tom Robbins' *Villa Incognito* (2003) and Tony Vigorito's *Just a Couple of Days* (2001) we can see, perhaps, some light in the darkness. With the passage of time, with a greater degree of comic insulation from the painful event, with the author's own remove from the source of their trauma, the wit becomes less acerbic, less barbed. The reasons for this are clear; Freud has outlined the psychological release granted, the surge of trauma released in the complex act of joke creation: he has gone so far as to suggest the alterative may well be madness. As the comic's burden of psychological release is lessened, it is only natural that the humour loses some of its blackness.

With Robbins and Vigorito we see a new positivity emerging, a suggestion that through this process of creating, reading, and sharing the blackest of humour we may be unburdening ourselves. Robbins' crazy wisdom suggests that the key to enlightenment lies in a complete understanding of the inherent incongruity at the nucleus of the absurd joke, not resolving the disparity between darkness and light but perceiving them simultaneously, just as we understand in delicate balance the logical and illogical syllogisms of the logic of the absurd which cause us to laugh. If Robbins' suggestion is true, then the earlier Black Humor novels provided us with the tools to read the later texts, to truly reap what benefits they offered.

The author's own cathartic goals in penning these novels also developed with time. For Heller and Vonnegut it was a matter of exorcising their personal demons, their psychological baggage from their experience of World War II. For Robbins and Vigorito it

is more about how to live in a new, modern, perpetually warlike America in which the military-industrial complex spills over into everyday events, universities, and even circuses. They write a metaphysical high comedy, literature that is light-hearted without being lightweight.

In the early 1960s Heller placed a weaponised language in the hands of a military bureaucracy, and a low price on human life. Vonnegut looks back, and uses laughter to attempt to understand what happened. Robbins establishes laughter as a way to disengage this weapon. Vigorito takes it one step further, weaponises laughter itself, establishes it as a hugely revolutionary spark and sets it alight. As a weapon, laughter backfires; its essential nature is to release the tension between incongruous elements: laughter is fundamentally a harmonising force.

When Bruce Friedman jokingly mused about the label Black Humor, he questioned whether it was really very black at all. He may have been onto something here. Black is a flat, two-dimensional colour, and early critics of Black Humor failed to grasp the nuances and subtly transformative power of a comedic understanding of the inter-mingling of humour and tragedy. Perhaps it is fuchsia or eggshell after all.

Appendix 1: An Interview with Tom Robbins

In the summer of 2013 I spent a few blissful months shored up in the stunning University of California, Berkeley's Bancroft library. While there, I tried to secure an interview with Tom Robbins. Through a route less circuitous than you might imagine, we eventually exchange a few emails, and the legendary author proves as generous with his time as he is with his language. I'm dying for an interview though, and chance my arm when planning a weekend visit to Seattle. I met Tom Robbins at The Next Chapter bookstore in La Conner, Washington, on 23 August, 2013. He was festively clad in green for the occasion, and was instantly recognisable among the shelves of books. With his red-hair resplendent, he turned his lop-sided grin on me, and pulled up a trouser leg to reveal vibrant green socks. We went to a local waterfront restaurant, which Tom assured me was good. I was palpably nervous.

We begin by speaking a little about the circumstances that conspired to bring me to Berkeley, and my impression of the Bay area.

RG: The San Franciscans are a little bit– their priorities are a little out of whack. I don't enjoy that. I overheard somebody say, on the phone the other day, "preservation of wealth is the most important thing". And I felt like turning around and saying, "you poor woman. You poor, poor woman."

TR: Yeah. What a wasted life.

R: I know, right? So I hope that there was context for that.

T: Well I don't think there are a lot of people in La Conner who are overly concerned with the preservation of wealth.

R: How could you be? It's too pretty.

T: It's changed a lot. Um. Well obviously from its beginnings it was a fishing village, and later a tugboat town. But starting in 1937 when the painter Morris Graves lived here, it, eh– I wouldn't say it's an art colony, but it's been a place where artists have lived including some internationally famous artists starting with Morris Graves. And as a result the town is unusually sophisticated for a little rural village. You can be yourself to the full extent of yourself here, which normally you'd have to move to a large city to obtain. And they're

very tolerable of eccentric guests and eccentric behaviour, which is why I've been able to live here so comfortably. And it was peaceful, and private, and beautiful, and cheap. And all that's changed in the last ten years, but it's still a good place to live.

R: In what way has it changed?

T: It's become much more gentrified.

R: Yeah. I can see the little coffee shops and things that are very much for the tourists I guess. But it's sweet. And you can see that it's a useful town. We have a little artists' colony– I'm from Donegal which is in the North of Ireland but not Northern Ireland, it's a very important distinction. And there's a little island about ten miles off the coast called Aran. And there's a King. Called a *Ré: Rí Toraigh*.

R: And they all speak Irish. It's their native tongue. And the king claims benefits from the state; he's the only monarch in Europe that claims benefits. And it's a little artists' colony. It's the funniest little thing. It's great fun.

Tom Robbins' food arrives, and he asks if I would like to share. Though the idea of splitting a sandwich with the man who wrote *Another Roadside Attraction* is an anecdote I'd savour for years, I confess I'm a little nervous, perhaps too nervous to eat. We continue to discuss La Conner.

R: So how long have you lived here?

T: Full time since 1970. I moved here April 1st 1970. I make all of my major moves on the first of April. And if they don't work out you can just say, "oh well, I was only kidding."

R: I didn't know April Fools day was a thing here.

Tom gives his sandwich some attention, taking a moment to consider the mayonnaise situation.

T: I don't ask them to put it on because they never put enough. Mayonnaise, in my peculiar opinion is the food of the Gods. I know of almost nothing that isn't improved with mayonnaise.

R: It is definitely a spectacular condiment.

T: Including gin. I mixed gin with mayonnaise once. And it wasn't bad.

R: On purpose?

T: Well this was in my 20s. I was living in Richmond, Virginia. And a couple friends came by my apartment one night with a bottle of gin. And I guess we were not interested in drinking it straight so we wanted to mix it with something. And I looked at my bashful refrigerator, and the only candidates were blueberry pancake syrup and mayonnaise. So we mixed it first with the blueberry pancake syrup and it was awful, so we put it in the blender with the mayonnaise and it was kind actually of good.

R: It's like a poor man's eggnog.

T: We called it a Gin Greasy.

R: Do you ever go back to Richmond?

T: Mm-hmm.

R: How does it strike you now?

T: It's less oppressive than it was. It was always charming. Clearly charming. I moved out in 1962 and I would go back and the first week I'd think "I gotta come back to Richmond, this is so beautiful, so charming," but by the end of the week I couldn't wait to get out. And my sister said once, "if Tommy had stayed in Virginia he'd be in prison now." A definite possibility.

R: I know that you did some Civil Rights activism there, at one point in your youth. Was that the kind of stuff that was going to lead to jail time?

T: Either that or death. The big problem was I was working for newspaper, a very conservative newspaper. And that would not have gone over well with the management if they'd know that, on days off I was going teaching in the schools. This one county in particular had closed all of its public schools rather than integrate them. So the white children were educated in the churches – this particular school taught them in the churches. So this group that I was associated with opened a school for the black kids, a black school.

R: So that was restrictive for you – the newspaper?

T: Oh, they wouldn't know what hit 'em. There's a long story about how I did get in trouble at the newspaper for putting pictures of black people in the paper.

R: I read about this somewhere! What happened there?

T: It's a long story. And if you read the book I just finished it's told in some detail. I will send you that book if you give me an address.

R: Absolutely. So the new book. I was wondering how autobiographical you're going to be in this, because I've got the impression you've always shied away from giving too much of yourself.

T: I have avoided the autobiographical in my novels, not wanting to short change imagination and/or use up my life in literature. I've never kept a journal for that reason. I had a girlfriend once who was a student at the university of Washington. A visiting poet, a very well known poet, came out from New York to teach for a quarter, and she took a class from him. And some friends, actually from La Conner, had taken us up on a mushroom hunt up in the mountains. So, I said – the poet had gotten a kind of crush on my girlfriend and he thought was some kind of nature Goddess, a nymph – I said why don't you invite him a long and he can see you in the woods in your natural habitat. So she did, and he accepted and it was an absolutely glorious fall day and we found lots of mushrooms in the wild woods and had a picnic in a sandbar on the Skagit River and then later after dark on the way home we stopped at a natural hot spring […] and disrobed and soaked in the hot springs under the full moon. That whole day he had his notebook out, like this whole experience was just fodder for his poems. And I definitely made up my mind that day that I would never use up my life in literature.

R: That's a wonderful idea. I often worry, when you're a tourist, and you're walking around and you've got your camera in your hand the whole time you end up seeing the entire experience through this little screen when you could have just been at home watching it on TV. Saved yourself all that energy and effort.

T: Or get someone to mail you some postcards.

R: So that was one of my questions. If you've avoided putting any autobiography or biography in the work how on earth do you come up with these characters that are so vivid and so well realised?

T: I'm lucky to have known quite a few larger than life characters. I've been lucky in that regard. And I've been attracted to them, therefore spent time with them. And secondly there's imagination.

R: Which you have endless reserves of, it sounds like. So you mentioned some larger than life army buddies. Air Force buddies, excuse me. What kind of people were they?

T: Well I was in Special Weather Intelligence, and the guys that were in that particular branch, are, most of them had two years of college and those that didn't were very bright. So I wasn't thrown in with the grease monkeys and the pot scrubbers.

R: What is Special Weather Intelligence? Explain that to me.

T: Well this was during the Cold War. I spent two years in Omaha, Nebraska. Three storeys underground in a supposedly nuclear bomb-proof building. Did you ever see that film Dr Strangelove?

R: Yes.

T: Ok. Remember that room in there with the big maps on the wall. That's where I worked.

R: That is amazing!

T: And there were people – I don't know how, I don't know who they were or how they got the connection. But there were people behind the so-called Iron Curtain. People in Mongolia and Siberia and various areas in the Soviet Union whose clandestine ham radios would send out reports on the weather including the cloud cover and the temperature and the wind's direction and speed. And it would be sent out in code and we would receive it underground in Nebraska. And then my associates and I would take the code and decode it and then recode it into a weather code onto a map that the forecasters could use so that they always knew what the weather was like in the Soviet Union in case they needed to go bomb. At that time there were bombers in the area 24 hours a day 7 days a week, there were bombs in their bay. And if they received the call on the Red Telephone, "Go bomb such and such a city in Russia," thanks to us and those brave people with their ham radio sets they'd know what targets to select because of the weather.

R: And did you think much about what it was and what was happening and what it meant, or did you try to block it out?

T: No I thought about it all the time. But I had time off and I had become attracted to jazz, and there was a jazz group in Omaha, called the New York Jazz Workshop, which wasn't entirely fanciful because most of the members at one time played in big name Jazz Combos on the east coast. They operated out of Omaha and they played all over the Midwest, mostly in colleges I think. And they played every Sunday in a place called the Red Lion Cocktail Lounge. Every Sunday I would go there and dig the scene and I heard

that they were going to produce an album so I – without being asked – wrote liner notes and I took it in to the Red Lion one Sunday and I showed it to one of the band members and apparently they read it during their break and they came out and they read my liner notes aloud on the microphone. And this was like the high point of my life up to that point.

R: That's exciting. So this was your distraction?

T: Yeah, there was a very good art museum in Omaha. And I saw my first Renoir's actually that wasn't in reproduction, and looking at Renoir's big rosy nudes, it struck me that Renoir is saying yes to life, and anyone who was saying yes to life was automatically saying no to war. I think that that moment I became a complete 100% pacifist. But I survived the military through passive resistance. I was always resistful, but in such a way that I couldn't really be punished for it, or was difficult to punish for it.

R: Interesting. So how long before you were able to get out, so to speak?

T: Not that long actually. I never knew if that jazz album was actually produced because I was discharged before, only about a month after the glorious day. I was in for four years. But this was toward the end. The last two years of the four years were in Nebraska.

T: But weren't you stationed in South Korea at one point?

T: I was in Korea yes.

R: Was that during that four-year service time?

T: Yeah.

R: And how did you keep the faith there with no jazz clubs to go to or Renoir's to look at?

T: The girls.

R: [Laughs]

T: And I don't want to sound superficial about it. The culture. You asked if I had gained anything from being in the military in Korea and yes I did but not from being in the military per se. My life was opened up and my perspective widened considerably by being in Asia, and becoming acquainted with both Korean and particularly Japanese culture. And the Japanese aesthetics, the aesthetic of *wabi-sabi*, which was the beginning of my interest in what is now called crazy wisdom. So I worked in a weather station on an air base and pilot's flying form Korea to Japan would have to clear through the weather

station and I would often have four days on and three days off and I got those three days off I was hitching round on a plane to Japan. I had a girlfriend in Tokyo. It was magical.

R: So crazy wisdom wasn't called that at the time?

T: I'd never heard that phrase, no. *Wabi-sabi* was a little bit like crazy wisdom.

R: And that began to appeal?

T: *Wabi-sabi* is what in western aesthetics is known as difficult beauty. Finding something meaningful and beautiful in what would normally be overlooked or even be considered ugly.

R: Ah! Ok! Well I've always been of the belief that uglier is more beautiful than bland. So then where does the – perhaps you can explain this for me – I got the Wes Nisker book in City Lights in San Francisco so I have some reading to do on this but maybe you can explain the crazy wisdom concept for me?

T: Well the superficial answer is it's the opposite of traditional wisdom. It's the wisdom of going against the flow. It's the wisdom of automatically choosing the short end of the stick. Do you do wish bones in Ireland?

R: Yes.

T. You take the little one. You volunteer for the worst and most dangerous jobs. Whatever seems right and proper you go the other way because that's where things are really happening in this world. The essence of life.

R: So it's got a certain amount of playfulness to it, and humour.

T: Oh a lot of playful. The crazy wisdom practitioners in Tibet – they actually started in India and then this particular sect of Indian Babos moved into Tibet and brought along their belief system, which seemed to just coincide with beautifully with the shamans, the Bön Shamans in Tibet. And they were Buddhists but they went out of their way to shock other Buddhists. They would sleep in graveyards at night and dance with corpses and sleep naked in the snow and really go to extremes in. Zen took a lot off the Tibetan crazy wisdom masters. That's why in Zen, the myth, the question of what you do when you meet your master, come into the woods. And the answer is you hit him over the head with a stick. A little different to what a Catholic would do if they met the Pope.

R: Well which one?

T: [laughs] Well not the dead one. […] A traditional part of the dream of Zen is you don't want the teacher to become more important than the teaching.

R: Ah, I see. So you started to pursue this existence, choosing the short end of the wishbone?

T: On a small scale, a little bit, which enlarged as I got older, and that has coloured my life to an extent.

R: Yeah your characters always, well for one thing, like I said, they're just so beautifully formed. So you seem to put them in these ridiculous situations and watch them fight their way out of it.

T: The problem – you are talking about war novels or novels about the military – most traditional war novels are pretty much set in terms of bad versus good or good versus evil but the central dynamic of human history is not a conflict between good and evil it's between ignorance and enlightenment. And for my perspective there is no enlightenment without humour. So therefore the most realistic war novels are the ones not in which there are occasional humorous passages for relief, but ones whose overview is permeated with a comic sensibility.

R: I agree. Completely.

T: A comic sensibility opens doors in consciousness that are closed to the sober and the prudent.

R: Yeah absolutely. But what about the power of humour to– Do you feel you can say more when you write comically. Do you feel like you can get away with more?

T: Well. I've gotten away with it so far. Well, I won't say that, certainly not in the eyes of the east coast literary establishment from whom I'm a pariah. I just think that my novels are more realistic than say those of Norman Mailer. Humour is both a form of wisdom and a means of survival.

R: I like this notion of using absurd humour in absurd situations. The novels I'm looking at for my study are – you said in one of our emails that it's not a means of coping with insanity, it's a weapon – you use humour as a weapon.

T: It can be. But then a form of [inaudible].

R: There's a lot to be said about– I read a lot of comedy criticism and I'm kind of fascinated about the mechanics of how a joke works. I'm essentially somebody who explains jokes, which is a strange thing to be but at least the other people I've met who do this explain the joke and retell the joke so actually it's the most humorous form of criticism I've ever read.

T: The humour that– the jokes that are truly meaningful, the jokes that are important, cannot really be explained and that is part of their power. It's most of their power.

R: So I guess what I was going to ask was – a lot of people would argue that humour can be used – it's quite conservative in a lot of ways. And it can be used to reinforce society's values; things like, you know, racist humour or jokes about women. And, I kind of disagree! I think– I think that jokes that, um, jokes that kind of reinforce conservative values say more about the conserv– wait, I'm losing my train of thought here.

T: No, no, go on.

R: So I think that when you're taking, for example, *Catch-22* one of the books I'm looking at. He makes a lot of jokes about women– I mean, awful, awful, things about women. But he's putting it in a situation where everything is so absurd you wonder, you wonder what his real intention with the humour is there.

T: Well crazy wisdom isn't using humour to defend or attack anything. Its whole purpose really is liberation: Liberation of the spirit.

R: So is that how you're using it?

T: Yeah, although I'm not consciously thinking that when I'm writing. I don't think about that at all.

R: Do you ever think about crafting a joke? Do you ever think about– you mentioned jazz. Do you ever think about crescendo or rhythm or things like this?

T: I think about the rhythm of the sentences constantly. I believe that people read with their ears as much as their eyes. And if you pay attention to my sentences you'll see that almost all of them have metre. So I'm very concerned with the rhythm. I guess I've never thought of myself as writing jokes. If there are humorous passages, humorous lines, they evolve organically out of the material at hand. I never say "well I think I'll put a joke in now, because this is a good place in the book for the overall rhythm of the narrative to

have a little joke". It won't happen that way. My way, it just comes out of the writing process itself.

R: I'm remember reading a passage from – is it *Another Roadside Attraction* – where you're talking about an arrest, or you're in prison– You mention in the interview that this is one of the more biographical stories, and that some knives went missing from the kitchen. The passage in which you say all of the things that they managed to find in the orifices, it's hilarious, and you've got this metre, and then you've got this short stop where you say they found Atlantis, and it's the short stops that are the funniest. It's a delight, and it's a delight to reread it. I was cracking up.

T: I like piling on.

R: Yes. But it's the crescendo, it's the jazz rhythm, it's a riff.

T: Yeah. Of course a lot of established critics don't get that at all.

R: Really? That's so depressing.

T: I seldom go to writers conferences but I went to one last summer and there were a lot of young editors and young agents there and their message to all the aspiring authors in the programme could pretty much be boiled down to no adjectives, no adverbs, keep it simple. When it was my turn on stage I said well, if that's what it takes to get published these days and if that's all your interested in that's fine I guess, but that's not writing that's typing.

R: But you are king of the simile though. I don't know, I think about the way, I was thinking– Vonnegut is one of the author's I look at and he uses these very short staccato sentences but he manages to say an awful lot in a very short way. He does the same thing he has a riff, he repeats these little mantras and ideas and they develop. It's the same thing but I think he was so massively influenced by being a journalist for such a very short time. And you were a journalist for quite a long time – I think – weren't you?

T: Well Vonnegut's interest in language is not at all similar to mine.

R: No. I don't think so.

T: We human beings have always defined ourselves through assimilation. And stories are important and I think I tell stories. To me it's just as important to– the language is just as important as the story. Sometimes more important. Language was our first invention, as human beings, and it remains our most grandiose.

R: Have you ever heard of an author named Tony Vigorito?

T: Oh yeah. Yes. I'm very fond of Tony. Although I haven't read his books because they're not on audio and while I'm writing I can only read by ear because my eyes are too tired at the end of the day. But he interviewed me about six months ago.

R: Oh really!

T: Online– for an online publication; it was later picked up by a magazine. And we had quite a correspondence.

R: How wonderful! I came across him a few years ago and he's actually another author I'm looking at for this study, because he, in *Just a Couple of Days*, he talks about chemical warfare, and I love the way he writes jokes. So he's my last hurdle. Because of course nobody has said anything about him yet.

T: I think he's living in San Francisco

R: You're kidding me; I thought he lived in Hawaii?[13]

T: Well, he may have moved.

R: Oh I've got to find him.

T: But a few months ago, about three months ago, he was in San Francisco. He had been living in Austin, Texas and he moved back to San Francisco.

I've been criticised for my metaphors and similes. But I think I use them to enlarge a reader's understanding of the person, the place, or the event that I'm describing; to open up another way of looking at this event, and to make it more indelible in a reader's memory.

R: But also it's just for the pure joy of reading. Your sentences are a delight to read. I know that I'm supposed to be a scholar and not tell you that you're wonderful– I'll try and stop.

T: I don't think at this stage I take it seriously. Not that you're insincere.

R: Who influenced your comedy, anybody?

[13] Please note neither I, nor Tom Robbins, nor Tony Vigorito can figure out where I pulled this one out of.

T: Influences? Alfred Jarry, Blaise Cendrars: these are French writers. Gunter Grass. Even though I think my work is very American my major influences have been European and of course Asian in terms of the philosophical.

I'm also influenced by film: particularly François Truffaut.

R: I don't know who that is?

T: My dear, you have so much to look forward to! *Jules and Jim, Jules et Jim* in French. Not that I speak French. *Shoot the Piano Player*, *The 400 Blows*. *Jules and Jim* and *Shoot the Piano Player* are my two favourite all time movies, and I go back and forth about which one I prefer.

There's a scene in *Shoot the Piano Player*. There's a young woman in there and, uh, throughout the course of the film you become, the viewer becomes quite fond of her. And, uh, she's shot, and you're pretty sure she's killed, toward the end of the film. And it's out in a French country setting on a farm, and there's a lot of snow on the ground. And she's at the top of a small hill, on this slope really, and she's shot by these gangsters. Her body comes sliding down the hill and aesthetically it's actually gorgeous, it's breathtakingly poetic, this snow and this body sliding down, and yet at the same time your heart is breaking and to me that is genius. And that's what I sometimes strive for in my books. That dichotomy between these powerful opposite feelings.

R: I've always been fascinated with the idea that – if you are a great craftsman – do you have the power to really control somebody's emotions by bringing them to the brink of despair and then throwing in a punch-line, or the other, have them in hysterics and then suddenly twist them to make it very serious indeed, or very poignant.

T: Well, it's not that complicated. It's not trying to control the emotions of the reader, it's in the finding the whole in the event – the w-h-o-l-e – because these things often do exist simultaneously, but in traditional art forms we just get the one. And there is an opposite emotion to be described or invoked that will come paragraphs or pages or chapters later. But to have those things evolve simultaneously, to me that is realism.

R: That's wonderful.

T: The journalist reports facts in order to arrive at the truth, but the true novelist, the good novelist, isn't after truth in that way. The true novelist seeks to improve upon the truth.

R: Do you find that people idolise you or view you as a guru or– how do you deal with that?

T: Only those people who haven't known me.

R: Were you aware, or are you now, of who your readership were? I always got the impression it would be people about my age and younger.

T: Um, yeah. In the beginning certainly, my first three novels my readers were young. But now, and I can only judge this by letters I receive and by occasional public appearances, audience is, in terms of age, quite diverse. At my readings and lectures I'll get teenagers, and I'll get people in their 70s.

R: Ok. Um, my Mom gave me my first book of yours. I was a teenager and–

T: So your own mother corrupted you?

R: I know right. But I watched, I don't know if you know of Channel 4, it's a television network in the UK and they're quite imaginative with the kind of stuff they put on. It's a good thing as a teenager to watch late at night, you get lovely and corrupted. And they were screening *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*. And Mom said "What are you doing up?" and I said "I'm watching *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*" and she said "Oh, ok, I've got some literature for you in the morning." And she gave me– we had that and we had *Still Life* and I said well I've just watched the movie so I shall have to read *Still Life* and– Oh my God I've read that book, I don't know how many times. My absolute favourite is the passage on how to make love stay. I adore it.

T: That remains my most popular book.

R: Does it? I've been talking obviously about your work a lot and I've heard an awful lot of people choose *Jitterburg Perfume*.

T: That also. Those two are my two most popular books though I don't think they're my best.

R: What do you think is your best?

T: I think *Fierce Invalids Home from Hot Climates* is my best.

R: Why do you think that?

T: Um, I just feel that the writing on the whole is better and the trajectory is more pronounced and I think I have more to say and say it in a more meaningful way. And the male protagonist is my most autobiographical character.

R: Really? I was going to say I always thought Switters was – you say you live with these characters so long – he is great company. I'd spend the day with him

T: It's the first book I wrote with a masculine voice. Particularly the first two are written in a feminine voice. And even though Bernard Mickey Wrangle is a vertical character in *Still Life*, it's still written from a female perspective.

R: How do you mean a vertical character?

T: As opposed to a horizontal character [laughs]. One who really stands up. He rises above the rest of the cast.

R: So, did you, or do you, speak on campuses?

T: I have, I don't make a habit of it.

R: I think what I'm curious about is, I know you were involved in the Civil Rights thing, but I think my view your humanism or pacifism at least would have spoken very much to that audience particularly in the 70s, so I'm curious were you aware of being an influence on it or were you influenced by it or– how did that work? Or did it?

T: Um. I participated wholeheartedly in the psychedelic revolution and some people have given me credit for contributing to it but I don't really think I did. It came about as a confluence of the opening in consciousness that was precipitated by psychedelics and by a moral awakening but that was precipitated by the civil rights movement and the great injustice of the Vietnam War. The social and psychological factors that happened to coincide and produce what we called the 60s.

R: Were you involved in protesting Vietnam? You certainly do in your books.

T: Yeah, I sniffed my share of tear gas.

R: I really like in *Villa Incognito* your little quietly hilarious references to the idiots in charge. I've been curious about how people responded to 9/11 versus how people responded to previous things and I think– I was at a conference on humor studies and one of these guys was talking about screening *Strangelove* to college students today and he said he was in the back of the room and he was bent over laughing and the kids weren't

laughing and he said– well he had some theories as to why they didn't get it and I suggested that you weren't allowed to. You could laugh at certain things after that but you could not laugh at the war effort – you could laugh at the idiots in charge and you could laugh at yourself but war criticism was off the table entirely. And in your experience was that different in earlier times?

T: Yeah. Um. The Vietnam War and racism were large and very present tyrants whereas the attack on the World Trade Centre was– of course a terrorist attack by its very nature was more– it was of short duration and mysterious origin.

R: So what about the response to it? Did you have to think about an appropriate response? I'm thinking of *Villa Incognito* here.

T: My response to that particular event came in *Villa Incognito* in that one scene where Stubblefield is walking across– not walking but crossing the chasm on the wire with his hands and– do you recall that passage?

R: Yeah, where the boys bump into each other?

T: That's where I had my say on 9/11 and its aftermath. And the dialogue there, in that section.

R: So what of the fact that [Stubblefield] disappears, no trace to be found?

T: I've heard from him.

R: [laughs] Doing good?

T: It would, be good, don't you think?

See part of the problem that you and I will have is that I don't read my books once they're published.

R: Ever?

T: I never have.

R: You should, they're very good!

T: A few years ago I had a three-day conference in San Miguel de Allende in Mexico. It's a town in which there are 5,000 Americans, and 4,990 of them were writing novels, or plays or stories. The other ten were painting. So there was a three-day conference organised around *Fierce Invalids*. And I knew I was going to be interviewed on stage about it and have talk about it in other situations so I did reread it.

R: And did you enjoy it?

T: I have to say I was impressed.

R: [laughs] Good! Did you laugh?

T: I never laugh at my own humour.

R: Really? I crack myself up.

T: I always planned that I would save my books for my golden years. But my golden years have come and practically gone and I haven't done it yet. I always had this fantasy of being old and pushed round in a wheelchair by a nineteen year old red-headed nurse in a starched white uniform with panty outline who'd be mixing me tequila sours while I read my life's work. But, for better or worse, that's not going to happen.

R: Especially if you keep working out. You might never end up in the wheelchair.

T: This is my ninth book. Stop me before I kill again.

R: Do you get nervous every time? When you're releasing them?

T: No. Always expect the worse.

R: You've mentioned a few times, even in the last hour or so, that the east coast intelligentsia think little of you. I disagree! Where, or what gives you that impression?

T: People quote reviews to me. I don't read them. I quit reading reviews of my books in 1977 after *Cowgirls* and I can honestly said I haven't read a review since people everywhere from my agent, to neighbours in La Conner, will come up and tell me nasty things that were said about me–

R: Oh God your neighbours are heckling you! But is that academia or is that a critic that's trying to get in a dig, or in an effort to say something intelligent feel like they have to say something negative.

T: I think that – maybe this is a conceit on my part – but I think that they view me as a threat to both their literary values and their personal values.

R: Why?

T: Well the reason these novels about dysfunctional families and bad marriages are so popular, critically so esteemed, because that's the way these critics live. Most of them are alcoholic and have bad marriages. They identify and they can go far out and identify with

Stephen King because his books are full of darkness and pain too, but so fanciful, so much fantasy that it doesn't bother them. But the general mood, they appreciate it.

R: I always thought it was because if you can enjoy a depressing book you're obviously a very deep and thoughtful person. This is why I struggle with Irish literature so much. Unless it's screamingly funny.

T: Yes that's certainly part of it.

R: The Irish have a delightful habit of indulging in stories of doom and gloom and death and destruction, when they can laugh at it it's brilliant, but it's so rare that they can laugh at it.

T: Being someone who values language as much as content I am naturally a big fan of Joyce who is the supreme stylist.

R: Have you finished Finnegan's wake yet or is it still sitting on your bedside table?

T: I've advanced beyond page 30.

R: Oh delightful!

R: I have a friend who studies Joyce and she said she was at a conference recently and– she studies– oh God I'm going to mess this up terribly– but she looks at art and disability in the works of Joyce and Beckett. She says she was at a conference once and somebody responded to her paper with "I disagree with almost everything you've said but you've expressed it so well." And then neglected to ask a question. I told her you should come to my conferences we tell jokes. Well I've presented in Birmingham on *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* and everybody loves your work in Birmingham. The British Association of American Studies Postgraduates were excited by *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*.

T: Well thanks so much.

I drove, or should I say I was driven – because if I had attempted to drive I would not be here today – from Dublin to, we just did a circle of the whole country.

R: When?

T: I'm bad with dates. Must have been about twelve years ago.

R: Oh wow! You probably drove past me in Donegal discovering you on a shelf. What did you think?

T: I loved it.

R: It's pretty!

T: Yeah.

R: I guess you would have liked the weather?

T: Well the weather in– I had always heard the food wasn't good but I found it to be quite to my liking.

R: We do fish pretty well.

T: But I was in, we were in, eh, Galway.

R: Galway! That's where I live.

T: And we had some wine and– I was actually being driven by a guy from Northern Ireland; he knew how to stay on the right side of the road. Of course it was raining and we had kind of a picnic lunch, and we got under, in Galway, a kind of overpass to keep dry and there were a couple of young men, three of them, and I think they were smoking a joint or something and we started talking to them and we share around with them and then I told them– and they were treating us like tourists– but I told them I was a writer and mentioned the books I'd written. It's like they opened up like a flower and they would give me the key to the city. So it's good to be in a country where the written word is still cherished.

R: And the other thing is we have absolutely no regard whatsoever for celebrity so you can be very anonymous there because the Irish will not give you the satisfaction of recognising you.

T: I like that part– It's why I live here. And one reason I have a hard time talking about my books is because I come down town in La Conner to the Post Office or that, and no one ever, ever, engages me in a literary conversation. So I can go for several years without having a literary conversation and then all of a sudden I'll have published a book and I have to go out on the road and talk to people and I just– I'm not in practice, I don't know how to do it and it takes me a couple weeks on the road before I start to say something meaningful about my work. I don't think about it, I just do it. I've been writing since I was five years old. I dictated– I announced at aged five to my parents that I was going to be a writer and my mother who was a frustrated writer encouraged me and for my fifth person I received a *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* scrapbook and instead of posting pictures in it I put in stories and of course I couldn't write them myself so I would dictate them to my

mother and whenever the muse bit me she would have to stop whatever she was doing and take dictation. And because as I said she was a bit of a frustrated writer herself so she would sometimes change the things I was saying and she would read the story back to me and I always knew, any little change I'd know and I would throw a tantrum until she put it back exactly as I had written. And I told that, many years later to my editor in New York, and he said "My god Robbins you haven't changed in forty years."

R: So do you find you ever get frustrated having to say the same thing on these tours again and again? What is the question you're asked most often?

T: How long does it take to write this book?

R: But you're so consistent with that.

T: People seem to think– they have a temporal attitude or interest in work I suppose. And the next question would be about the movie. Because movies are just more sexy than books.

R: And Uma Thurman was in it! She's certainly sexy.

T: I didn't find her that sexy.

R: I play roller derby. And my name was inspired by Jellybean. So my roller derby name is Kamikaze Jellybean.

T: Wow!

R: She was the fun one and the curvy one and the pretty one and the one with the cute little butt and cute little cheeks.

T: I never met a roller derby queen before.

R: Oh I am far from a queen! I am quite terrible.

T: I tried to talk the woman who cuts my hair into going into it because she's a– she loves to dance, and she was a cheerleader in high-school and she's a short bomb with a curvy butt. And they were starting a roller derby league or whatever here in this area and I said "I'll be your sponsor!" But she wouldn't do it.

R: No I enjoy it. It's fun. You can be somebody else, for a little while. Then you get ballsier. You should talk her into it. And then she can cut your hair on roller skates and that's going to be fun.

T: I'd be up for it.

R: I bet!

T: This is the third time that boat has gone by and I would think that maybe you've hired that captain to keep coming by with that boat except that you're Irish and you don't succumb to worship of celebrities.

R: [laughs] He does have wide angled lens on there. You can't see it.

T: So as I was saying I don't think about writing. I don't have literary conversations with myself. I just do it. I mean I've been doing it so long that it's just part of who I am.

R: Well my other, last question more or less, is what kind of fan mail do you get?

T: Wonderful, wonderful.

R: Do you ever get military fan mail?

T: A few. I haven't got any from Afghanistan but I did get some from Iraq.

R: Really?

T: Yeah. Saying my books helped them feel sane.

R: About which books?

T: I don't remember. I get a lot of– I think readers, even really young readers, and I've had thirteen-year-old girls understand my work better than any adult could. They just say really insightful things about them. And the remarks that have been accorded to me from the critical establishment have never been very insightful at all; quite the opposite. I have a file cabinet full of– just the very best mail. I'm saving that for my golden years too.

R: Now that would be some fun reading. I'm surprised, I guess, that you get to hide in such a peaceful existence, because it's no secret that this is where you're hiding out. Have you ever been tracked down by a nut?

T: Oh yeah. The truth really was, the first ten years, the first ten publishing years, every summer I'd get lots and lots of kids from, Rhode Island, they'd drive all the way out here, because there was a kind of mystique about me, at that point my picture hadn't been circulated, and they didn't know much about me, so it was so it was considered a treasure hunt if they could track me down.

R: Like the Chink?

T: Yeah. Yeah but then they would want me to stay up all night drinking tequila with them, and, of course I had to go to bed to work the next morning. I was in bed by ten o'clock, so I always kind of disappointed them. And they expected me to talk while I write and they were disappointed when they found out I'm kind of inarticulate on the subject.

R: I'll tell you what though, I've always read your work in a voice quite similar to yours. Because I read it slowly and you have such a rhythm, so instead of letting your eye cast across the page like you do with some writing, you pronounce each word in your head, and it's always in this little Southern twang, very subtle. I wonder though is that because I was introduced to your work through the film.

T: In my minds ear I think I sound like Jeremy Irons. And then I hear myself recorded and I just want to crawl under the chair.

R: Nobody likes their sound of their voice. I wonder if Jeremy Irons does?

T: He should!

R: You should get him to do your audiobooks. I remember audio-booking a Kurt Vonnegut book and the narrator was an actor– I can't remember his first name but his second name is Tucci, he's an actor. He has a wonderful voice, and I was going for these ridiculously long runs because, the book was fun, but I just wanted to listen to this man's voice, and a the end of the book – and in my mind he was 6'7" and dark and chiselled and extremely handsome and I googled him at the end, when the narrator was revealed at the end of the audiobook, and I was surprised.

T: Stanley.

R: Stanley Tucci, yes.

T: I met him, I was in a movie with his best friend, and he visited the set.

R: Really, what movie?

T: *Mrs Parker and the Vicious Circle*

R: I have not seen that yet. That's another one Mom handed to me.

T. I'm not in the credits, because it was a union shoot and at that time I was not in the union. I'm definitely in there although I'm not sure if you'll recognise me or not. I have a little moustache, not the beard, and my hair's slicked back.

R: So we can't see your ginger roots.

T: I've been in four or five things. Very small, speaking parts. *Made in Heaven*. Actually, um, *Breakfast of Champions*, which– I think the movie is better than the book. I spent some time with Kurt Vonnegut who is not much fun at all.

R: No, I get that impression: quite a sombre individual.

T: Cranky.

R: There's a biography by a guy called Charles Shields, and he paints him as sort of, somebody who manufactured an image of himself, you know, growing out the hair and moustache and looking generally like Mark Twain. But he's so likeable in his books, and he puts so much of himself into it, I guess he wrote the best version of himself; someone who was cantankerous but entertaining.

T: His wife was a photographer and she specialises in photographing authors. So I went to *Esquire* magazine's fiftieth anniversary dinner in New York and there was a whole celebration and there was a breakfast at the mayor's mansion in the morning and Jill Krementz was there and she was photographing Kesey and me and some other people. And she was looking at a used back cover for one of my books. But she took me home to their brown house, and Kurt was there. And he's not particularly friendly. And then his assistant came downstairs and we got along. And he left and he did not come back. I was sitting at the kitchen table with his wife and his assistant. And then I met him again on the set of *Breakfast of Champions*. He was not very friendly then either.

R: I haven't seen *Breakfast of Champions*; I'm trying very hard not to watch any of these films until I finish this giant project.

T: Well you should see it. I think it's a brilliant film.

R: Really? Because it's not a brilliant book. It's not my favourite by a long stretch.

T: It's kind of like a Jackson Pollock film, in the way that there's this overall emphasis– the emphasis is everywhere, every scene is an emphatic scene, it doesn't fall in any time plan, from minor climax to minor climax to major climax. It's just, it's everywhere, at once. I'm not explaining it very well.

R: I wonder is it an adaption issue?

T: I like the film a lot.

R: What part do you play in it?

T: Of course a very small part. I'm a barfly: typecast.

R: I was hoping you'd be Kilgore Trout.

T: Oh God no. The guy who plays Kilgore Trout is in– wonderful, wonderful man – his first big hit was Tom Jones.

R: Like the crooner, the Welsh guy? Oh, no the *old* Tom Jones. I'm a very bad literary student sometimes.

T: His name is on the tip of my tongue, but I don't remember. Anyway, a real actor played that part.

R: Do you like doing movies?

T: Yeah. It's so opposite from my life. I mean, I live a very solitary existence. When you're a writer you lock yourself up in a room for hours alone in the day, and it's just between you and the page. And on set there's all these people with different areas of expertise and they're all so good at what they're doing and they all are working together in a cohesive way. It's just kind of– it's like running away with the circus.

The restaurant overrun by real diners and not a budding literary critic plugging the depths of her favourite author's patience, Tom suggests we vacate our seats. We take a stroll through La Conner, and visit his PO Box where, of course, he has received some fan mail.

Appendix 2: An Interview with Tony Vigorito

Prompted by Tom Robbins, Tony Vigorito reached out to me as I was cooling my jets in Seattle's airport, my return to the Bay Area seemingly indefinitely delayed. We arranged to meet in the Guerilla Café in Berkeley the following week, as Vigorito made his way home from Burning Man. I thought this was very cool.

We began by discussing the other authors in the study, their comic approach to war literature, and Vigorito's own background.

RG: I'm wondering if you have any either military experience or somebody that was close to that. What got you thinking about this idea of – the novel that I focus on specifically is *Just a Couple of Days* – so what got you thinking about weaponry?

TV: I have no military experience, but my family history is definitely touched by World War II. And what got me thinking about weaponry, it may just have been coming of age in the– growing up in the 1980s when the Cold War was still quite relevant and they would show made-for-television movies like *The Day After*. The whole concept of Nuclear Armageddon was just so present in my imagination, in the imagination of anyone who was a teenager during that time. So that's probably what got me thinking about, especially about alternate weapons. And then of course I read my George Orwell. He has an interesting essay – I can't remember the name of – he wrote it in 1948, and he really makes the argument that – he just kind of describes how geopolitics are going to shit with the emergence of atomic weapons – and he makes the argument that when every nation possesses atomic weapons that would be– that would compel them to world peace. It's an interesting argument.

RG: That's what the person who invented TNT believed. He said "war is over it's too dangerous now."

TV: And of course they were both wrong, war isn't over it has just gotten more covert and diabolical than ever before.

RG: You mentioned that your family history is very connected to World War II, do you want to tell me a bit more about that?

TV: Not really, just that I grew up hearing stories about the devastation that war can cause. And then I had an early fascination with the, I should say college-aged fascination, with the 1960s, and sort of the intensity of contrasts that occurred during that period, because there was a tremendous amount of, hope, really, that came along with it. Especially in this area, right? You know, a belief that we could seize the reigns of human evolution and create a relevant future of our own design sort of thing. And that was occurring at the same time as the Vietnam War, which was the Cold War grown hot, and everyone knew someone who was drafted or had died. So that intensity of contrast between – for the lack of a better word the light and dark, I just found fascinating. I think that had a lot to do with the quality of the artistic and musical expression that came out of that period and why it has such staying power. It was just very connected to life and death and to– the stakes were very high. And, yeah that was an early influence on me. And obviously that zeitgeist is long gone, but I try in my own writing to sort of keep that zeitgeist alive so it doesn't flicker out completely.

RG: It translates really well, I think, *In Just a Couple of Days*. I remember Tom [Robbins] having said at one point that he didn't write about the 60s, he wrote the 60s, or something to that effect. The feeling of the era is imbued in his books. I feel like *Just a Couple of Days* seems to do that, it seems to evoke a sense of time and place without writing specifically about that. One of the things I was curious about was the scene where the students are congregating and the other guys are in the bunker, and the virus is spreading through the students. It always recalls Kent State to me. Was that your intention?

TV: No, no, but that's fine that it does. And, I think that I was, I was in graduate school for sociology when I was writing that book – that's what my doctorate's in – so I was actually reading a lot about crowd and mass behaviour, and the sorts of emergent dynamics that can happen in a crowd. I was also trying to create a microcosm of– I wanted the reader to understand what was happening worldwide. You can't describe the entire world at once but you can describe a crowd at once. *Just a Couple of Days* was very much a metaphor for the 1960s for lack of a better term. There was a sort of a belief that you could just leave the old social structures behind and create the world anew, so that's pretty much what the Pied Piper virus was intended to represent. Social structures are made of nothing but language so by dissolving language you're able to have that blank slate, and the opportunity to witness the world without being mediated by your own socialisation.

I now feel that's naïve by the way. I really feel that our social structures exist for a real reason. The rules of law are important. The rules of evidence are important. In the absence of that we have lynch mobs. Of course, in *Just a Couple of Days* I was trying to imply that there was a higher form of consciousness we learned. But in the absence of that higher form of consciousness, which is the same thing people were reaching for in the 1960s, in the absence of that, yeah we need these social structures. Humans are, there are three million years of primate evolution still compelling our behaviour. We were talking about Burning Man earlier, you see a lot of– you strip off a lot of the normal entrapments of civilisation and you start to see the chimpanzee politics that play each other out. People can be dangerous to one another, and society can be a very positive and domesticating force, taming our animalistic impulses.

RG: In terms of the novel being of a time and place it's sort of a hybrid of the 60s contrasted society and a late-Cold War paranoid society.

TV: Yeah and I wrote it in the 90s and I think it's not generally recognised but I'm of the mind that the 90s was sort of a low volume re-run of the 60s in the United States for a number of reasons.

RG: I've heard that said before.

TV: So that was also a source of inspiration for me. You know I was in college in the 90s. I saw how campuses were and I see how they are today and they're nothing like they were.

RG: I did watch a documentary in the library about Berkeley in the 90s called *What Happened to Student Activism?* And they walked around with a video camera and they asked students what they knew about the free speech movement and they have many shots of people saying, "um, nothing", but meanwhile there were protests happening in the background. It was a different type though. It seemed to be more– it was less revolutionary in that they were trying to change things within existing structures as opposed to breaking down these structures.

So *Just a Couple of Days* was originally self-published, right? And I didn't realise that, well I realised it was written in the 90s but the way you said that made me think maybe early/mid-90s?

TV: I started that around 1996 or 1997.

RG: But it was published within months of 9/11, or even weeks, wasn't it?

TV: Hmm. Let me think. Yeah, that was accidental though, obviously.

RG: Did you have any concerns about that when you were promoting the book, or did you have any questions about that? Did you have the impression you released a pre-9/11 book into a post-9/11 audience?

TV: No, that never really crossed my mind. I thought it was synchronistic actually. I thought it was well-timed. It actually did very well.

RG: I think you're one of those people who self-published quite early on when it was relatively new to do. I and I know I came across your book because Amazon said: "we see you've read Tom Robbins you may be interested in Tony Vigorito," and I got the book through that. Amazon does not promote self-published books anymore. I was really curious to how that ended up happening, and do you think that affected it a lot?

TV: I'm not sure what you're asking.

RG: Well, the book was being promoted to somebody in Ireland who had read Tom Robbins, by Amazon.

TV: So Amazon has their algorithms for that. Actually I cautioned my publisher about that because when they republished *Just a Couple of Days* they wanted it to go out of print for a full year before they republished it, and I said "well, you're going to lose your place in the Amazon algorithm if you do that." I had gotten in early and ended up getting associated with the right names, and so I think it was constantly popping up on people's recommendation lists.

RG: And quickly being described as– with a bunch of words from a marketing perspective must have benefited you massively: "cult", "underground".

TV: There was a lot of work I did on my own. I did a lot of promotion myself. I would drive around to music festivals and just have my books for sale. I mean, I gave the books away for free but most people would donate $10. I did that for two or three summers, and got thousands of books in people's hands that way. It was directly into the hands of the people that I thought would appreciate it the most, and who would be likely to recommend it. So I did sort of create a bit of a snowball.

Also because it was self-published I had all the financial motivation, making many more dollars per unit than I am having it conventionally published. Something like 700% more per book, so it was easy to be motivated to put in all that effort myself.

RG: To return to the question of 9/11, do you think that you would write it differently now? You also said that you don't believe that any more.

TV: I didn't say that. I just feel that there's a certain naiveté in wanting to throw the baby out with the bathwater, in other words. Having experienced these little micro social dramas resembling lynch mobs and this sort of thing; I realised that there's a really good reason why we evolved our social structures as we did. But yeah, it'd be great if we could all blossom into a floral consciousness as Tom Robbins would describe it, but I just don't see that happening any time soon. It still makes a good story. If I were to write it post 9/11 I would probably be even more critical of governing structures and military than I was.

We briefly discuss Vigorito's second book, *Nine Kinds of Naked*. I had had some difficulty getting my hands on *Just a Couple of Days* in order to re-read it ahead of our interview, and though the later book was available in local bookshops, the earlier one was not.

TV: It's a different sort of a book for sure than *Just a Couple of Days*. I think *Just a Couple of Days* had more of a Vonnegut edge to it. In fact, when I first started it, I used *Cat's Cradle* as a template, in terms of my pacing and everything. And then by page 100 though it had completely become it's own thing. *Cat's Cradle* is a fairly slim volume compared to *Just a Couple of Days*. But the short chapters, and sort of brief pointed endings to every chapter, I thought worked well. But then *Nine Kinds of Naked*, I don't even know what I was thinking, writing that book.

RG: From what I have read, and what I can remember– I'm thinking the opening aspect of it seems to be quite smooth flowing and a mellow pace and sort of evoking this suburban existence – though when I think of it now it is very different. So in terms of writing comically, and this is where I'm going to be forgetting details because normally I'd be asking about specific jokes, but as I recall it's more like anecdotal humour and over-arching humour. You don't tend to write gags as much as say Vonnegut for example? Correct me if I'm wrong.

TV: What do you mean by gag?

RG: I mean like a punch-line.

TV: I definitely have my punch-lines, but I do tend to write sort of absurd characters that are just funny to read, especially when I mix them together and see the various interactions that will result from this absurd character interacting with that absurd character, like Brother Zebediah interacting with Manny Malarkey, a street preacher and a truck driver. And both of them are humour-based characters in their own right, and then you combine them together you get this ridiculous version of a conversation that emerges, each of them drawing upon their own experiences.

RG: So how self-consciously did you write that? Do you, like Vonnegut would say he would giggle to himself as he writes and you can see these little well constructed jokes happening within them – is that your style? Or Tom says he just writes and it ends up being funny.

TV: Yeah that's pretty much what I do. I mean, there was actually a street preacher that I modelled Brother Zebediah after, which is funny to me because I've had a critic say that the preacher character was not plausible.

RG: I didn't think that at all, I thought he was very plausible.

TV: Yeah I thought that myself, and I would literally sit and listen to this – he was a campus preacher – I would sit and listen to him and he'd say the most ludicrous things and I'd write them down.

RG: What campus? What was the campus, where were you writing?

TV: Why?

RG: I'm just curious.

TV: It was Ohio State. That's where I did my doctorate. And he'd say the most ludicrous things, and I would have notes on my desk, with these ludicrous things that this campus preacher– the points he would try to make. And so I would build the entire conversation– the entire dialogue around permitting me to use that line or this line. There was a film called the *Five Obstructions*. Have you ever seen this? It's about a filmmaker, it's actually a documentary, and a filmmaker goes to his mentor who's in a creative rut and he poses him these five obstructions. The first one was I believe to create a short film but every scene can't be longer than five seconds or something. And so by creating an obstruction he ends up with this marvellously creative work, and he's able to help his mentor to get out of this rut. So anyways I'd start with a line – that'd be my obstruction – and I'd find a reason to

justify that line. And all of the twists and turns of the conversation would in many ways be an artefact of trying to get to that line. And I took it to the extreme in *Nine Kinds of Naked* because I started with that title and I had no idea what it meant. I just thought it was a delightful turn of phrase. I said I'm going to write – the novel was about synchronicity – so I wrote it with no plan, no idea what the title meant, with the goal of justifying that title somehow. And it took me nine tenths of the novel to do that. In fact I was nearing the end and I still hadn't come around to it. I think a lot of scenes that I write, they have a– I'll make notes here and there, and I used to do a lot more than I do now. I used to always have a pad of paper and a pen at hand. And now I find that I have evolved my writing into more of – you know, not being limited by whatever notes I've taken; the scene emerges in the moment itself. Occasionally there's a particular insight I'll have, or a gag, a joke that I've thought of that I want to include in my book and I try to find a way to include it.

RG: So it is a conscious thing, it's like a crafting.

TV: Yeah – I mean it's a combination of conscious and unconscious. I would say probably my best writing is unconscious, and this is probably why I've let that go, this habit of taking notes on a pad of paper, because I feel that just showing up to do the writing day after day is enough – I don't always have to be on, taking notes about life, or insights, amusing turns of phrase that I think of or happen to overhear.

RG: Is that, to a certain extent, attributed to just maturing as a person as well?

TV: I'm certain, yeah, writing is very much just thinking out loud. You know, you write something down, like *Just a Couple of Days* was very much an expression of my twenties. *Nine Kinds of Naked* would be an expression of my early thirties; my third book, obviously my late thirties. I see the arc of maturation throughout my writing.

RG: In terms of the comedy, has that changed – obviously I haven't read the third book. Is that changing in any way? There are a few questions connected to that: do you think that comedy changed after 9/11? And do you feel like writing comically allows you to say more?

TV: I do, I do. Actually I feel very strongly about the presence of humour in any novel. And I just can't stand novels that are devoid of humour. The reason being that life is not devoid of humour. You take a group of men, put them in the most dire circumstance imaginable – war – and they're cracking jokes. There's a book I've read that's actually that's actually really popular on the West Coast, and there's not a single joke in the entire

book. Not a single smart turn of phrase, no sarcasm, no wry humour, nothing. Everyone in it is – it's just like this incredibly desperate story – it's very much like say Ayn Rand, her writing is completely devoid of jokes as well, and that's not an accurate reflection of life. So how has my writing evolved as far as that goes, I would say I think in *Just a Couple of Days* I tried really really hard, I was very deliberate in creating a sort of intensity of humour, a concentration of lots and lots of jokes, clever turns of phrase, that sort of thing. I don't do that now. For example in the book I've just finished – it's called *Love and Other Pranks* – I have scenes in there that are not funny at all, but it always comes back around to the humour.

Oh and in *Just a Couple of* Days I feel that, you know you asked, in reference to that question earlier, if I had to do it over, I think there's some passages where I would get a little bit more serious, in order to express the gravity more effectively.

RG: But you– you have kind of a straight guy – your protagonist is sort of a straight guy. He's observing an absurd situation and commenting on it quite wryly. As you said most of your comedy is deriving from juxtaposing these characters – you have a protagonist that is able to observe, step back from it, comment on it – I think that's hilarious. I really enjoyed that.

TV: Yeah, I think that I ended up almost caricaturising the other characters as a result of that. In a way, Flake, the narrator, is the only real character in the book. Everyone else, including the other protagonists – they're drawn with almost cartoonish strokes: Blip and Sophia

RG: Yeah, Sophia's sort of a hippie archetype but she's believable, insofar as Amanda from *Another Roadside Attraction* is believable.

TV: Sure, and I've heard similar criticisms of some of Tom's writing. And I don't have any problems with it. As I've grown I've had a desire to create more full-bodied characters that are filled with contradictions. So I definitely did that in *Nine Kinds of Naked*; some of the thoughts the characters share with the reader are less than noble, but that's ok because all of us have less than noble thoughts and I feel that allows the reader to identify more with the character where you're not just reading this idealised archetype, you're reading a– you're peering inside the soul of a real person that has every opportunity of failing as well as succeeding.

RG: I'm thinking of Vonnegut again in terms of the idea of writing characters who are contradictory and seeing how that works. And you mentioned that *Nine Kinds of Naked* is episodically based on *Cat's Cradle*.

TV: No, no that was *Just a Couple of Days*.

RG: Excuse me, *Just a Couple of Days*.

TV: How did you describe that: "episodically based"?

RG: Or based on the episodic style.

TV: I'm not sure what you mean by episodic but –

RG: The chapters being quite short and–

TV: And the pacing, the general pacing, like I would see "what page is he on when he got to Ice Nine?"

RG: Oh really? That specific? That's interesting.

TV: Well it was my first book, what did I know about writing a novel? It was actually my third: I didn't finish the other two. It was the third that I had started. Which is funny to me because another criticism I've received is that the pacing is too slow. That I didn't get into the – fifty pages in you still don't know what the story's about – I still haven't introduced the Pied Piper Virus.

RG: But you put the proverbial gun on the stage. The overpass has been painted. You're aware that something is happening.

TV: Yeah, those of us who aren't specifically fans of literature I think are much more impatient to know what the conflict in the story is, so, I've sort of learned to throw my, throw the conflict right up front, get the reader involved in the story immediately. I used to spend a bit more time with character development right upfront.

RG: I don't remember being at all bored by it; definitely not. I remember thinking that the writing was so much fun. […] Who else has influenced you?

TV: Robert Anton Wilson.

He was – he wrote very specific to the sort of California counter-culture. His book, *The Illuminatus!* trilogy – have you ever heard of that?

RG: That is familiar to me, yes.

TV: Also I like John Myers Myers, he's a World War II novelist actually. I mean, my favourite book would be *Silverlock* by John Myers Myers; a wonderful journey through literature.

RG: And are these comedic authors?

TV: Yes. Neither of them deal with war, specifically. But, let's see, I've read the complete corpus of Vonnegut as well as Tom Robbins, Douglas Addams, I've read some Haruki Murakami – he's definitely influenced me in later years, in terms of bringing in a level of undefined mystical reality into his storytelling. You finish a book and you're still not exactly sure exactly how something was happening, or what the nature of this one character or being or entity was but it was there nonetheless. I think that works well. Who else – Salman Rushdie is in there, Thomas Pynchon.

RG: Much of the stuff I do is very based on biography, because, they've written them! Well Tom's new book is going to be an autobiography, which I'm dying to read.

TV: I know I'm very excited for that – does he have a title yet?

RG: I don't know? But, I should perhaps not grill you on that.

TV: About?

RG: On biography, where you come from– For the point of my work, I'm not sure it's relevant in your case. […] And I had suspected all along that it was more about living in a certain time. The Cold War didn't have a front, although you do mention Vietnam, so it makes perfect sense that you would.

TV: I've always has an anti-authoritarian streak a mile wide throughout my life as well. I can remember getting hassled by military recruiters when I was eighteen, constantly calling my parents' house.

RG: Really?

TV: This is how they recruit you.

RG: Where did you grow up?

TV: I was in Cleveland. I grew up in Pennsylvania, Erie, Pennsylvania. And once a week I'd get a phone call. My Mom – this was back in the days of landlines – my Mom would call me to the phone and I'd say "hello" and it'd be a military recruiter trying to – and I already had an indignant stance when I was eighteen which only expanded as I grew

older. It just seems to me that the military takes advantage of a young man's needs for a masculine identity, and offers them some pre-packaged version of it, and in many ways mangles it. My main character in *Nine Kinds of Naked*, Diablo, is a vet, a veteran of some unspecified war, and – but yeah – he's living with regret, because of what he was encouraged to do by military institutions.

RG: Well, I think I've asked all I need to ask. Do you need any information on Irishness for your upcoming book?

TV: No, but you'll be pleased to hear the main character is a red-haired pirate. Half the book is a pirate novel, which takes place in the eighteenth century and the other half takes place in the present day.

We continue to talk about Vigorito's upcoming book, and my project, until we are kicked out of the café into the early-evening Berkeley sun. It's my last day there, and I walk home through the historic campus. A flock of cyclists with elaborate feathered Mohawks on their bike helmets buzz past me as I pause for a photograph at the Sather Gate.

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