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Yoshizu, Kyohei

Graduate School of Social and Cultural Studies, Kyushu University

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## Stop the Clocks: Vonnegut's Conception of Time in *Slaughterhouse-Five*

Kyohei Yoshizu

In this paper, I will discuss the conception of time in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, written by Kurt Vonnegut in 1969. In the semiautobiographical prologue, the author recounts his own experience of the passage of time by reflecting on his days as a World War II soldier. This places the story of Billy Pilgrim as, among other things, a meditative piece on time. The reader understands Vonnegut's perspective through the fragmentary structure of the narrative.

My purpose is first to analyze Vonnegut's view of time in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Then, I will examine how Vonnegut treats time by using specific narrative techniques in order to convey what I refer to as "temporal dismantlement." To support this claim, I contrast Vonnegut's technique with William Faulkner's stream-of-consciousness approach to narrative structure.

From the opening pages we find that *Slaughterhouse-Five* is a personal exploration by Vonnegut into his own experience of the passage of time. In the metafictional first chapter, Vonnegut remembers the day he visited Bernard V. O'Hare, "an old war buddy" (11). Vonnegut expresses his attitude of time passing by quoting the Latin poet Horace: "Eheu fugaces, labuntur anni" which can be translated as 'Ah, time has gone by in vain.' Vonnegut mirrors this sentiment in the narrative of Billy Pilgrim when Billy makes out how old he is by looking at the plate number of a car. He wonders: "Where have all the years gone?" (57). This shows Vonnegut uses Billy to reflect his own attitude. Later on, Billy asked himself about the present: "how wide it was, how deep it was, how much was mine to keep" (18). Vonnegut ponders about the width and depth of the present time because he feels that present extends backward into the past and forward into the future.

Secondly, before revisiting Dresden, Vonnegut has to spend one night in Boston where he "became a non-

person in the Boston fog" (20). After Lufthansa puts him in a limousine and sent him to "a motel for a non-night" (20), he feels that:

The time would not pass. Somebody was playing with the clocks, and not only with the electric clocks, but the wind-up kind, too. The second hand on my watch would twitch once, and a year would pass, and then it would twitch again.

There was nothing I could do about it. As an Earthling, I had to believe whatever clocks said—and calendars. (20)

From this passage, we notice that Vonnegut experiences discomfort at the passing of time.

Vonnegut's particular experience of time can also be found in Billy's story. There is a scene in which Wildhack tells Billy that "They're playing with the clocks again" (208) referring to the Tralfamadorians' manipulation of the electric clocks in the dome where Billy and Wildhack are held prisoners. Monica Loeb quotes Vonnegut's answer to a question concerning the human perception of time:

"Time is not what we think it is," because we human beings are "limited in what we can understand." . . . Instead, Vonnegut believes that "reality is rationed to us, as our brains are such a size that we can only deal with a small part at a time and so reality is metered through our brains of irregular manageable rates and that's what we call time." (24)

We generally cannot help but think of time as flowing chronologically from the past into the future. However, Vonnegut considers that this impression is due to

human's limited perspective, and *Slaughterhouse-Five*'s narrative structure reflects Vonnegut's conception of time.

Moreover, Vonnegut's view of time in *Slaughterhouse-Five* is influenced by *Music of the Spheres* written by Guy Murchie. Vonnegut confesses that he used Murchie's conception of time in one of his works (most probably *Slaughterhouse-Five*<sup>1</sup>) without permission.<sup>2</sup> Thus, he quotes Murchie:

I sometimes wonder whether humanity has missed the real point in raising the issue of mortality and immortality—whether perhaps the seemingly limited time span of an earthly life is actually unlimited and eternal—in other words, whether mortality itself may be a finite illusion, being actually immortality and, even though constructed of just a few “years,” that those few years are all the time there really is, so that, in fact, they can never cease. (*Wampeters* 88)

We are likely to consider life as finite, but according to Murchie, our lifetime is not limited by death because time does not exist if it is not perceived by human consciousness. Yet, if time is dependent on human perception, it implies that its flow or “speed” can vary according to the way it is perceived. This is what Klinkowitz seems to be suggesting when he observes that “the narrative artist can rearrange time to fit his or her purposes” and that “time itself can be arrested by art” (39). One of the artist's purposes—especially when he is haunted by traumatic memories like Vonnegut—is to “arrest” time and deny the inevitability of death. The disordered narration of events in *Slaughterhouse-Five* thus reflects Vonnegut's view of time as a series of separated, non-chronologically related events: “It is just an illusion we have here on Earth that one moment follows another one, like beads on a string, and that once a moment is gone it is gone forever” (27).<sup>3</sup>

So far we have examined Vonnegut's view of time as it is expressed in the novel. Then, how does this view effect *Slaughterhouse-Five*'s structure? Here, I will examine two points: one being the Tralfamadorian view of time in relation to the dismantlement of time in

narration, and the other in how the narrative structure mirrors this point.

At first, I will consider the Tralfamadorian view of time. As the epigraph of the novel already indicates: “this is a novel somewhat in the telegraphic schizophrenic manner of tales of the planet Tralfamadore, where the flying saucers come from.” The narrative technique is derived from the Tralfamadorian view of time:

All moments, past, present, and future, always have existed, always will exist. The Tralfamadorians can look at all the different moments just the way we can look at a stretch of the Rocky Mountains, for instance. They can see how permanent all the moments are, and they can look at any moment that interests them. It is just an illusion we have here on Earth that one moment follows another one, like beads on a string, and that once a moment is gone it is gone forever. (26-27)

Here, we notice that all moments of past, present, and future are coincident. In other words, all moments are present at any time. As Robert T. Tally points out, this view is similar to Bergson's theory of memory according to which all moments coexist in the present in concentrated forms, without being articulated together.<sup>4</sup>

Second, I will consider how Vonnegut narrates non-cohesive memories. Such dismantlement of time in narration has been previously expressed in literature through the use of the stream-of-consciousness technique. Thus, William Rodney Allen contends that:

*Slaughterhouse-Five*'s narrative mode is allied with the stream-of-consciousness technique pioneered by Joyce and Faulkner, which seeks to reproduce the mind's simultaneous blending of the past through memory, the present through perception, and the future through anticipation. (84)

Indeed, the dismantlement of time in *Slaughterhouse-Five* is similar to the disarranged narration of time in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*.<sup>5</sup> In this novel, as Sartre puts it, “[Faulkner's characters'] past is

not ordered according to chronology but follows certain impulses and emotions" (228). Yet, there is a difference between the stream of consciousness in *The Sound and the Fury* and the narration in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. We must examine both narrations to determine the nature of this difference. In *The Sound and the Fury*, Benjy's narrative in Chapter 1 may be close to that of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, because the idiot, Benjy, does not understand time. Moreover, he does not have a sense of identity, and cannot tell himself apart from his surroundings. It seems that his perceptions, senses, and emotions are not distinguished from outside events and somehow fuse with them. However, the time of the story itself is not affected by Benjy's idiosyncratic understanding of the world. In contrast, there is no independent timeline in the narration of Billy's wayward pilgrimage. There is no objective present time to which the narrator returns after relating Billy's story.<sup>6</sup> In contrast, since there is an objective timeline in *The Sound and the Fury*, the events depicted are not spatialized completely. In this regard, in Faulkner's novel, memories appear from the body of consciousness. In other words, scene changes are located within the character's consciousness. In a contrasting manner, in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the body is nonexistent as a media for the recollection of memories. Consequently, a given scene seems to automatically shift into another one. As the narrator puts it, *Slaughterhouse-Five* is "jumbled and jangled" (19), and temporally different scenes are arranged at random without prior notice.<sup>7</sup> Here, the events become spatialized. Sharon Spencer describes the spatialization of time as follows:

... the spatialization of time in the novel is the process of splintering the events that, in a traditional novel, would appear in a narrative sequence and of rearranging them so that past, present, and future actions are presented in reversed, or combined, patterns; when this is done, the events of the novel have been "spatialized," for the factor that constitutes their orientation to reality is the place where they occur. One of the most obvious effects to be achieved by means of this process is simultaneity: the presentation of two or more actions in different places occurring at the same

moment in time. In this way, a novelist . . . may dissolve the distinctions between past, present, and future as they are dissolved in dreams and in the stream-of-consciousness flow. (156-57)

The spatialization of time dismantles the chronological continuations of events, and rearranges them according to the way they appear in memory. By this dismantlement, each event is restored in the space where it happened. My purpose now is to apply Spencer's discussion of spatialization to *Slaughterhouse-Five*. For instance, in chapter 4, though Billy takes a shower, he finds that it is not warm. This reminds him of how good he felt wrapped in a towel by his mother after having been bathed in his childhood. This recollection triggers a shift from the former scene (the shower) to the latter scene (the childhood scene). In chapter 5, during his wedding night, he goes to the bathroom and travels back to 1944 where he experiences the same urge to urinate there, too. As we find out from these examples, the narrator in *Slaughterhouse-Five* narrates events not by putting them in chronological order but by connecting the space where they happen along streams of memory or consciousness, or associations of images. This construction is similar to Bergson's theory of memory. According to him, if there is a place of perception, it is not located inside the brain but, instead, outside, where lies the perceived object. In other words, our perception is originally in things rather than in the mind, outside us rather than within. That means that the commonsensical view that there exists a boundary between in and out of our body is meaningless.

So far we have examined Vonnegut's treatment of time in Billy's narrative. We identified a narrative technique differing from Faulkner's stream of consciousness. It is a non-chronological narration of events, which are instead connected by the place in which these events happen.<sup>8</sup> This spatialization of time is similar to Bergson's theory of memory as we have seen in the previous section.

The stream-of-consciousness technique is an attempt to represent human consciousness more realistically by attempting to describe the way we perceive time (namely our psychological time) instead of the "objective" time read on the clocks. In contrast, Vonnegut's narration in *Slaughterhouse-Five* seems to

be cinematic or cartoony as if to caricature the realism of the stream-of-consciousness device. Conversely, however, it more precisely highlights the realistic aspect of the unconscious. We are likely to think that we consciously recollect memories. This recognition assumes human as a subject who recollects memories.<sup>9</sup>

Yet, we only appear to remember, but the fact is that memories remind us of images, feelings, and senses that we had at the time. We don't bring memories back to us, but instead memories come to us. That is to say, Billy Pilgrim's jumping back and forth to the places associated to his memories express the very way human memory functions: the act of remembering is largely influenced by the unconscious. Since human consciousness is unable to notice the motions of the unconscious, the unconscious is not mediated by human consciousness and is impersonal. In this regard, we might say that Vonnegut's narrative in *Slaughterhouse-Five* is an unconscious stream of consciousness.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Loeb, 38.

<sup>2</sup> See *Wampeters, Foma & Granfalloon*, 88.

<sup>3</sup> Vonnegut claims in the preface of *Wampeters, Foma & Granfalloon* that: "I honestly believe I am tripping through time. Tomorrow I will be three years old again. The day after that I will be sixty-three" (xxvi). Moreover, in the following passage referring to the chronological orders of his essays in this book, he says "If time is the straight and uniform string of beads most people think it is" (xxvi). It implies he does not think that "time is the straight and uniform string of beads most people think it is." Also the expression "the . . . string of beads" reminds us of the phrase "like beads on a string" (27). Billy used for the Earthling's conception of time. Thus the Tralfamadorian view of time is related not only to Billy, the protagonist of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, but also to Kurt Vonnegut, the author of the novel.

<sup>4</sup> See T. Tally, 172.

<sup>5</sup> It seems that the technique of stream of consciousness is often used to represent the consciousness of traumatized characters. For instance, it is often suggested that Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* depicts

a mental disease caused by the First World War. As for *Slaughterhouse-Five*, many critics explain Billy's (and Vonnegut's) condition by referring to his traumatic experiences during the Second World War (especially, the bombing of Dresden). Such peculiar experiences of time as "recurrent and intrusive distressing recollections of the event" might have led writers to discover this new narrative technique. (The quote "recurrent and intrusive distressing recollections of the event" is from diagnostic criteria of PTSD in *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* [Third Edition, DSM-III].)

<sup>6</sup> In other words, all time becomes present time for him, something Jerome Klinkowitz aptly named "a continual present" (55). This condition evokes one of the symptoms of PTSD patients.

<sup>7</sup> Robert T. Tally describes *Slaughterhouse-Five*'s dismantled narrative as follows:

In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the time-tripping narrative lends itself to a notion of schizophrenic narration, the breaking down of the expected signifying chain. Modernism gave us the stream-of-consciousness narrative, with its insistently personal, even neurotically inward, unfolding of an individual ego through the visible machinations of the individual's mind. With the postmodernist narration, time does not ebb and flow, a river winding its way through the valley, but rather jerks and twists and lurches backwards and forwards, up and down. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, this lurching is accomplished through quick breaks, jumping from place to place. (173)

<sup>8</sup> Whether a place of a focused character's perception is located inside the brain or outside, where lies the perceived object, also results from the difference of the focalization of two. Faulkner's narration in Chapter 1 in *The Sound and the Fury* is an internal focalization. On the other hand, Vonnegut's narration in Billy's story in *Slaughterhouse-Five* is a focalization zero (non-focalization). At first glance, the difference of a place of perception in these two novels is not the author's views of memories but the point of a focalization. However, if they use effective narrations to fictionalize their ideas, their choices of points of view in the narratives should reflect on the authors' conception of the unconscious.

<sup>9</sup> One of the features of the stream-of-consciousness device described in the intermediate part of the

report—namely that “there is an objective timeline” to which the narrator returns after a character’s recollection of a memory—entails the view that “memories appear from the body of consciousness.” Thus this stream-of-consciousness device focuses on an unconscious aspect of human consciousness, and still put more emphasis on human consciousness than on the unconscious. Still, the narration in Chapter 1 in *The Sound and the Fury* exceptionally prevents Benjy from being given human consciousness as a subject to recollect memories successfully.

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Kyohei Yoshizu

*Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), Kurt Vonnegut's representative work, is the novel of time. The author often asserts his unique sense of time with his own narration in the metafictional Chapter 1. From the second chapter, he uses a uniquely fragmented narrative structure that reflects his view of time. This structure affects the protagonist Billy Pilgrim's experience of time as follows: "Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time . . . Billy is spastic in time . . . He is in a constant state of stage fright . . ." (23). The Tralfamadorian view of time Billy is influenced by is also related to Vonnegut's conception of time. In this paper, therefore, I will discuss Vonnegut's treatment of time in *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

My purpose is to examine two points: 1) the Tralfamadorian view of time in relation to the dismantlement of time in the novel, and 2) the narrative devices used by the author. Both concern themselves with how memories are perceived. This paper deals with the latter especially in detail. *Slaughterhouse-Five*'s narrative mode is allied with the stream-of-consciousness technique. This technique is an attempt to represent human consciousness more realistically by attempting to describe the way we perceive time (namely our psychological time) instead of the "objective" time read on the clocks. Yet, there is a difference between the stream of consciousness in *The Sound and the Fury* and the narration in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. In Faulkner's novel, scene changes from the recollections of memories to the present time are located within the focused character's consciousness. On the other hand, in Vonnegut's novel, memories are not mediated by human consciousness, and they are connected by the place where the events happen. Hence the events in memories become spatialized. Bearing in mind that the act of remembering is largely influenced by the unconscious, the spatialization of time highlights Vonnegut's realistic depiction of the unconscious more precisely. I regard the narration in *Slaughterhouse-Five* as an unconscious stream of consciousness.