Kurt Vonnegut's America (review)

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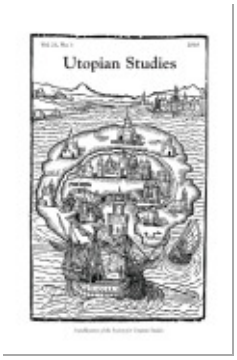

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Jerome Klinkowitz. *Kurt Vonnegut's America*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2009. 160 pp. Cloth, $34.95.

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In many ways, Kurt Vonnegut was an unlikely figure to rise to such literary prominence that his death in 2007 was received with a collective national mourning. Born into a German American Midwest family, whose father, a successful architect in the 1920s, had been ruined by the Great Depression of the 1930s, and whose mother was to succumb to drug and alcohol abuse and eventually suicide, Vonnegut grew to maturity during a period of social, geopolitical, and economic turbulence. Packed off to the European theater of World War II in his early twenties, he was captured by the Germans at the Battle of the Bulge and witnessed at close quarters the firebombing of Dresden in February 1945, an experience that was so dramatically to inform his most famous and critically celebrated novel, *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969). Yet, as Jerome Klinkowitz points out in his engaging, and at times touching, study, critical recognition was not something that Vonnegut found it easy to come by or to deal with when it was forthcoming in the wake of *Slaughterhouse-Five*'s publication. The reprinting and reappraisal of two decades' worth of fictional material in the early seventies thrust Vonnegut into a public and media limelight that he was little prepared for and which generated anxieties about the underlying value of his work that could be crippling. By his death, the result of brain injuries caused by a fall, he was regarded as one of America's foremost men of letters, in demand on the lecture circuit and guaranteed best seller status—an unlikely outcome for a man who started his working life in the publicity department of the General Electric Research Laboratory.

Klinkowitz's *Kurt Vonnegut's America* charts this rise, its setbacks and privations, triumphs and rewards, with a pleasing blend of biographical, anecdotal, and critical assessment that, while it tends to soft-pedal the critical in favor of the personal, can perhaps be forgiven considering the nature of this project. This is, after all, a paean, a fond and, at times, overly sentimental response to the grieving caused by the death of an idol and a friend. As Klinkowitz states in his prefacing remarks, the book emerged from the rounds of interviews and commentaries that were asked of him in the immediate wake of Vonnegut's death, and there is a personal engagement here that is both comfortingly familiar and occasionally claustrophobic. Klinkowitz's

long friendship with the writer, allied to a longer scholarly interest in the work, makes him eminently qualified for this valedictory appraisal, and there is no doubt that what he has produced complements his previous critical engagements and will stand as a valuable summation of Vonnegut's work. His closeness to his subject allows for a measured reminiscing style that employs largely biographical and chronological methodologies to accomplish the task at hand. The warmth of his affection is conveyed in the generosity with which he conjures Vonnegut, the man, from the pages of his work. Principled, socially conscious, modest, and with a mischievous sense of humor is how he emerges, with a sort of likable avuncularity that one would always wish for in one's literary heroes. Klinkowitz's touch is light and respectful, and the reader is occasionally moved by the care with which he handles his subject, glossing over the difficult, contradictory elements of his personality. Yet, if one is to read (and use) this as a critical study rather than a fond encomium, the downplaying of this darker Vonnegut is problematic, for it not only leaves a number of questions unanswered but also gives one cause to question the objectivity of Klinkowitz's assessments. A number of times he refers to Vonnegut's episodes of depression without elucidating their cause, severity, or impact, and though he gestures toward the crippling writer's block that afflicted Vonnegut in the period after his father's death, he does not examine that in any depth or really ascribe to it any discernible critical significance. While these are not necessarily failings of the study—the book is after all only 134 pages in length and cannot therefore be described as exhaustive—they do suggest a protectiveness that though admirable, leaves the dispassionate reader wondering as to the critical distance achieved by Klinkowitz.

Objectivity aside, *Kurt Vonnegut's America* provides an interesting overview and introduction to the body of work that encourages one to explore further—Klinkowitz's discussions of Vonnegut's journalism and occasional pieces are especially intriguing and suggest that much of his most committed if not necessarily considered work was produced in formats shorter than his novels. In many ways, his journalism reveals him at his most politically charged and contemporary, where his longer writings locate him much more firmly in the concerns of post–World War II intellectual milieus. Vonnegut's discomfort with America's military involvement abroad from Vietnam to Iraq and Afghanistan is conveyed with clarion confidence and often scabrous wit, criticizing the saber-drawing alacrity of increasingly insecure presidents. But it is

Vonnegut's concerns for America's home life that come across most strongly from Klinkowitz's study; the gradual erosion of a simple (but not simplistic) family and community coherence in the years after the war troubled him greatly, representing, as he considered it did, a movement away from core collective principles and toward an increasingly atomized individualism and a thoughtless fetishizing of progress. Klinkowitz stresses a residual Midwestern unostentatious decency in Vonnegut's makeup, a determination to try to make things better wherever he could, a quality nobly demonstrated when he and his wife adopted three of his sister's children when she died of cancer, even though he already had a large family of his own. It is with such acts of instinctive generosity that this book would like us to associate and remember Vonnegut, and though the assessment is unnervingly rose-tinted, what does emerge is a man of considerable moral quality who spoke not just to national and international interests but to the domestic and the everyday. Vonnegut, as presented here, is fundamentally an ethical writer, not in the sense that he preached a particular modus vivendi but in his conviction that his role was to point the way toward making the world a better place. Time and again, Klinkowitz stresses this straightforward social responsibility that Vonnegut felt behooved to perform, and as a consequence, the Vonnegut portrayed is quite different from the abstract postmodernist and science fiction novelist that attaches itself to his popular reputation.

The critical examination of Vonnegut's postmodernist credentials is not a pressing concern of this book, nor is there a strong desire seriously to contextualize him among his literary peers, both of which are a shame for the critical reader but are hardly faults of the text. Klinkowitz does point to the transformative nature of the novelist's style and implies, somewhat in passing, his affiliation with a poststructuralist sensibility, but these are never fleshed out in detail, and the reader is left without a sense of the development of a subversive aesthetic or reasons why Vonnegut might have chosen to eschew social realism. This may be an attempt to place postmodernism within its own time-bound context, but it is surely more of a fault for this particular book as it decontextualizes the work and, in my opinion, detracts from, rather than enhances, the originality of *Slaughterhouse-Five* and its successors. This is not to damn Klinkowitz's work for refusing to classify Vonnegut within a particular literary clique, for one of the admirable aspects of this study is its breadth of scope, but, rather, to suggest that Vonnegut's

cultural impact and continuing reputation are inextricably linked with the trajectory of postmodernist aesthetics, and to downplay that connection is to the detriment of the work. Having said that, one postmodernist trope that Klinkowitz does deal with is the permeability of subjectivity, an area in which Vonnegut clearly was ahead of the curve. "We are what we pretend to be, and had therefore better be very careful what we pretend to be" (42) is the construction that he returns to on a number of occasions as an indicator of the slipperiness of contemporary identity, its ability to reform itself and to be based less on an immutable, authentic selfhood than on shifting coordinates of performative being.

Whether *Kurt Vonnegut's America* is actually about Kurt Vonnegut's America is a moot point: while Klinkowitz solidly locates his subject among post-1945 social concerns, this book rarely engages with America as an entity or even with how Vonnegut conceptualized his nation. What it is, is a moving and tender critical memoir that lacks at times the hard edge of criticism but delivers on the memoir through a personal and reflective anecdotalism. Vonnegut, as constructed by Klinkowitz, is a very human, personable, and honorable individual, committed to pointing out the wrong turnings taken by society but equally aware of his own flaws and limitations. One couldn't ask for much more from one's friends as a send-off, but at times one could ask for more from this book from a scholarly perspective. This book deserves great praise for what it achieves but should, perhaps, be read in conjunction with other Vonnegut criticism for a fuller picture.

Francis Lodwick. *A Country Not Named*. Ed. William Poole. Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2007. xii + 148 pp. Paperback, $30.00.

Denis Veiras. *The History of the Sevarambians: A Utopian Novel*. Ed. John Christian Laursen and Cyrus Masroori. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006. 418 pp. Paperback, $31.95.

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> He gave man speech, and speech created thought—which is the measure of the universe
>
> —P. B. Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound*