

Jokes across the Generation Gap

Writers, and especially novelists, have become the saints of our secular culture, not so much in the sense that they are thought to be morally superior, but because they have by their own efforts (unlike royalty, whose advantages are inherited) found a way to transcend the job market. They enjoy the same existential happiness as movie stars, who are paid money simply for being, or “expressing” themselves. That, at least, is the ideal, and if many writers (like Kurt Vonnegut’s shadow-self, the sf hack Kilgore Trout) fail to achieve that ideal, such failure is simply the darkness that lends success a brighter luster.

As the luster grows and the reputation swells, the writer gains an interest independent of his work. With each new novel the question is asked, “Has success spoiled X?” That is, Is the new book equal to those before? Has age withered or custom staled the known persona? To answer that question at once vis-à-vis *Galapagos*: no, Vonnegut is as good as ever and better than usual, and he is still, exactly, Kurt Vonnegut, still the same droll, disingenuous, utterly middle-American, if now high-middle-aged, Huck Finn, telling a plain tale in the same trademarked style that combines the homespun and the streetwise in a patchwork of one-liners, catchphrases, and tangential anecdotes that yields a sum wonderfully larger than its parts. His is an artlessness that seems so sincere that it takes in not only his popular audience, who love him all the more for being *their* Everyman and ombudsman to the court of Literature, but as well the literary establishment, who can, on this account, comfortably dismiss Vonnegut as a naif with a knack for low comedy, but not “serious,” not an artist, not canonical.

Yet Vonnegut, despite his consistent popular success, is an artist surely destined for canonization, with an oeuvre that will someday support as much scholarship as any novelist’s alive and a Life that promises juicy biographies to come. If he is not “serious” in the establishment sense, that is because seriousness is, by definition, the domain of fuddy-duddies, a territory in which a foxy novelist will never let himself be apprehended by the hounds of criticism.

Review of *Galapagos*, by Kurt Vonnegut.

Consider, for instance, the matter of style. Sentence by sentence, no one, not even Hemingway, the new Horace of today's monoglot schools of creative writing, can be sparer, simpler, easier to parse, but Hemingway's sparseness was at the service of refining away an auctorial voice that would tell instead of—as a perfected naturalism commands—show and letting the reader work out for herself the larger meanings that may loom behind a plain unvarnished tale. Vonnegut, by contrast, is always explicating his own text, often before he's written it. Consider the following paragraph (which comes early in *Galapagos*) of manic self-interpretation:

If Selena was Nature's experiment with blindness, then her father was Nature's experiment with heartlessness. Yes, and Jesus Ortiz was Nature's experiment with admiration for the rich, and I was Nature's experiment with insatiable voyeurism, and my father was Nature's experiment with cynicism, and my mother was Nature's experiment with optimism, and the Captain of the *Bahia de Darwin* was Nature's experiment with ill-founded self-confidence, and James Wait was Nature's experiment with purposeless greed, and Hisako Hirogochi was Nature's experiment with depression, and Akiko was Nature's experiment with furriness, and on and on.

The Hemingway style flatters its readers by pretending not to manipulate them; the Vonnegut style teases its audience, as a testy parent might tease a child, but then a moment later (being a kind parent at heart) Vonnegut renews the enchantment of his story, which, like any good Hausmärchen, is full of wonders and whimsies not allowed to a writer addressing "serious," grown-up readers. Here it is the literal-minded popular audience that is likely to grow restive, for those readers whose hungers are normally satisfied by the lumpen-realism of Arthur Hailey or James Michener must be seduced into a more playful and imaginative frame of mind, and this Vonnegut does in two ways: by the plausible strategies of science fiction (in which genre Vonnegut served much of his literary apprenticeship) and by humor, the broader the better. As he remarks of the new human race that is to evolve in the Galapagos Islands over the next million years:

People still laugh about as much as they ever did, despite their shrunken brains. If a bunch of them are lying around on a beach, and one of them farts, everybody else laughs and laughs, just as people would have done a million years ago.

Laughter, whether at farts or more complex behavior, is Vonnegut's forte, in support of which proposition I must quote at length a passage I think is irresistibly funny, though the humor is once again at the expense of digestive processes. This is his account of the marine iguana, a reptile that has been selected as the "totemic animal of the cruise" of the *Bahia de Darwin*, the ship of fools whose voyage to, and shipwreck on, the Galapagos Islands is the focus of the novel:

The creature could be more than a metre long, and look as fearsome as a Chinese dragon. Actually, though, it was no more dangerous to life forms of any sort, with the exception of seaweed, than a liverwurst. Here is what its life is like in the present day, which is exactly what life was like a million years ago.

It has no enemies, so it sits in one place, staring into the middle of the distance at nothing, wanting nothing, worried about nothing until it is hungry. It then waddles down to the ocean and swims slowly and not all that ably until it is a few metres from shore. Then it dives, like a submarine, and stuffs itself with seaweed, which is at that time ingestible. The seaweed is going to have to be cooked before it is digestible.

So the marine iguana pops to the surface, swims ashore, and sits on the lava in the sunshine again. It is using itself for a covered stewpot, getting hotter and hotter while the sunshine cooks the seaweed. It continues to stare into the middle distance at nothing, as before, but with this difference: It now spits up increasingly hot salt water from time to time.

During the million years I have spent in these islands, the Law of Natural Selection has found no way to improve, or, for that matter, to worsen this particular survival scheme.

The comic premise of *Galapagos* is that the survivors of the voyage devolve, by Darwinian logic, to the condition of that marine iguana, and a more unlikely lot of survivors Nature could not easily have selected: a single fertile male who refuses to breed, and nine females, one of whom is infertile, one of whom is congenitally blind and also refuses to breed, one of whom is pregnant with a male child with genes mutated by the Hiroshima bomb, while the remaining six are cannibal foundlings of the near-extinct tribe of the Kanka-bonos, whose horror of the fertile male precludes any possibility of sex. How this ill-assorted set of Adam and Eves produces a new human race, while the rest of the species suffers extinction, provides the social comedy of the novel, and it is black

enough, but Vonnegut's genius is for satire on the broadest Voltairean lines. His targets are not the foibles of social behavior but (as befits an American of the post-war era) targets as broad as the pax Americana: war, genocide, economic imperialism, ecological catastrophe, nuclear extinction, and the madness and futility of all religions and ideologies. The difficulty of aiming at such broad targets is not in scoring bullseyes but in avoiding the preaching-to-the-converted complacency of such cosy jeremiads as Lessing's *Canopus* fantasies, and this Vonnegut achieves by irony. Like Samuel Butler in *Erewhon* (where illness is treated as criminal behavior and crime as a disease), Vonnegut contends with poker-faced consistency that the problem of the human race has been its excessive intelligence and imagination, and that a devolution to the condition of seals and walruses represents the race's only hope for survival.

In designing the tale that supports this thesis Vonnegut commands almost the full spectrum of comedic possibility. He is a masterful debunker, a superb monologist, an ingenious farceur, and has a quick and wicked tongue. Like Chaplin he can switch from farce to sentiment by the batting of a lash. All that he lacks to be a decathlon champion of comedy is the mimetic genius of a Dickens, but though Vonnegut is a shrewd observer of character, his dramatic strategy would militate against ventriloquism, even if he had the knack.

Vonnegut writes in a single voice, the one his readers know to be the voice of Kurt Vonnegut. In *Galapagos* he assumes the alias of Leon Trotsky Trout, the son of Kilgore Trout, the sf writer Vonnegut fears he might have been but for the grace of God and the reading public, but the tropes and elisions of this Leon Trout all bear the Vonnegut trademark: the moving-right-along diffidence of paragraphs that commence "Yes, and" and end "and so on and so on"; the same claims to ease and evanescence of composition (Leon writes, "I have written these words in air—with the tip of the index finger of my left hand, which is also air") so that we seem to hear the story rather than to read it as prose on a page; the same beery glee in appropriating clichés that any self-respecting novelist would shrink from ("We were certainly no spring chickens," Vonnegut wrote in his own voice in the prologue to *Slapstick*, and Leon uses the same low locution in *Galapagos*, where he writes, of Captain von Kleist: "He did not know shit from Shinola about navigation").

To cavil at these monogrammed tics, as critics regularly do, is to fall into the trap of supposing that Vonnegut is being a lazy writer or that he is pretending to be a klutz in order to ingratiate himself to a world of klutzes. Neither is the case. The Vonnegut audience is in large part a generation younger than himself (he is now sixty-three) and college-edu-

cated. His catchphrases are not those his readers would use but belong to their parents' generation, and are meant to annoy them in just the way they annoy the critics and also to establish an imaginary generation gap between the writer and his readers, the better to get on with the avuncular purpose of his comedy, which is moral instruction.

Indeed, the interest of the Vonnegut voice is not in what it reveals of the author but in the audience that it hypothesizes, an audience that must have the most basic facts of Life explained in the simplest terms, an audience that will crack up at the sound of a fart, an audience that has the best of intentions even as it paves the road to hell, an audience of children who know they need to be scolded. Vonnegut is unusual among novelists who dramatize the conflict (ever recurring in his work) between fathers and sons in that his sympathies always lie on the sadder-but-wiser side of the generation gap. In an era that has institutionalized adolescent rebellion, here is a father for foundlings of all ages. Small wonder he is so popular.