HUMANIST HUMANISM: AZİZ NESİN'S *YAŞAR NE YAŞAR NE YAŞAMAZ* AND KURT VONNEGUT'S *SLAUGHTERHOUSE FIVE*

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I, Hardy Micajah Griffin, certify that

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ABSTRACT

Humanist Humanism: Aziz Nesin's *Yaşar Ne Yaşar Ne Yaşamaz* and Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five*

This project begins by demonstrating how Aziz Nesin and Kurt Vonnegut's novels are part of a trajectory of humanist works challenging institutionalized bodies of hegemonic discourse. The challenge taken up in writing such works is how to respond without adopting an equally dogmatic stance in response. Vonnegut and Nesin simultaneously absent themselves in the world and exist in and through the work, dissipating in the face of the institutions of hegemony. This existence in the work carries with it a great and exigent failure, for while nothing remains for the dogma to act on, this absence in the world and presence in the work leads to an imbalance between the sacrifice made and the results. These two writers respond to the rise of this challenge and the ensuing failure with their own particular brand of humor—one which is a weapon of critique, a call to arms, an admission of failure, and a transcendent laughter all in one.

ÖZET

Hümanist Mizahı: Aziz Nesin'in *Yaşar Ne Yaşar Ne Yaşamaz* ve Kurt Vonnegut'un *Slaughterhouse Five*

Bu proje Aziz Nesin'in ve Kurt Vonnegut'un romanlarının hegomonik söylem kurumlarına karşı oldukları hümanist çalışmalarından bir parça göstererek başlıyor. Bu söyleme karşı çıkmanın zorluğu bu tarz çalışmaları cevaplarken aynı dogmatik duruşu kullanmamaktır. Vonnegut ve Nesin çalışmada yaşarken dünyadan kendilerini alarak hegemonik kurumların önünden kendilerini yok ediyorlar. Yalnız böyle çalışmada var olmaya bağlı kaçınılmaz bir başarısızlık oluşuyor. Çünkü dogmanın etkileyecek bir şeyi yoksa bile aynı zamanda bu çalışmada yaşamak ve dünyada yaşamamak özveride bulunmak ve sonuç arasında dengesizlik gösteriyor. Bu iki yazar bu hegemonik kurumlarına karşı çıkmak ve ardından gelen başarısızlıklara onlara özgü bir mizahla cevap veriyorlar. Bu hümanist mizah bir ara eleştiri silahı, mücadeleye çağrıma, başarsızlığın kabulu, ve deneyüstü gülüşüdür.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 A hypothetical meeting

In *Fates Worse Than Death: An autobiographical collage*, Kurt Vonnegut describes a walk he had with "…the great Turkish novelist Yaşar Kemal (who resembles a genuinely happy Ernest Hemingway, although he has been jailed again and again for crimes of conscience)" (p. 124). The walk is complicated by the lack of a common language between them; yet, as Vonnegut describes it, they do find a medium through which to communicate:

> I showed him Edna St. Vincent Millay's quaint house. I showed him Washington Square and said, "Henry James! Henry James!" (Just as I had exclaimed to him earlier, "Edna St. Vincent Millay! Edna St. Vincent Millay!" Proper names need no translator, although it is unlikely that Yaşar Kemal had heard of either author.) (p. 125)

This appears to be the only instance wherein Vonnegut describes meeting and 'speaking' with a Turkish author.

On the other hand, Aziz Nesin was Yaşar Kemal's contemporary and so it was only natural for them to interact on numerous occasions, one of which Ataol Behramoğlu describes in his biographical work, *Aziz Nesin'li Anılar* (*Memories with Aziz Nesin*) (2008). Nesin, Kemal, Burhan Arpad, and Behramoğlu were the Turkish delegates invited to the first World Writer's Convention for Peace in 1977 in Sofia, Bulgaria. Behramoğlu describes how a Greek delegate brought allegations against Turkey that the Turkish writers felt were "unfounded and rude" (p. 37) ("Yunanistanlı bir delege Türkiye'ye karşı haksız ve kaba suçlamalarda bulundu"), and so they left the convention hall. At the time, Aziz Nesin was writing in his room

upstairs, and the other three knocked on his door and found him in a tank top and shorts, clearly shocked by their sudden appearance.

> Yaşar Kemal, choking a bit in his haste, angrily described the incident in his brass voice. While he was speaking, administrators from the Bulgarian Writers' League had caught up to us and started apologizing, worried, and waiting for an argument. Aziz Nesin said some things to appease Yaşar Kemal. They argued for some time. Aziz Nesin's repose affected me. Trying to lighten the mood, this small and calm man arguing face to face with the tall, excited [Yaşar] truly brought to mind the heroes in *Of Mice and Men*. "Right now you look just like George and Lenny" I tossed out there… (p. 37-38)
>
> Yaşar Kemal öfkeden, biraz da hızlı hareketten tıkanarak, davudi sesiyle olup biteni anlattı. Bu arada Bulgaristan Yazarlar Birliği yöneticileri de peşimizden yetiştiler, özür dilerek, üzüntü ve kaygıyla bekleşiyorlardı. Aziz Nesin Yaşar Kemal'i yatıştırmak için bir şeyler söyledi. Bir süre tartıştılar. Aziz Nesin'in sükûneti beni etkilemişti. Havayı yumuşatmak için, biraz da minik ve sakin adamla kocaman ve heyecanlı adamın karşı karşıya durup tartışmaları bana gerçekten *Fareler ve İnsanları*'ın kahramanlarını çağıştırdığından, "Şu an tıpkı Leni'yle George'a benziyorsunuz" deyiverdim...

I am not trying to say that Yaşar Kemal, the recently deceased literary powerhouse, was in any way similar to the mentally-challenged character of Lenny in Steinbeck's novel (it is also clear Behramoğlu is not seriously making that statement). In fact, I am bringing this moment up here for exactly the opposite reason. Upon Kemal's passing on February 28, 2015, the Turkish and international media exploded with tributes and accolades, with a week's worth of laudatory reviews of his work, along with much speculation as to why this writer never received the Nobel Prize.[1] Behramoğlu ends the anecdote by describing Nesin and Kemal together in that hotel room at the World Writer's Convention for Peace: "I [can still] bring to life before my eyes with all the clarity of a photograph these two giants of our literature standing face to face on the day of June 9, 1977, at the 'Park Hotel Moscow' in

[1] See, for instance, Ertuğrul Özkök's piece in the English-language Hürriyet Daily News (accessed March 5, 2015): http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/the-turks-and-kurds-who-objected-to-yasar-kemals-nobel-prize-nomination.aspx?pageID=449&nID=79192&NewsCatID=401

Sofia" (38) ("9 Haziran 1977 günü, Sofya'da 'Park Otel Maskva'da... iki dev yazarımızın karşı karşıya durup bir an tartışmalarının fotoğrafı bütün canlılığıyla gözlerimin önünde"). This is precisely why I stated above that Kemal and Nesin are contemporaries—not only because they were writing at the same time and both had similar political ideologies, but because in Behramoğlu and others' opinions, they were contemporaries in literature first and foremost.

These two vignettes—perhaps most poignantly because of his recent passing—present Yaşar Kemal in a privileged light, and there can be no doubt that he deserves such a privileged place on the stage of world literature. But where are the editorials questioning why Nesin or Vonnegut did not get the Nobel Prize?[2] Vonnegut himself brings up the issue in the last book published in his lifetime, *A Man Without a Country* (2005), where he quips that the Swedes did not give him a Nobel because he had previously owned a Saab dealership that went bankrupt and they had yet to forgive him (p. 82). In a gesture reminiscent of Rabelais' bodily humor, Vonnegut challenges the rarified air of the all-Swedish Nobel Academy: "Old Norwegian proverb: 'Swedes have short dicks but long memories'" (p. 82).[3] Vonnegut's use of such striking humor here brings up the question of why *no* humorists have ever won the Nobel Prize, and why there were no editorials questioning that fact on the passing of the literary giants, Aziz Nesin and Kurt Vonnegut.

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[2] In addition to Vonnegut's own discussion of why he did not get a Nobel prize discussed above, after an exhaustive search, I was able to locate a small article in *Milliyet* newspaper published on October 7, 1970, wherein Turkish writer and editor, Tarık Dursun K. argued that Nesin should be awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. Complicating this endorsement, however, is the fact that Dursun K. was the head of *Milliyet Publishing* (*Yayınları*) at the time, which published some of Nesin's most-famous books.

[3] Vonnegut's assumption in this quote that all Swedes are male is uncharacteristic, although it does bring to light the very male nature of the comparative work at hand, which, to be frank, makes me a bit uneasy. Therefore a sincere effort has been made to include the work of female theorists to counterbalance this to some extent.

At the core of this dissertation is the argument that humor must be taken seriously, that comedy may in fact have just as much to offer as tragedy or other forms—especially in cases like Vonnegut's and Nesin's, where their humor challenges both the status quo and the individual, demanding that each be better (in a manner, ironically, that has a distinct flavor of the tragic to it).

At the same time, the juxtaposition of Vonnegut and Kemal's interaction with that of Nesin and Kemal invites us to imagine what would have happened if Kurt Vonnegut and Aziz Nesin had managed to meet during their lifetimes. On the one hand, physically they also would have looked very similar to George and Lenny, as Vonnegut was very close in height to Kemal. At the same time, I can't imagine these two infamous humorists not laughing and cracking jokes with one another—almost the very antithesis of the two vignettes presented above.

This dissertation is just such a meeting of these two writers, although it is a meeting which takes place through an examination of their writing—in particular the works which occupied each of them for the greatest amount of time: *Slaughterhouse Five* (1969) in Vonnegut's case, and *Yaşar Ne Yaşar Ne Yaşamaz* (*Yaşar is Neither Living Nor Not Living*) (1977) for Nesin.[4] I have chosen these two novels not only because they were watershed projects for each writer, but more importantly in this context for the manner in which they embody the complex humanism of both writers in greater depth than their other works.

At first blush, it may seem odd to compare these two novels because the plots and themes are quite different, but the humanism contained in each and the way in

[4] Vonnegut speaks at length in the Introduction to *Slaughterhouse Five* about how it took him 24 years to complete the book (see chapter 1), while Nesin also states in the Introduction to *Yaşar Ne Yaşar Ne Yaşamaz* that it was the piece that never seemed to end for him as he first wrote it as a radio play, then a stage play, later as a screenplay, and finally as a novel.

which this humanism reflects particular life experiences of each author are best reflected in these two novels. As Vonnegut explains in the Introduction to *Slaughterhouse Five*, this novel arises from the writer's own experience of the Dresden firebombing by the Allies in World War II. The novel's plot is extraordinarily complex both because the main character travels through time and because multiple themes are explored, from rampant consumerism in the U.S. to the arbitrary nature of time. It is safe to say, however, that at the core of this work is Vonnegut's strong anti-war stance, and many critics have pointed out how the novel became a bestseller almost immediately not only for its literary attributes but also because it was released during the height of the anti-war protests during the US conflict in Vietnam.[5]

Yaşar Ne Yaşar Ne Yaşamaz also plays with time, although in a different way. It has two plot lines that alternate chapters at the beginning of the work. The odd-numbered chapters focus on the experience of prison of the main character, Yaşar. At the same time, from the first evening of his incarceration, Yaşar is selected as the storyteller in his cell block, and so the even chapters consist of his stories which begin in his childhood and continue through his formative years up to the moment he gets incarcerated. After the first few chapters, Yaşar's life in prison usually begins and ends each chapter, framing the pre-prison stories like bookends. Again, while the novel explores a wide variety of themes, from the labyrinthine nature of Turkish bureaucracy to the ways in which this bureaucracy ends up promoting a parallel system of illegal bartering and the trading of favors, at the core of Nesin's novel is Yaşar's struggle to earn recognition of his existence—a struggle

[5] See, for example, William Rodney Allen's Introduction to *Conversations with Kurt Vonnegut* (1999)—I will return to this point in Chapter 3.

that begins around 7 years old when, through a bureaucratic error, Yaşar is unable to get an official identity card. While this struggle for recognition begins in childhood when he is not able to be registered in school, Yaşar only begins to solve this problem once he is elected the storyteller of his cell block. This is a reflection of Nesin's own experience of how the challenge of his becoming a writer both seemed to be the end of all he had previously worked for as a career military man and yet was also the beginning of all he would become as a writer.

Therefore, while the experiences of the writers and protagonists are not exactly the same, they nonetheless share certain fundamental aspects. This begins with an act challenging the dogma of where their early lives appear to be going—an act that directly led to them becoming writers. This change, while initially exhilarating and successful, begins a recurring cycle of success followed by deep, personal failure. These failures became increasingly harder for Vonnegut and Nesin to bear with the continued iterations of the cycle of taking up the challenge of writing and then moving into concordant and exigent failure. Even as neither *Slaughterhouse Five* nor *Yaşar Ne Yaşar Ne Yaşamaz* were written in the author's final years, the protagonists of each, Billy Pilgrim and Yaşar Yaşamaz, experience failure in ways that mirror the recurring, deep, and personal experience of failure that each of these two writers went through. At the same time, each writer's humor acts as both the humanizing element of their challenge to overwhelmingly dogmatic forces and their humanist approach in re-experiencing and reliving the increasing horror of the exigent recurrence of the failure that arises from writing. In the end, while neither Nesin nor Vonnegut's humor acts as a panegyric or a redemptive project, it nonetheless becomes their greatest and most enduring humanist statement.

In broad strokes, the chapters of this dissertation follow this challenge, recurrent failure, and what I will come to call these writers' humanist humor. The first chapter looks at Vonnegut's and Nesin's early challenge of dogma in their lives and their writing, along with the re-presentation of this challenge (with their tell-tale humor) in *Yaşar Ne Yaşar Ne Yaşamaz* and *Slaughterhouse Five*. The second chapter explores the experience of failure arising from this challenge for the characters Yaşar and Billy Pilgrim as well as for Aziz Nesin and Kurt Vonnegut. And finally, even as the function of humanist humor is highlighted and discussed throughout, the last chapter is an in-depth exploration of how this humor acts to both highlight these humanist writers' sense of failure and to ameliorate it.

Throughout the dissertation, the statements of these writers in interviews, essays, and in encounters recalled by others are examined in detail, but these two novels, *Yaşar Ne Yaşar Ne Yaşamaz* and *Slaughterhouse Five*, are the only fictional works cited with one exception. "Tanrısal Adalet" ("Divine Justice") by Aziz Nesin is cited and analyzed not as fiction as such but for the description of heaven presented in it and for the postscript where a first-person, 'Nesin' narrator directly addresses the reader.

1.2 The general picture on a comparison of Nesin and Vonnegut

None of my research has uncovered any prior comparison between the work of Aziz Nesin and Kurt Vonnegut, despite the many commonalities in their writing and their lives. This may have to do with the dearth of translations of Nesin's works into

English combined with small print runs for those that have been translated.[6] While a majority of Vonnegut's work has been translated and published in Turkish, with *Slaughterhouse Five* appearing in 1975 (only six years after the original English publication), this type of comparative literary study between Turkish and non-Turkish authors has up until recently been rare in Turkey—a fact evidenced by, among other indicators, the opening of PhD programs in Comparative Literature in Turkey only in 2010.[7]

There are other possible reasons for a lack of comparative studies, including Nesin's predilection for short stories versus Vonnegut's focus on the novel (although both writers were prolific in a wide variety of genres, from poetry to plays to screenwriting, and even, in Vonnegut's case, a libretto, and in Nesin's case, play scripts written for radio, which was the original format *Yaşar Ne Yaşar Ne Yaşamaz* took). Also, science fiction plays a role in much of Vonnegut's work while science fiction proper only features in one Nesin story, although he did write a handful of fantasy stories.[8] In the end, however, perhaps the most compelling possible reason such a comparative study has not been undertaken before is the simple lack of comparative work done on humor writers worldwide.

The argument that I will make is that these two writers' work shares any number of significant points which far outweigh the few differences mentioned above. These commonalities are not merely limited to their writing but extend to

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[6] The one exception is Milet Publishing's facing-page translation of *Sosyalizm Geliyor Savulun!* (*Out of the Way! Socialism's Coming!*) (2001). I am also trying to make a small dent in this problem by translating *Yaşar Ne Yaşar Ne Yaşamaz* currently.

[7] See http://karsilastirmaliedebiyat.blogspot.com.tr/2010/05/universitelerde-karslastrmal-edebiyat.html

[8] "Canlısız Bir Dünyada Aranan Yitirilmiş Bir Mutluluk" ("The Search for a Lost Happiness on an Uninhabited World") is the only properly science fiction story, while "Yolunu Şaşiran Kurt" ("The Wolf Who Lost His Way"), wherein a wolf is the narrator, is a good example of one of Nesin's fantasy stories. Both are in the collection *Aşkım Dinimdir* (*Love Is My Religion*).

each as contemporaries, which no doubt has some bearing on multiple interesting parallels such as each being involved in the armed services in their youth but then becoming outspoken critics of the army later (Vonnegut through his anti-Vietnam stance and Nesin through his leadership in the publication of the "Aydınlar Dilekçesi" ("Petition of the Intellectuals") following the military coup of 1980).

Much more than specific events or interesting parallels, however, I argue in this work that their humanism as embodied in this challenge-failure experience and the use of their particular styles of humor, intimately connects these two writers who lived almost across the world from one another. The next section traces this humanist experience of challenge and failure through a number of historic humanist figures, while the section after that takes a historical look at humor theory and certain instances of humanist humor. At the end of this introduction, wrapping up the literary review, is a brief archeology of the sources used in the three chapters of this dissertation.

1.3 A general look at the humanism herein

While neither Nesin nor Vonnegut ever gave an in-depth definition of their humanism as such,[9] this dissertation aims to generally define their humanism in terms of the challenge-failure dynamic and through their humor. The first part of this—Vonnegut and Nesin's challenge of dogma—is arguably, in general terms, the underlying principle of philosophy, particularly (although not exclusively) in the Western tradition. Take, for instance, many of the Platonic dialogues, which present

[9] In various places, Vonnegut stated the highly abbreviated definition he gives in *A Man Without a Country* (2005): "We humanists try to behave as decently, as fairly, and as honorably as we can without any expectation of rewards or punishments in an afterlife" (p. 59).

the dialectic challenges presented by Socrates against the overwhelmingly dogmatic stances of others.[10] In fact, the refusal on the part of Socrates to temper the challenge that his questions pose might well be described as what causes his own death. In *The Apologia* Socrates neither kowtows to his accusers nor, perhaps more importantly, curbs his rhetorical challenge of the false accusations against him, and it seems to be this refusal that leads a majority of the jury to demand the death penalty. This refusal to back down from his challenging questions continues in *The Phaedo* as well, when Socrates describes how he will continue his dialectic questioning in whatever form the next world takes.[11]

This quest, constructed of questioning in the face of overly dogmatic stances, repeats itself throughout history in myriad ways. One such instance, some 800 years after Socrates, is evident in Augustine's *Confessions*, wherein he defends the right of various interpretations of *Genesis*. [12] Augustine speaks against those who would 'harass' him with their own particular interpretations of what Moses meant when he wrote 'In the beginning, God made heaven and earth,' and says that he is equally not able to affirm his own interpretation over all others. Even though this is clearly different in style and substance from Socrates' arguments in *The Phaedo*, Augustine's *Confessions* also argues for a dialectical approach without the dogmatic

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[10] Such as *The Crito*, *The Euthyphro*, *The Laches*, *The Meno*, and others, including possibly even *The Lysis* where Socrates seems to discard all of his own ideas.

[11] In *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche problematizes Socrates' logical challenge to dogma, insinuating it arose from his ugliness and his plebian birth (4). Moreover, "Wherever authority still forms part of good bearing, where one does not give reasons but commands, the logician is a kind of buffoon: one laughs at him, one does not take him seriously" (5)—interestingly enough in the current context, Nietzsche almost characterizes Socrates as the court jester who goes too far with his critique so that the humorous critique becomes too real: "Socrates was the buffoon who got himself taken seriously: what really happened there?" (5) Nonetheless, Nietzsche's comments are half laudatory, half contemptuous, and many scholars have wrestled with which was the more accurate.

[12] In Book XVII beginning at 25.1. It should be noted that, while Augustine does acknowledge the right of others to interpret what Moses says, the fact that his interpretation is the only one really entered into demonstrates that he is not overly interested in presenting others' views on the subject.

shutting-down of all different viewpoints on the subject—and this, in a limited way, parallels Vonnegut and Nesin's humanist experience, in which they entertain and even accept the validity of opposing points of view (as long as they are not themselves dogmatic) through their written dialectic style.[13]

This humanist stance of dialectic as a challenge to the blanket imposition of dogma, as previously stated, can be said to inform much of Western philosophy; yet, it is not solely the purview of the West, as a number of recent studies have shown. George Makdisi, in his article "Scholasticism and Humanism in Classical Islam and the Christian West," draws a parallel between humanist thinking in the West and similar thought processes in medieval Islam, such as how "…the Islamic system of determining orthodoxy was, in its essentials, the medieval Western university system of determining 'orthodoxy,' so to speak, in scholarship, which has come down to our day" (p. 177).[14] In the Islamic system, "This process of scholarly research was called *itijihad*, literally, the exertion of one's efforts to the utmost limit" (p. 177). Edward Said discusses this very same term in his *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, in which he explains this practice in full:

> Ideally, what keeps the humanist honest is this sense of a common enterprise shared with others… I've always found an excellent paradigm for this in the Islamic tradition, so little known amongst Eurocentric scholars all too busy extolling some supposedly exclusive humanist Western ideal. Since in Islam the Koran is the Word of God, it is therefore impossible ever fully to grasp, though it must repeatedly be read. (p. 68)

This, Said says, is at the heart of *itijihad*, which he defines similarly to Makdisi as "a component of personal commitment and extraordinary effort" expended in order

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[13] I say 'limited' here because Augustine is not interested in non-Biblical interpretations, and his tone indicates that even as he grudgingly cannot do away with others' interpretations, he clearly thinks his is the most accurate.

[14] This argument is expanded and deepened in H. Dabashi's (2012) *The World of Persian Literary Humanism*.

"…to try to approach the ground of the text, its principle or *usul*…" (p. 68).[15] Said contrasts this with

> The dogmatic view of Islamic readings [which] argues that Ibn-Taymiyya (1263-1328 C.E.) was right and that only *as-salaf al-salih* (pious forerunners) should be followed, thus closing the door, as it were, on individual interpretation. (p. 69)

In opposition to this dogmatic stance, Said describes *itijihad* in terms very similar to the 'humanist experience' of thought, if you will, that reveals itself in the Platonic dialogues and in the *Confessions*.

Additionally, however, Said's discussion of *itijihad* includes an explicit acknowledgement of something that is nonetheless implicit in both Socrates' questioning and Augustine's acceptance of multiple interpretations. As Said states, the truth (in this case "the Word of God") is "impossible ever fully to grasp" although the attempt must repeatedly be made. Thus, from the taking up of the humanist challenge of dialectic questioning and individual interpretation arises an exigent failure—the inability to complete the textual project. This was stated in an almost heroic fashion by Socrates in his argument in *The Phaedo* that he would continue questioning even after death, and it is implied in Augustine's *Confessions* through his inability to affirm one interpretation over all others; nonetheless, here in Said's description of *itijihad*, this 'impossibility' of ever fully grasping the *usul* contains a hint of a sense of despair surrounding the failure incumbent in the project of philosophical questioning and interpretation. This sense of despair becomes of particular import in the context of Nesin and Vonnegut's writing as it is almost

[15] It seems clear from Said's discussion that *itijihad* is not presented here as the definitive 'origin' of humanism but rather as a challenge to the idea that humanist questioning/dialectic is solely located in the history of Western philosophical thought.

palpable in the two novels under consideration here and in their essays and commentaries following their taking on the dogmatic stances of their times.

Only a few decades after Ibn-Taymiyya's suppression of *itijihad* with his doctrine of *as-salaf al-salih*, Petrarch, who has been described by a number of Renaissance scholars as the 'father of humanism,' began writing. In the *Secretum* and *Il Canzoniere*, Petrarch struggles repeatedly with a similar problem to the one Said describes in *itijihad*, for even as Petrarch is filled with a love for the divine (one that clearly recalls Augustine's *Confessions*), nonetheless his unrequited love for Laura is all-too-human. This might seem a simple dichotomy save for the fact that Petrarch repeatedly moves between the two, in a manner that recalls Said's description of how the impossibility of reaching the Word of God demands repeated readings. Elliot M. Simon describes Petrarch's "…inescapable contradictions of his love for both the divine and the human" (p. 228) in terms of the myth of Sisyphus:

> Petrarch created his Laura as a *figura* of idealized virtue that reflects his desire to overcome the moral imperfections of *cupiditas* inherent in his life and to aspire to a higher truth-in-beauty that would overcome the aesthetic imperfections in his creative imagination… [Moreover,] Petrarch made his Laura into a "tentative form" of an earthly agent projected upon a divine reality that could be reenacted in his poetry. The Sisyphean cycles of Petrarch's love for Laura define the archetypal process whereby the divine order and the earthly event interact upon each other. (p. 228)

What is remarkable about the repetitive nature of the humanist failure here is the way in which Petrarch does *not* cast Laura as the problem but rather as the 'earthly agent projected upon a divine reality.' Therefore, as Simon points out, "…Laura embodies love, morality, and reason, and teaches the poet-lover how to overcome *cupiditas*" (p. 229). Thus, Laura as a *figura* becomes the summit of the Sisyphean mountain that Petrarch is striving to ascend—a situation that Simon brings out in his analysis of Petrarch's description of his climb of Mount Ventoux:

> For Petrarch, the quest for the summit… was a life-long dedication to his love for Laura, his poetry, and his desire for fame and salvation… but [at the top,] he also experienced a profound recognition of the foulness of the world below and the carnal corruption of his soul. (p. 229-230)

In other words, Petrarch's (and the humanist's) exigent failure is not embodied in a specific *other*, but is rather generalized across the world and simultaneously concentrated and taken on as an immensely *personal* failure. Petrarch condemns the world around him even as he owns it as a reflection of the carnal corruption of his soul. This, too, is particularly important in Nesin and Vonnegut's cases, for each of them encounters almost debilitating failure in their conflict with their respective societies and governments—all the more debilitating because they make this failure their own rather than simply vilifying an 'other' and thereby redeeming themselves.

Nowhere is the complex movement from challenge in the face of dogma to a simultaneously personal and universal failure clearer than in Vonnegut and Nesin's use of humor. Both writers' challenge takes the form of their own particular brands of humorous writing, in particular through their satirizing of the military, the government, and fellow citizens and themselves. However, there is something clearly different between Vonnegut and Nesin's humor on the one hand, and such famous satirists as Jonathan Swift on the other. Take "A Modest Proposal" for instance[16]: Beginning with a pitiful description of women begging in the streets with "…three, four, or six children, all in rags…" straggling along behind her, Swift then describes how these "helpless infants who, as they grow up, either turn thieves for want of work, or leave their dear native country, to fight for the Pretender in Spain, or sell themselves to the Barbadoes", and his 'modest' proposal is, of course, to eat these

[16] I have used the Project Gutenberg text here, available at http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1080/1080-h/1080-h.htm

infants at around one year old, for, as he says, "I have been assured by a very knowing American of my acquaintance in London, that a young healthy child well nursed, is, at a year old, a most delicious, nourishing, and wholesome food…" Thus, Swift's razor-sharp wit ends up cutting two ways: into the profligate birth rate of the lowest classes even as it also deftly attacks the callousness with which the higher classes treat the destitute, and such horrors as 'voluntary' abortion, child-slavery, and mothers murdering their bastard children, all of which Swift says are "too frequent among us".

Nesin and Vonnegut's humor will be analyzed in-depth in the following chapters, but it is immediately apparent that there is a different quality present in their humor from Swift's satire, in that neither Vonnegut nor Nesin's satire takes a distant, critical standpoint as Swift does in "A Modest Proposal." Chapter 3 goes into more depth on the difference between Swiftian satire and Vonnegutian/Nesinian satire; briefly, in this piece Swift occupies a distanced perspective as both a Church of Ireland (Protestant) minister and a pro-Irish rights supporter. That is, on the one hand, he has little or no common ground with the Catholic lower classes whose birth rates are high and who make up the vast majority of beggars, and on the other he has taken a pro-Irish stance in the face of the English loyalists who make up almost all of the higher classes.

Contrast this with Nesin's description of Hajji Hayri the engineer in his story, "Hırant Hüdaverdi Olmuştu!" ("Hrant Became Hüdaverdi!"[17]), in the collection *Ah Biz Eşekler* (*Oh We Asses*) (1960).[18] The first-person narration and non-satiric tone

[17] In Turkish, 'Hrant' is immediately identifiable as an Armenian—and therefore Christian—name, while Hüdaverdi is an old-fashioned Muslim Turkish name—literally, 'God-given'.
[18] Even the "Biz" ("We") in the title here indicates a sharing of responsibility for the asinine state of affairs.

make it seem likely that Nesin is likely describing an actual occurrence.[19] The story begins:

> We were guests at the Hayri's house. Other guests also came—there were 17 men and women in the living room.
> …Before I describe what happened, let me give you a little information about Hayri. He was an engineer and a bit past sixty, but he looked younger. He was a real, religious Muslim. At that time, God himself couldn't have found a more devout Muslim… Hayri the hajji knew foreign languages and had lived for four or five years in Europe…
> Hajji Hayri the engineer left well enough alone [however] when it came to the religious beliefs of his wife and children. (p. 70)
>
> Hayri'lerin evine misafir gitmiştik. Başka misafirler de gelmiş. Salonda kadınlı, erkekli onyedi kişiydik.
> …Olayı anlatmadan önce, Hayri için biraz bilgi vereyim. Altmışını biraz geçmiş, ama genç görünen bir mühendistir. Tam, koyu bir Müslümandir. Bu zamanda böyle dini bütün adam mumla aranılsa bulunmaz… Hacı Hayri yabancı dil bilir, dörtbeş yılını Avrupa'da geçirmiştir…
> Mühendis Hacı Hayri karısını ve çocuklarını vicdanı inançlarında serbest bırakmıştır.

Here and throughout the story, Nesin paints a picture of Hayri as a highly intelligent and simultaneously very devout man—in contrast to a number of other guests at the party who turn out to be either religious pretenders or secular simpletons. This comes to the fore once the conversation turns to the news story of a foreigner who has converted to Islam in order to marry a Turkish woman. Nesin points out how such social conversation is rarely well thought out:

> A very well-dressed woman who had never prayed in her life—who would have no idea how to pray—spoke: "This is no good… it's shameful. To marry a girl they become Muslims. Is that even possible? ... I think it's disingenuous."
> However much the woman who said this hadn't even prayed once in her life, so, too, another woman who had never been circumcised spoke:
> "Yes, but, the man's going to be circumcised. Is it so easy to become a Muslim? At this late age, they're going to separate the man's flesh from his flesh…" (p. 71, first ellipsis in original)

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[19] I have included much more from Nesin's story not to privilege it over Swift's but rather because the chances that the reader will be familiar with Swift's "Proposal" are high but much lower for this story of Nesin's. Nesin is often a sharp critic of religion (see the discussion of "Tanrısal Adalet" ("Divine Justice") below), but as the story of Hayri demonstrates, he never belittles individual believers, often saying belief was an individual's choice.

> Hayatında bir kere bile namaz kılmamış, nasıl namaz kılındığını da bilmeyen çok şık bir kadın:
> – Samimiyetsizlik bu... dedi, ayıp. Kızla evlenmek için Müslüman oluyorlar. Olur mu yani? ...Bence büyük samimiyetsizlik.
> Bunları söyliyen hanım nasıl hayatında bir kere bile namaz kılmamış bir Müslümansa, hayatında hiç sünnet olmamış olan bir başka bir hanım,
> – İyi ama kardeş, dedi, adam bir de sünnet olacak. Müslüman olmak kolay mı? Bu yaştan sonra adamın etinden et kesecekler...

There is a clear distinction made here between these two characters and Hayri. Despite the fact that he has spawned this debate in the story—which gets more and more heated—he doesn't re-enter until someone remarks that Hayri isn't speaking, at which point he asks if everyone is a Muslim. And they all say yes.

Then Hayri asks his guests why. One answers that it's because Islam is the best religion, to which Hayri says, "That's true, Islam is the best religion… But are you a Muslim because you've analyzed all religions and come to the conclusion that it's the best?" (p. 72) ("Çok doğru, dedi, İslamlık en iyi dindir... Ama siz bütün dinleri inicelediniz de, en iyisi olduğu için beğenip Müslüman oldunuz?") Again, Hayri doesn't let answers go if they haven't been given proper consideration first. Another guest says she's a Muslim because her mother and father were Muslims, and Hayri says "Was it up to you to be born to Muslim parents? Did you put in a written request before you were born to come into this world with a Muslim mother and father?" (73) ("Müslüman anabadan doğup doğmamak sizin elinizde miydi? Doğmadan önce Müslüman anababdan dünyaya gelmek için dilekçe mi vermiştiniz?") The guest says nothing in return, which takes Hayri's demand that people think deeply about their religion one step further—Hayri's insistence highlights how the hardest questions, such as 'are you truly a Muslim if you are simply carrying on your parents' faith?' may well have no proper answer.

Nesin, like Vonnegut, was quite clear in his stated atheism, but neither of these writers turned their backs on religion, choosing instead to investigate it and making statements in support of true believers who are not dogmatic in the expression of their faith.[20] In a surprise for the dinner guests and the reader of the story, towards the end, Hayri announces that his grandfather was a Christian who became a Muslim (p. 73). Yet Hayri is not a *dönme*—that is, a Muslim who is so in name only but is really a different believer. In the last line of the story, Nesin reminds us of Hayri's very real piety: "If you'll please excuse me, I have to go and perform the last prayer of the day, after which I'll be right back" (p. 76). Nesin could easily have skewered Hayri here as he earlier did those who spoke without thinking first, but his restraint shows a heartfelt respect, and an unwillingness to satirize those who are taking up the challenge of asking unanswerable questions. The other fact that Nesin has subtly pointed out is how, even as everyone present at Hayri's house in the story seems ready to get in on the conversation about what it means to be a Muslim, Hayri is apparently the only one of the group going to pray.

The way in which Nesin's and Vonnegut's satire is less distanced than Swift's, and thereby empathetic to some degree,[21] leads to interesting contradictions in the description of Nesin's and Vonnegut's works, such as the following description of Nesin's humor by Yeşim Gökçe on the Turkish Cultural Foundation's website:

> Aziz Nesin is the flagstone [*sic*] of humorous Turkish literature. Even today, many people consider his work as a guiding light. Every one of his books and stories displays the profound love that he feels towards humankind, and relies on black humor to make a commentary on the

[20] In an interview conducted by Emin Çolan in *Hürriyet*, after Nesin states he is non-religious, he says, "I not only respect Muslims but all religious people. If they truly believe, they are all worthy of respect" (*İnsanlar Konuşa Konuşa*, p. 167).

[21] This aspect of empathy recalls Aristotle's discussion in the second section of the *Poetics* on how the plot must excite pity and fear for "a person like ourselves".

> situation of the country. Whether they are acquainted with literature or not, any speaker of Turkish is typically familiar with at least one of his stories.[22]

This juxtaposition of 'black humor' and a love of humankind may seem like the anonymous writer of this paean has made a mistake in their enthusiasm—except that in a roundtable discussion in *The Paris Review* on how Kurt Vonnegut's work affected four contemporary writers, Ben Greenman (one of the four writers) says something quite similar about the effect of Vonnegut's writing on his own:

> As a young reader, which is when I had my strongest connection to Vonnegut… in the fashion of first love… In my own work, I have moved… between "funny" writing and "serious" writing—I put those words in quotes in Vonnegut's honor, to show how absurd the division can be… Whenever I feel a piece of my own writing becoming too complacent as an entertainment, whenever it feels like a sugared pill going down too easy, I remind myself to disrupt the operation of the text a little to recall readers to themselves. That remains, for me, the best thing about reading Vonnegut. You know you're having a good time, but you also know you're not.[23]

In both this quotation and the previous one concerning Nesin, a kind of humor becomes clear that is simultaneously highly critical and yet oddly embracing—a 'humanist humor' that is neither 'a sugared pill' nor distant in its attack.

There are no doubt a multitude of predecessors to this humor, but the writer who perhaps best embodies both the challenge/failure dynamic and this humanist humor is the life and work of Voltaire, and *Candide* in particular. Voltaire takes up the challenge against dogma in some of the very first verses he wrote, in which he accused the King of France, Louis XV, of incest with his daughter, for which

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[22] http://www.turkishculture.org/pages.php?SearchID=650. Retrieved 28.04.2013. In a sign of the complicated relationship between the Turkish public and Nesin, this description was taken down some time in 2014, until I wrote to the Turkish Cultural Foundation and pointed out that it had suddenly 'disappeared,' at which point it magically reappeared in March, 2015.

[23] http://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2013/04/11/laughing-in-the-face-of-death-a-vonnegut-roundtable/

Voltaire was thrown in the Bastille for eleven months.[24] As Philippe Erlanger relates in *Le Régent*, shortly after his release, Voltaire's first play, *Œdipe* (Oedipus—which he wrote while in the Bastille), was performed at the Comédie-Française, and the King's daughter came to the performance and the audience could see she was pregnant. Voltaire was rumored to have quipped that the audience might not only see Oedipus and Jocaste but Eteocles as well (p. 241). Not surprisingly, whether for this comment or for other slights against royalty, Voltaire ended up in the Bastille again and then he himself proposed his own exile to England (Joseph Mazzini Wheeler, *Voltaire: A Sketch of His Life and Works*, 1891, p. 14).

What is interesting about Voltaire's movement from his hubristic youth into a sense of failure is the simultaneously global and yet personal nature of this failure. In describing the effect of the Lisbon earthquake in 1755 on Voltaire, Wheeler says, "His optimism got injured during his journey through life, and was completely shattered by the earthquake at Lisbon in 1755" (p. 37). Tom Drake describes how Voltaire viewed this event as a global tragedy that led to outrage:

> Voltaire is infuriated by how Christians blame the earthquake on providence, as if God were punishing the Portuguese for their sins -- why then would God kill tens of thousands of children? -- and disgusted with the way his fellow French "Optimistic" philosophers and much of Europe write the earthquake off as "for the best".[25]

Voltaire's first reaction was to write the poem "The Lisbon Earthquake: An inquiry into the maxim 'Whatever is, is right'," in which he directly takes on the philosophical optimism of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz and Alexander Pope with such lines as:

> Wretches unnumbered in the pangs of death,
> Who mangled, torn, and panting for their breath,

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[24] As described in Martin Fitzpatrick's "Toleration and the Enlightenment Movement" in Grell and Porter's, *Toleration in Enlightenment Europe*, p. 64.
[25] See http://www.webpages.uidaho.edu/engl_258/lecture%20notes/voltaire_and_candide.htm

> Buried beneath their sinking roofs expire,
> And end their wretched lives in torments dire….
> Whilst you these facts replete with horror view,
> Will you maintain death to their crimes was due?[26]

That might have been the end of the matter but for Jean Jacques Rousseau's public letter of rebuke (Rousseau and Voltaire were both living in Geneva at the time and Voltaire had made an effort to befriend Rousseau earlier). Rousseau's letter states, "…you only vex me. It might be said that I don't feel my unhappiness enough, and that you are trying to soothe me by proving that all is bad… Of the many persons crushed under Lisbon's ruins, some without doubt escaped greater misfortunes…"[27] While this letter by itself was a philosophical slap in the face, it must have been much worse as Voltaire had previously held Rousseau in such high esteem that, "On Rousseau's *Social Contract* Voltaire said it so convinced him of the beauty of man in a state of nature that, after reading it, he ran round the room on all fours" (Wheeler, p. 36).

Thankfully, Voltaire did not succumb to a sense of personal failure arising from the tragedy of the Lisbon earthquake; instead, as Wheeler says, "His reply to Rousseau's rebuke for his pessimist poem on the earthquake of Lisbon was the immortal *Candide*…" (p. 36).[28] While not all humanist responses can be as 'immortal' as *Candide*, the way the novel incorporates both taking up the challenge of writing and the personal failure Voltaire encountered is integral to the approach taken to humanism in this dissertation, particularly as the novel is a humorous one. In

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[26] See http://www.webpages.uidaho.edu/engl_258/lecture%20notes/lisbon_earthquake%20poem.htm
[27] See http://www.webpages.uidaho.edu/engl_258/lecture%20notes/rousseau%20on%20lisbon%20poem.htm
[28] Wheeler's use of 'immortal' here may not be only for rhetorical effect, as Renee Waldinger argues in her *Approaches to Teaching Candide* that this novel is taught more than any other work of French literature worldwide (xi).

a description that could as easily be applied to *Slaughterhouse Five*, Wheeler portrays *Candide* as "…one of the wisest as well as one of the wittiest of works… At one moment we are forced to tears at contemplating the atrocities of inhumanity; the next we are forced to laugh at its absurdities" (p. 37). This may sound at first as if two opposites are cancelling one another out, but Wheeler shows how the laughter does not erase the atrocities as "…we are laughing all the while we are most profoundly moved" (37). This recalls the contradictory sentiments that the Turkish Cultural Foundation ascribes to Aziz Nesin's work as well as Ben Greenman's discussion of Vonnegut's prose: we are both having a good time and not having a good time.

The philosophical optimists decreed that those who suffered and died in the Lisbon earthquake in some way deserved it—or, in Rousseau's version, met a better fate than they might have had they lived. But Voltaire, despite his outrage with this stance, does not kill off Pangloss in return, who is the representative of philosophical optimism in the work. Instead, at the end of the novel, Candide learns to focus on his life as it is, and to ignore Pangloss' twisting the past to fit his philosophy that everything is all for the best:[29]

> Pangloss sometimes said to Candide:
> "There is a concatenation of events in this best of all possible worlds: for if you had not been kicked out of a magnificent castle for love of Miss Cunegonde: if you had not been put into the Inquisition: if you had not walked over America: if you had not stabbed the Baron: if you had not lost all your sheep from the fine country of El Dorado: you would not be here eating preserved citrons and pistachio-nuts."
> "All that is very well," answered Candide, "but let us cultivate our garden." (p. 84)

[29] It is outside the scope of the current work, but it is interesting to note that Candide only finds happiness outside Constantinople in the lands of the Ottoman Empire after meeting a wise Dervish (who slams the door shut in Pangloss's face) and a Turkish farmer who gives Candide the idea of cultivating one's garden as he notices the farmer is happier than "…the six kings with whom we had the honour of supping" (83).

In the end, Voltaire's humanism illuminates problems and pitfalls of such a dogmatic system but it doesn't fall into the trap of then demanding an equally dogmatic eradication of the source of such ludicrous statements.

Voltaire's use of humor to both approach the horror of the Lisbon earthquake and Pangloss' ridiculously dogmatic philosophical optimism is recalled later in Nesin's and Vonnegut's works—particularly in Vonnegut's use of humor to discuss the Dresden firebombing, which ended up being the largest massacre in European history. As the writer Avi Steinberg says of *Slaughterhouse Five*, and the Dresden bombing in particular, in *The Paris Review* roundtable:

> On the page, we witness Vonnegut deploying all of his comic skills to escape the trauma of that place—and the fact that he doesn't succeed, and that his escapism fails even as it reaches the edges of the universe, is what makes the story work. The humor doesn't dare to fully enter the scene of massacre but exerts a powerful enough force that the reader can orbit around it. The seriousness of that book isn't to be found in its ethical poses or in its reportage but in the brave and risky ways in which it uses humor to let the questions remain unanswered.[30]

Voltaire is clearly a predecessor for Vonnegut in the way he uses humanist humor 'to let the questions remain unanswered.'

1.4 Humor and humanism

To answer the question what is 'humanist humor,' I will conduct a short overview of the relevant parts of humor studies. As the previous section began with Socrates, so this overview begins with one of the greatest classical satirists, Aristophanes. In *The Anatomy of Satire*, Gilbert Highet argues that "Aristophanes is a moral and political reformer" (1962, p. 27) and that his satire functions to effect what he sees as positive

[30] http://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2013/04/11/laughing-in-the-face-of-death-a-vonnegut-roundtable/

change in the polity. This use of humor to describe or bring about a description of wholeness is not confined solely to politics, however, for, as Paul W. Ludwig (1996) points out, "For many of Plato's modern readers, Aristophanes' encomium of eros is the most memorable and convincing speech in the *Symposium*" (537), where Aristophanes argues that human beings used to be conjoined as 'circle people' and that Eros is our leftover desire to re-connect. We are doomed, however, to imperfectly seek this connection, as we can never return to being 'circle people.' This sense of failure in becoming personally whole is a central issue for both Nesin and Vonnegut that will be explored fully in the second chapter, which focuses on the exigent failure of their humanism.

In terms of the polity, Aristophanes uses political satire to challenge the powerful and rich through normal citizens that today might be considered middle or even lower-middle class. John Zumbrunnen begins an analysis of Aristophanes in his "Elite Domination and the Clever Citizen: Aristophanes' *Archarnians* and *Knights*" by taking up Aristotle's famous phrase in the *Poetics* that comedy "…is a representation of inferior people [*phauloterôn*]" (2004, p. 656), only to then point out how *phauloterôn* here has a number of possible meanings, one of which is 'ordinary'—a particularly apt adjective for Aristophanes, "…who most often chooses for his heroes ordinary Athenians" (p. 657). This is not a call to revolution but rather to support how Aristophanes is focused on exposing hypocrisy. Thus, Fisher states, "In *Clouds*, then, Aristophanes is not trying to persuade his audience of the immorality of the historical Socrates or of the Sophists; rather he is making fun of what he sees as the pretentious elements in modern intellectual and social trends…" (p. 24).

Much of this combination of the common person against hypocrisy could be repeated for both Nesin and Vonnegut, with a focus on similarly dogmatic institutions—namely, the State, the military, religion, and economic disparity. As Talat S. Halman relates, Nesin's "…hero is the man in the street beleaguered by the inimical forces of modern life. He lambastes bureaucracy and exposes economic inequalities in stories that effectively combine local color and universal verities" (*A Millennium of Turkish Literature: A concise history*, 2011, p. 123). In addition, focusing as he does on protagonists from Indianapolis, like Billy Pilgrim in *Slaughterhouse Five*, Vonnegut also picks ordinary Americans for his protagonists. On the one hand, Vonnegut and Nesin's use of ordinary people is clearly connected in a certain sense to the same approach taken by Aristophanes, including the refusal to end his comedies with happy endings. In a comic scene that could easily end a work by either Vonnegut or Nesin, Aristophanes' *The Clouds* ends with Strepsiades being beaten by his son, Pheidippides, as the latter has been completely won over by Socrates' philosophy—despite Aristophanes' description of Socrates' philosophy as essentially a sham. On the one hand, Aristophanes' introduction to *The Clouds*, wherein he berates the judges of the previous year's contest for not choosing his play, demonstrates how the playwright feels his work is a success, but at the same time, the humorous ending wherein Socrates' philosophy wins out over Strepsiades' schemes, highlights in a way the play's inability to complete the project (akin to the failure to accomplish the perfect reading brought up in Said's explanation of *itijihad*).

Following Aristophanes and other Old Comedy satirists, Roman satire split, as David Worcester describes in *The Art of Satire* (1968), into two general

categories: Horatian and Juvenalian satire.[31] In *Figuring Genre in Roman Satire* (2006), Catherine Keane points out how Horace's own definitions of satire, while only appearing in short bursts, were quite varied:

> The *Sermones* ("chats") of Horace, mild though they may seem, explore satire's full range. Horace describes his genre's second-century CE founder Lucilius as a successor to Greek comic dramatists (1.4.1– 5), and correspondingly imagines himself as a performer on stage (1.10.76– 77). Other Horatian images emphasize a more aggressive function, comparing the satirist to a violent bull (1.4.34) and his work to a sword, with which he threatens critics (2.1.39– 41). Horace relates satire to the legal scene as well, posing as a defender of flouted laws (1.4) but also recognizing that satire might be construed as illegal slander (2.1). Finally, he famously compares his satire, a mode of criticism that employs humor, to the pedagogical strategy of bribing pupils with cookies (1.1.24– 26).[32]

While it would be a difficult argument to say that Vonnegut and Nesin's use of humor resembles giving cookies to pupils, Keane upholds the commonly held image of Horace as "…an often self-undermining ironist" (p. 11), and this description certainly does apply to both Vonnegut and Nesin, who often soften the blow of their satire through self-mockery and by, as Keane describes Horace's approach, appearing "as an 'acting' character" (p. 11).

In Juvenalian satire, on the other hand, there are no cookies. Juvenal uses satire aggressively and unflinchingly—here, the satirist is not a bull and does not only 'threaten' with the sword but slices right in like a butcher or a surgeon. As Keane puts it,

> …Juvenal responds to his predecessors' ambiguous attitudes to violence by bringing out more engagingly the potential for humor in images of attack and deformity. When he employs vivid and troubling

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[31] It goes beyond the scope of the current work, but an argument could also be made that Lucilius and Persius had different styles of satire, as well as Menippeus, although Joel C. Relihan makes a convincing case that Menippean Satire was not a term used by the Romans and was instead anachronistically applied in Lipsius' *Somnium* in 1581. See "On the Origin of 'Menippean Satire' as the Name of a Literary Genre" in *Classical Philology*, Vol. 79, No. 3 (Jul., 1984), pp. 226-229.
[32] Keane then uses a similar string of quotations to demonstrate that Persius viewed his own satire as essentially Horatian in approach.

> images that resist a sanitized satiric theory, Juvenal promotes his work as the most morally challenging in the satiric tradition. (p. 12)

Nesin and Vonnegut certainly *do* use the troubling in its potential for humor—that may well be what Ben Greenman is touching on when he says reading Vonnegut is both having a good time and distinctly not having a good time. A simple example of this troubling satire for Nesin is his story, "Tanrısal Adalet" ("Divine Justice") in the collection *Nah Kalkınırız* (1991) (*Like Hell We'll Develop*), at the end of which Nesin makes the case that whoever is rich and privileged in this world will no doubt be privileged in the next as well:

> Whoever has the best, the widest, and the most beautiful lot in this world will have, in the next world, the land with the best views, for the right to charity is theirs alone. The pitiable poor cannot even do good deeds to secure their place in heaven. Those who exploit others have not even left the poor the right to be charitable. To do evil or to do good is only the right of these exploiters. (p. 54)

This cynical view of heaven comes upon the reader quite suddenly and would no doubt be a shock to Turkish believers—all the more so for the simple soundness of its logic.

So, there is something of Juvenalian satire in Nesin's and Vonnegut's works; however, to return to Keane's quotation, she emphasizes the visual element in Juvenal's satire: "*images* of attack and deformity… vivid and troubling *images* that resist a sanitized satiric theory…" This is indicative of the extent to which Juvenal goes in his satire which, despite their non-cookie-giving humor, Nesin and Vonnegut do not include—Vonnegut famously does not describe the actual Dresden bombing in *Slaughterhouse Five* (this is examined in depth in Chapter 2), and, while Billy Pilgrim must indeed go into the houses and bomb shelters where the bodies of firebombing victims lie, any vivid, imagistic detail of the corpses is absent.

These ‘troubling images’ recall Swift’s “A Modest Proposal,” all the more so because Keane states, “…in Juvenal’s narrative scenes, the act of perpetrating or viewing violence or disfigurement is always loaded with cultural prejudice. Pain experienced by some characters becomes a source of pleasure and self-satisfaction for others” (p. 64). Juvenal’s attack on the Pathics’ fake adoption of strong masculinity in his second satire demonstrates just how this works: “Shaggy limbs and rough bristles along your arms certainly advertise a fierce nature, but the doctor laughs as he carves the swollen piles from your smooth-shaven anus” (2.11– 13, as quoted and translated in Keane, p. 64). As mentioned in the previous section on humanism, Swift’s satire is surgically sharp in “A Modest Proposal,” extending well beyond the troubling suggestion of eating the poor’s one-year-old children to highly inventive images of what can be done:

> Those who are more thrifty (as I must confess the times require) may flea the carcass; the skin of which, artificially dressed, will make admirable gloves for ladies, and summer boots for fine gentlemen. As to our City of Dublin, shambles may be appointed for this purpose, in the most convenient parts of it, and butchers we may be assured will not be wanting; although I rather recommend buying the children alive, and dressing them hot from the knife, as we do roasting pigs. (p. 5-6)

The focus on tanning the skins and on the use of the knife both connect clearly to the Juvenalian doctor’s carving off the piles; interestingly enough, there is an echo of this in the description of Roland Weary’s trench knife (not government issue) graphically described in *Slaughterhouse Five*: “It had a ten-inch blade that was triangular in cross section. Its grip consisted of brass knuckles, was a chain of rings through which Weary slipped his stubby fingers. The rings weren't simple. They bristled with spikes” (47). Weary goes on to discuss the knife in almost Juvenalian detail, such as how the triangular shape of the blade “‘Makes a wound that won’t close up’” (47). However, before Roland Weary has a chance to use his knife, he and

Pilgrim are caught by a group of German soldiers led by a corporal who "…marveled at Weary's cruel trench knife, said in German that Weary would no doubt like to use the knife on him, to tear his face off with the spiked knuckles, to stick the blade into his belly or throat" (69). In the end, Vonnegut in particular will use the 'troubling imagery' of Juvenalian satire, but he uses it in the abstract, while Swift uses it in concrete detail.

Plato, Aristotle, and Quintilian (watching the early satirists' work), were some of the first thinkers to write on humor; today, their theories are generally grouped under what is now known as the superiority theory of humor. Simon Critchley, in *On Humour* (2002), sums up this theory and the other two broad categories of humor theory as follows:

> In the first theory [the superiority theory], represented by Plato, Aristotle, Quintilian, and, at the dawn of the modern era, Hobbes, we laugh from feelings of superiority over other people… The relief theory emerges in the nineteenth century in the work of Herbert Spencer, where laughter is explained as a release of pent-up nervous energy, but the theory is best known in the version given in Freud's 1905 book *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*… [And finally, in the incongruity theory, humor] is produced by the experience of a felt incongruity between what we know or expect to be the case, and what actually takes place in the joke, gag, jest, or blague… (p. 2-3).

Although these categorizations sound quite clear here in the abstract, they are easily conflated when actually applied to humorous situations.

Take, for example, an incident that Kurt Vonnegut says his sister found "terribly funny," which he recounts in an interview in *The Paris Review* (1977):

> Vonnegut: …One time [my sister] saw a woman come out of a streetcar horizontally, and she laughed for weeks after that.
> Interviewer: Horizontally?
> Vonnegut: Yes. This woman must have caught her heels somehow. Anyway, the streetcar door opened, and my sister happened to be watching from the sidewalk, and then she saw this woman come out horizontally—as straight as a board, face down, and about two feet off the ground. (p. 181)

This could easily be used as proof of the superiority theory, for the case can be made that Vonnegut's sister is laughing down (literally) at this poor woman. However, Vonnegut's sister could just as easily be feeling a great relief at not being the person who is popping out horizontally. The incongruity theory, finally, needs little explanation, as surely Vonnegut's sister would not have burst into laughter had this woman alighted from the streetcar in the normal, vertical fashion.

No doubt recognizing this sort of problem with these theories of humor, Critchley makes an observation shortly before he introduces these three theories that:

> …persons who might not otherwise feel themselves to be experts in metapsychology or French spiritualism somehow feel confident in dismissing Freud's theory of jokes or Bergson's account of laughter because they are either not funny or simply miss the point. When it comes to what amuses us, we are all authorities, experts in the field. We *know* what we find funny. (p. 2)

It is a strange situation when almost all human beings (save the humorless) feel they are experts in the field of humor, even as this very same field stymies those theoretical frameworks established for it.[33] John Morreall states in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*'s 'humor' entry (2012) that, "When people are asked what's important in their lives, they often mention humor. Couples listing the traits they prize in their spouses usually put 'sense of humor' at or near the top." It is incredible, then, as Morreall goes on to point out, how a "Martian anthropologist comparing the amount of philosophical writing on humor with what has been written

[33] As the "Vonnegut's sister" anecdote illustrates, theories of humor do not fail as such, and yet they also do not seem to rule out all other theories or to offer completely satisfactory explanations. The Wikipedia entry on humor states: "Proponents of each [theory of humor] originally claimed their theory to be capable of explaining all cases of humor, however, they now acknowledge that although each theory generally covers its own area of focus, many instances of humor can be explained by more than one theory. Incongruity and superiority theories, for instance, seem to describe complementary mechanisms which together create humor." Retrieved from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theories_of_humor (accessed March 6, 2015).

on, say, justice, or even on Rawls' Veil of Ignorance, might well conclude that humor could be left out of human life without much loss."[34]

At the same time, the subsection in the introduction to Critchley's *On Humour* where he arguably presents the crux of his argument is entitled, "Laughter's Messianic Power"—a title which takes Morreall's point about the importance of humor in people's lives significantly further. In the first sentence of this section, Critchley describes how "…jokes return us to a common, familiar world of shared experiences…" and, simultaneously, "…indicate how those practices [highlighted in jokes] might be transformed or perfected, how things might be otherwise" (p. 16). This focus on the everyday seems to glaringly contradict the metaphysical title of the section. Over the next page and a half, however, Critchley clarifies the conflict between the title and this statement through his atypical definition of 'messianic.' First Critchley says, "Humour both reveals the situation and indicates how that situation might be changed. That is to say, laughter has a certain redemptive, or messianic, power" (p. 16). Yet, this power

> …does not redeem us from this world, but returns us to it ineluctably by showing that there is no alternative. The consolations of humour come from acknowledging that this is the only world and, imperfect as it is and we are, it is only here that we can make a difference. (p. 17)

In clear contrast to the theories presented in Morreall's survey of the philosophy of humor, Critchley here describes the function of humor almost as the expression of a radical humanism. This passage, published in 2002, connects to Critchley's book published five years earlier, *Very Little… Almost Nothing: Death, philosophy, literature*. In the preamble, while discussing Adorno's work, Critchley says, "…the only philosophy that can be responsibly practiced after Auschwitz is the attempt to

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[34] See http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/humor/

view things from the standpoint of redemption, which is impossible, and yet this impossibility must be comprehended for the sake of the possible" (p. 27). While "Laughter's Messianic Power" and this "Almost Nothing" are clearly not one and the same, these two concepts share a focus on a redemption in this world.

Henri Bergson offers an interesting precedent for Critchley's focus on "Laughter's Messianic Power" in *On Laughter* (1900): "...laughter 'corrects men's manners.' It makes us at once endeavour to appear what we ought to be, what some day we shall perhaps end in being" (p. 11). Bergson demonstrates this in summarizing all of his early examples of what causes laughter and describing how they are attributed to the undesirable mental states of automatism and a refusal to be flexible in one's thinking:

> From the runner who falls to the simpleton who is hoaxed, from a state of being hoaxed to one of absentmindedness, from absentmindedness to wild enthusiasm, from wild enthusiasm to various distortions of character and will, we have followed the line of progress along which the comic becomes more and more deeply imbedded in the person, yet without ceasing, in its subtler manifestations, to recall to us some trace of what we noticed in its grosser forms, an effect of automatism and of inelasticity. (p. 11)

Bergson's point that humor pushes people to be more elastic in their thought echoes Voltaire's treatment of the philosophical optimists through Candide's treatment of Pangloss in the last chapter of *Candide*.

While Bergson's emphasis on the elasticizing effect of humor on people's manner of thought is of immense importance in the articulation of humanist humor, some critics have described how Bergson attempts to define all that makes human beings laugh under the umbrella of automatism. For instance, Wyndham Lewis's "The Meaning of the Wild Body" (1927), aims to disprove Bergson's claim that the comedic is predicated on a person or people acting or appearing like a thing (automatism) by positing that a cabbage reading Flaubert was equally funny (as

quoted in *On Humour*, p. 58). While there are certainly instances in the contemporary world where the comic is *not* embedded in a person (as endless cat videos on YouTube demonstrate), in both *Slaughterhouse Five* and *Yaşar Ne Yaşar Ne Yaşamaz*, even the sections satirizing the dogma of inelastic institutions take place between human individuals—Yaşar's pleading, cajoling, requesting, and, finally, violently demanding the state recognize his existence are so humorous because one human civil servant after another refuses to acknowledge Yaşar's clear physical presence before them because they have been automatized as human machines of the broken state bureaucracy. Furthermore, even as many critics have problems with Bergson's account because of its emphasis on the social correction of inelastic (automaton) behavior, there are moments when Bergson seems to outline laughter as much more than a mere moral corrective, such as when he half-patronizingly, half-reverently says, "We regard it [the comic spirit], above all, as a living thing. However trivial it may be, we shall treat it with the respect due to life. We shall confine ourselves to watching it grow and expand" (p. 8).

Thirty years before Bergson, Charles Baudelaire's essay "On the Essence of Laughter" in *The Mirror of Art* (1868-69) presents an even more metaphysical analysis of laughter. Early in the essay, Baudelaire describes the dogmatic Christian as ill at ease with laughter: "The Sage, that is to say he who is quickened with the spirit of Our Lord, he who has the divine formulary at his finger tips, does not abandon himself to laughter save in fear and trembling…" (p. 134). Baudelaire takes this even further over the next couple of pages, first implying that laughter is satanic, then coming full circle and, akin to Critchley's insight above, imbuing laughter with a messianic function:

> If you are prepared, then, to take the point of view of the orthodox mind, it is certain that human laughter is intimately linked with the

> accident of an ancient Fall, of a debasement both physical and moral… In the earthly paradise—whether one supposes it as past or to come, a memory or a prophecy, in the sense of the theologians or of the socialists—in the earthly paradise, that is to say in the surroundings in which it seemed to man that all created things were good, joy did not find its dwelling in laughter… Observe also that it is with his tears that man washes the afflictions of man, and that it is with his laughter that sometimes he soothes and charms his heart; for the phenomena engendered by the Fall will become the means of redemption. (p. 135)

Chapter 3 will return to this essay of Baudelaire's in greater depth, but it is important to point out how Baudelaire here has truly opened up the humanist function of laughter in terms of its redemption, as he describes it, for theologians and socialists alike. In fact, Baudelaire describes laughter (and tears) as arising from the imperfection of the world of human experience.

In another metaphysical look at laughter, Georges Bataille (like Critchley) balances both how much we know about humor and yet how it appears to be somehow ultimately unknowable in his *Writings on Laughter, Sacrifice, Nietzsche, Un-Knowing*, first published in 1953, in a section entitled "Un-knowing: Laughter and Tears."

> We can, with fair precision, observe and define the various themes of the laughable… But can we say that because we know how to provoke laughter we really know what causes laughter? It would seem, from the history of the philosophical study of laughter, that such is not the case, for it is, on the whole, the history of an insoluble problem. That which first seems so accessible has constantly eluded investigation. It may even be that the domain of laughter is finally – or so it seems to me – a closed domain, so unknown and unknowable is the cause of laughter. (p. 89)

When Bataille describes the philosophical study of laughter as "the history of an insoluble problem," he may well be referencing the immense and various problems that continue to haunt humor studies today. One such problem is how each of the three theories of humor that Morreall describes privilege certain functions of humor: According to Moniek Buijzen and Patti M. Valkenburg, the relief theory is a

physiologically-based theory, while the superiority theory highlights the emotional function of humor, and the "incongruity theory emphasizes cognition" ("Developing a Typology of Humor in Audiovisual Media," 2004, p. 148). Even within each theory, there are great differences of opinion—take, for instance, Morreall's discussion of major differences in incongruity theorists:

> …Thomas Schultz (1976) and Jerry Suls (1972, 1983) have claimed that what we enjoy in humor is not incongruity itself, but the resolution of incongruity… Amusement, according to this understanding of humor, is akin to puzzle-solving. Other theorists insist that incongruity-resolution figures in only some humor, and that the pleasure of amusement is not like puzzle-solving.[35]

Schultz and Suls' claim fits our understanding of puns perfectly—the laugh comes when the listener/reader uncovers the 'puzzle' of the double meaning; however, it seems a bit more of a stretch to squeeze cartoons of political satire into this puzzle model. Thus, even as each humor theory works for some instances, no single, detailed explanation seems to cover all possibilities.

To return to Bataille's discussion of the theories of laughter, immediately after he declares laughter an insoluble problem, he proposes his own theory in response to those that are unable to definitively explain the cause of laughter:

> There remains, perhaps, just one theory, which has at least, to its credit, its dependence on the most outstanding and essential quality of preceding ones: *their failure*. Let us suppose that that which induces laughter is not only unknown, but unknowable. There is still one possibility to be considered. That which is laughable may simply be *the unknowable*. In other words, the unknown nature of the laughable would be not accidental, but essential. We would laugh, not for some reason which, due to lack of information, or of sufficient penetration, we shall never manage to know, but because *the unknown makes us laugh*. (p. 90)

[35] See "The Incongruity Theory" section of the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy 'Humor' entry.

This in itself is a profound formulation for a physiological process most of us take for granted; at the same time, it poses a particularly difficult question for this kind of study wherein a writer (or writers in this case) attempt to capture the unknown to be opened at any later point by a reader and have it re-animate (for lack of a better phraseology), as the unknown rising from the page. In a parallel to Said's description of how the humanist struggle arises not from what is knowable but rather in a futile attempt to close the gap of unknowing, Bataille's theory of humor rests much more comfortably than previous theories on its very unknowability.

Critchley, Baudelaire, and Bataille (and, to some extent, Bergson) all grant humor a certain metaphysical quality. Interestingly enough, both Vonnegut's and Nesin's humor have also been described in metaphysical terms: Nesin in the odd "…many people consider his work as a guiding light" comment on the Turkish Cultural Foundation's website, and Vonnegut in *The New York Times*' review of *Slaughterhouse Five*, which calls him "A laughing prophet of doom," and *The Charlotte Observer*, which says he is "A medicine man, conjuring up fantasies to warn the world" (quoted on the first page of the paperback edition of *Slaughterhouse Five*).

This lies in direct contrast to palliative humor. In *On Humour*, Critchley describes just such a situation in what he calls "reactionary humor" (which references Adorno's theory of humor's role in the culture industry). Critchley offers up P.G. Wodehouse's *The World of Jeeves* as an example of "…humour [that] does not seek to change the situation, but simply toys with existing social hierarchies in a charming but quite benign fashion…" (p. 11). Unfortunately, later in *On Humour*, Critchley discusses M.M. Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* (1965) in much the same way as he deals with Wodehouse in his introduction, despite Bakhtin's clear

emphasis throughout his work on the anti-dogmatic function of the festival of Carnival. Critchley says, "…rather than placing in question the dominant order, such acts of comic subversion [as Carnival] simply reinstate it by offering transitory comic relief. After Carnival comes Lent, and one cannot exist without the other" (82). Initially, this looks to be a parallel fitting the challenge/failure dynamic of the humanist 'movement' described above. However, Critchley has confused the very real festival of Carnival and ensuing Lent with Bakhtin's description of the Carnivalesque nature of Rabelais' writing.

Mikhail Bakhtin's argument centers on the celebration of carnival, particularly as it is presented in the work of Rabelais. "…carnival is the people's second life, organized on the basis of laughter" (8). Carnival was in marked contrast to "The official feasts of the Middle Ages, whether ecclesiastic, feudal, or sponsored by the state, [which] did not lead the people out of the existing world order and created no second life. On the contrary, they sanctioned the existing pattern of things and reinforced it" (9). Bakhtin goes on to say that at official feasts, "…the element of laughter was alien… The true nature of human festivity was betrayed and distorted" (9). Over and against this,

> …carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed. (p. 10)

This levelling during carnival is no doubt necessary for truly unsanctioned laughter to come into being, otherwise the forced nature of the official feast threatens to encroach.

Yet Bakhtin is not simply writing about Carnival itself, but the embodiment of the laughter of carnival in the work of Rabelais—a work in which Lent never

comes. It is this constant carnival which challenges the transitory nature of the relief in Rabelais' laughter, and changes a "reactionary" humor into a radical one. As Michael Holquist points out in the prologue to *Rabelais and His World*:

> Bakhtin concludes his book by quoting Pushkin's *Boris Godunov*, the section in which Dmitry, the false pretender to Russia's ancient throne, has a nightmare in which:
>
> The people swarmed on the public square
> And pointed laughingly at me,
> And I was filled with shame and fear. (p. xxii)

Just as Baudelaire's dogmatic 'Sage' is afraid of fear, so, too, Bakhtin's king of Russia's nightmare is being laughed at in the public square—a more bitter pill to swallow, as Pangloss no doubt came to realize, than being killed or destroyed.

All of this, then, is the basis of the 'humanist humor' which Vonnegut and Nesin come to apply to their examination of the movement of humanism (which they themselves also experienced) in their works *Slaughterhouse Five* and *Yaşar Ne Yaşar Ne Yaşamaz*. This radical, 'humanist humor' is returned to in Chapter 3, which examines how these two writers' evocation of laughter simultaneously escapes the exigent failure of the humanist challenge and succumbs all the more to this failure.

1.5 Main sources consulted

In addition to the two novels examined throughout the dissertation, a number of each writer's non-fiction works are used as primary sources in this dissertation. The second volume of Aziz Nesin's three-part autobiography, *Böyle Gelmiş Böyle Gitmez: Yol* (translated by Joseph S. Jacobson into English and entitled *Istanbul Boy*) rendered certain essential information about his childhood and youth. Another extremely important work by Nesin, *Cumhuriyet Döneminde Türk Mizahı* (*Turkish Humor in the Republican Period*), first published in 1973, remains the only in-depth

research work on this subject available to date. *İnsanlar Konuşa Konuşa* (*People Are Talking and Talking*) is a collection of interviews with Nesin, of which Emin Çölaşan's interview published in *Hürriyet* newspaper offers Nesin's clearest discussion of his atheism. Moreover, I have to admit to using *Gözyaşından Gülmeceye Aziz Nesin*, a collection of Nesin quotations edited by Alpay Kabacalı, as an indispensable way of locating primary source information quickly, along with the Nesin Vakfı (Foundation) website (www.nesinvakfi.org/aziz_nesin.html), particularly for Nesin's "Speech in Sivas."

Of Kurt Vonnegut's five essay collections, I have focused most intently on the two he called his autobiography, *Palm Sunday: An Autobiographical Collage*, and *Fates Worse Than Death: An Autobiographical Collage*, as well as *A Man Without a Country*. The collection of interviews with Vonnegut, *Conversations with Kurt Vonnegut* edited by William Rodney Allen, has been quite helpful; other short Vonnegut quotations have also been taken from a variety of periodical sources, such as *The Paris Review*, and *Playboy*.

In terms of secondary sources, unfortunately there are very few sources analyzing *Yaşar Ne Yaşar Ne Yaşamaz* as Turkish literary studies in Turkey tend to be broad surveys or to compare certain elements in a collection of works by one or more authors (such as geographical space, time period, narrative perspective, etc.). For these details, I found Engin İspir's MA thesis at Selçuk University, *Aziz Nesin'in Romanları Üzere Bir İnceleme* (*An Analysis of Aziz Nesin's Novels*) to be the most germane to the current project. Beyond traditional academic sources, however, Ataol Behramoğlu's *Aziz Nesin'li Anılar* (*Memories with Aziz Nesin*)—quoted at the outset of this introduction and at various points throughout the dissertation—and Demirtaş Ceyhun's *Çağımızın Nasrettin Hocası: Aziz Nesin* (*Our Era's Nasrettin Hoja: Aziz*

Nesin) have been instrumental not only in identifying the moments of triumph and failure in Nesin's life but also for their conviction that Nesin is a world-class literary figure. Talat S. Halman says the same in English (although terribly briefly, unfortunately) in *A Millennium of Turkish Literature*, and *Akıncaya Karşı... Aziz Nesin*, by Şule Süzük describes how revolutionary many of Nesin's ideas were. *Babam Aziz Nesin* by Ateş Nesin, along with newspaper interviews with Ali Nesin (one even in English for the *Hürriyet Daily News*) and Ali Nesin's contributions to the Nesin Vakfı website paint a picture of a loving father who was nonetheless constantly struggling against the government, angry citizens, and with himself. And finally I have used many examples from popular media to capture the extreme reactions of the denizens of Turkey to Nesin, both good and bad.

Any serious work on Kurt Vonnegut must take into consideration the considerable body of work by the Vonnegutian scholar Jerome Klinkowitz including the books *Kurt Vonnegut's America*, *Vonnegut in Fact: The Public Spokesmanship of Personal Fiction*, and *The Vonnegut Effect*, along with Todd F. Davis' *Kurt Vonnegut's Crusade Or, How a Postmodern Harlequin Preached a New Humanism*; additionally helpful have been *Kurt Vonnegut and the American Novel: A Postmodern Iconography* by Robert T. Tally, and the collection of essays *At Millennium's End: New Essays on the work of Kurt Vonnegut* edited by Kevin Alexander Boon. As for Vonnegut biographies, both Susan Farrell's *Critical Companion to Kurt Vonnegut: A Literary Reference to His Life and Work*, and Charles Shields' *Unstuck in Time: A Journey Through Kurt Vonnegut's Life and Novels* have been useful both for the biographical details and especially for the discussion of the relationship between Vonnegut's life and his works; Charles Shields' controversial biography *And So It Goes: Kurt Vonnegut: A Life* has been

consulted for its unsanctioned status, and Marc Leeds' *The Vonnegut Encyclopedia: An Authorized Compendium with a Foreword by Kurt Vonnegut* also provided some details lacking in the longer biographies.

CHAPTER 2

THE HUMANIST CHALLENGE

2.1 The non-biographical biography

This chapter begins with a look at Aziz Nesin's childhood and military career (and the beginning of the second half repeats the same examination for Vonnegut). As such, it could well be described as "the-man-and-his-work criticism," to borrow a phrase Michel Foucault uses at the outset of his essay, "What is an Author?" (1977). However, the emphasis in this dissertation is not on establishing a biography of Aziz Nesin or Kurt Vonnegut but rather in looking at their work *on themselves*—in the case of Nesin, through his autobiography and the timeline his son, Ali Nesin, created based on the stories his father told him. In other words, the work has primacy over the author, and even though the 'biographical' is discussed in this chapter before the written work, this is only done to set the stage for the humanist challenge of taking up writing[36]—a challenge that arises in Nesin's autobiography but one that is even stronger in the character Yaşar's taking up of storytelling in *Yaşar Ne Yaşar Ne Yaşamaz*.

Much has been written on the difference between Barthes' "The Death of the Author" (1968) and Foucault's "What Is an Author?"[37] but in the application of these texts to the humanist challenge in *Yaşar Ne Yaşar Ne Yaşamaz* and *Slaughterhouse Five*, I would like to focus on a similarity in the way the act of writing is both

[36] In "What is an Author?", Foucault problematizes what 'the work' is to an even further extent when, at one point, he brings up the question of whether, were Nietzsche to have included a laundry list in one of his notebooks, that also have to be included (207).
[37] See, for instance, Adrian Wilson's "Foucault on the 'Question of the Author': A Critical Exegesis" in The Modern Language Review, Vol. 99, No. 2 (Apr., 2004), p. 339-363.

described as an entry into death for the writer and yet also how both Barthes and Foucault (perhaps unintentionally) also indicate that the writer comes to life in the process of writing. At the same time, as the very names of both writers in the title of this dissertation suggests, my use of these two essays is not to demonstrate that the novels under examination here are completely detached from Vonnegut and Nesin, as Barthes' essay in particular demands, but rather to start from the commonality of Barthes' and Foucault's essays, before moving into an application of Maurice Blanchot's description of the author in the essay "Literature and the Right to Death" to Vonnegut's relationship with *Slaughterhouse Five.*

Both Foucault's and Barthes' essays argue that writing constitutes an entering into death for the writer. Barthes states that,

> As soon as a fact is *narrated* no longer with a view to acting directly on reality but intransitively, that is to say, finally outside of any function other than that of the very practice of the symbol itself, this disconnection occurs, the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, writing begins. (p. 142)

This intransitivity draws an interesting parallel with to an action devoid of a desired result (that is, the verb denotes action but refuses to act *on* anything in particular)—and this seems to indicate Barthes is talking about fiction and poetry that turn away from interacting with the outside. In this framework, the author no longer acts upon the world and thereby 'enters his own death.' Foucault agrees in terms of writing that "has freed itself from the theme of expression" (p. 206) (akin to Barthes' 'intransitive narration,' although now not 'acting on' but 'expressing to' presumably), for which he says "…the mark of the writer is reduced to nothing more than the singularity of his absence; he must assume the role of the dead man in the game of writing" (p. 207). In terms of Nesin and Vonnegut's novels examined here, this 'assuming the role of the dead man' is of particular interest and will be further explored below.

At the same time, contradicting these assertions are points made by both Barthes and Foucault that the scriptor/writer *comes to life* in a certain sense through the text (even if the title of Barthes' essay for example belies this interpretation). Barthes says

> Linguistically, the author is never more than the instance writing, just as *I* is nothing other than the instance saying *I*: language knows a 'subject', not a 'person', and this subject, empty outside of the very enunciation which defines it, suffices to make language 'hold together', suffices, that is to say, to exhaust it. (p. 145)

Barthes here limits the author in great detail, cutting the author's connection with the work, and he continues by demonstrating that the author is categorically *not* "…in the same relation of antecedence to his work as a father to his child" (p. 145). Inversely, however, Barthes indicates that the scriptor *is* the instance writing—this scriptor, while almost entirely 'empty,' does exist long enough to enunciate and hold language together, even if not as a 'person' but rather as a 'subject.' Thus, while the rest of Barthes' essay seeks "the death of the author," perhaps unwillingly Barthes implies in this one sentence that a hand to hold the pen—a mouth to enunciate the words—must still be constituted just long enough to complete the process of the writing, after which it will be exhausted.

Even as Foucault's work "What is an Author?" does not go as far as Barthes' essay in erasing the author, it nonetheless incorporates a similar condition. Towards the beginning of the essay, Foucault describes how "writing's relationship with death" is the subversion of "an old tradition exemplified by the Greek epic" in which the hero dies young but the narrative went on to make him immortal (p. 206). Then, in a sort of bridge between the Greek epic and modern writing, Foucault discusses *The Thousand and One Nights*, where "Scheherazade's narrative is an effort, renewed each night, to keep death outside the circle of life" (p. 206). This intimates a

parallel to the analysis of Barthes' sentence presented above, for as long as the story goes on, Scheherazade is assured life, but she can only be sure of her existence in the instant of the storytelling. Foucault moves from there to modern writing, stating that "The work, which once had the duty of providing immortality, now possesses the right to kill, to be its author's murderer, as in the cases of Flaubert, Proust, and Kafka" (p. 206). While none of these three authors committed suicide (Foucault no doubt means to reference how the work took over these three authors' lives), at the same time, the high instance of writers who have killed themselves beyond the three mentioned here certainly proves the point both in Foucault's figurative and in a more literal sense. Yet, Foucault's very first example in this article is a quotation from Beckett ("'What does it matter who is speaking?'" (p. 205))—the very author whose narrator(s) in *The Unnameable* famously says, "I can't go on, I must go on." This in turn brings up the question of whether it is the *work* that indeed kills Flaubert, Proust, and Kafka (as Foucault says), or it is the ensuing non-existence encountered when *not* doing the work. In the end, Foucault's point is well taken that the work can now kill, but perhaps it can only do so when the writer "can't go on."[38]

The choice to write begins with the writer entering death in both Barthes' and Foucault's essays—what I will call 'the humanist challenge' in this work. Once this agreement has been struck, in a strange contradiction of this entering death, any moment *not* spent writing ends up being an instance of non-existence.

In the second half of this chapter, how Vonnegut came to writing is examined as Nesin's is in the first half. However, while Nesin's beginnings as a writer are quite

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[38] While it is beyond the scope of the current work, it is worth comparing such writers as James Joyce and Samuel Beckett—the first wrote in fits and starts, and died relatively early at age 59 probably of health issues related to alcoholism (see http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/07/02/silence-exile-punning), while the second lived to 83 and was constantly working (see H. Porter Abbott's *Beckett Writing Beckett: The author in the autograph*).

clearly declared by his son, Ali Nesin, at least three possible starting points for Vonnegut present themselves. I make the argument that the particular humanist humor found in Vonnegut's works begins with the letter he writes to his father, sister, and brother after he is released from being a prisoner of war.

Following this background and the beginning of Vonnegut's writing career, Maurice Blanchot's essay, "Literature and the Right to Death" (1949) is examined in light of the humanist challenge presented in *Slaughterhouse Five*. This essay, while it predates Barthes' and Foucault's essays by about 20 years, nonetheless pinpoints and examines the contradiction laid out above concerning the writer's death upon entering writing and simultaneous existence only through writing. In the first pages, Blanchot looks at what Foucault would later call the 'author function' from the writer's point of view, presciently describing this function (although from the writer's perspective) and also pointing out the attendant contradiction—that the author being a function of the work brings up the question of how then the work is written:

> The writer only finds himself, only realizes himself, through his works; before his work exists, not only does he not know who he is, but he is nothing. He exists only as a function of the work; but then how can the work exist? 'An individual,' says Hegel, 'cannot know what he [really] is until he has made himself a reality through action. (p. 303)

In the last part of the chapter, this contradiction is investigated in terms of Vonnegut's metafictional self-representation in the first chapter of *Slaughterhouse Five*, along with comments in interviews and essays on why it took Vonnegut 24 years to write this novel.

2.2 The background to Aziz Nesin's moment of challenge

In 1925, Aziz Nesin began school in the third grade without having attended either first or second grade.[39] In the second volume of his autobiography, *Böyle Gelmiş Böyle Gitmez* (*Istanbul Boy*, 1979), Nesin describes the immense poverty of his early years:

> There was no meat in our pot. Meat, or food with meat in it, was a feast at our house. However, the doctors had prescribed that Mother should eat plenty of meat. After suffering the restrictions and regimens imposed by various diagnoses of her disease, and lying in a number of hospitals, it was definitely determined that she had tuberculosis…
> I don't know from where, but we received free meat…
> Yet the food stuck in Mother's throat because I wasn't at the table; she'd always save some for me and try to make me eat it. (p. 1-2)[40]

In the summer before fourth grade, Nesin remembers how his "Father had gone off again to dig for treasure" (p. 53), at which point Nesin took the examination to attend the famous Darüşşafaka School for Orphans (the only such school in Istanbul at that time), where friends of the family had to testify that his father had left the family, and he had to be one of thirty chosen from the 100 boys who had passed the entrance exam (p. 67). Unfortunately, however, Nesin was only there for two years before he was expelled for absenteeism.[41] Returning to the school once he had become a famous author, he gave a speech in which he presented a number of reasons why he did not continue: his classmates mocking him, his mother's worsening health and

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[39] In the second volume of Joseph S. Jacobson's translation of Nesin's *My Boy* (entitled *Yol*, or *The Path*), Nesin says he had never heard the National Anthem before his first day of third grade but that "The other children knew how to sing the National Anthem from the previous year" (8).
[40] All text from the second volume of *Böyle Gelmiş Böyle Gitmez* has been taken from Jacob S. Jacobson's translation, and therefore the original has not been transcribed.
[41] See the detailed timeline put together by his son, Ali Nesin, at: http://www.nesinvakfi.org/aziz_nesin_ilk_30_yil.html. Accessed on 07.11.2014.

eventual death, and the fact that he did indeed have a father while all the other students were fatherless (*Istanbul Boy* 169).

Losing his spot at such a prestigious school might have spelled an end to Nesin's writing career even before it started, but then, "As most clever young boys without means [did,] he entered the military school; this was the only way for him to have any kind of education."[42] Nesin entered the Küleli Military School in seventh grade (still one to two years behind schedule), and went on from there to attend the Ankara Harp Military Academy, from which he graduated second in his class and began military service as a third lieutenant.[43] Shortly after Nesin started his military career, he became engaged to Vedia Bitirim, and he receives multiple punishments for returning late to base or missing obligations in order to spend time with his fiancée, who lived in the Maçka neighborhood of Istanbul.[44] Ali Nesin, who has put together multiple timelines for his father on the Foundation's website, ventures that Nesin might have first written his story "Kısmet" (which was later published in *Millet* magazine) circa early 1939 in Bitirim's Maçka apartment; at the same time, Ali Nesin states that in June of 1939, while stationed in Muratlı, Nesin wrote a love poem to Bitirim and mailed it to her, and proceeded to write two more and send them to *Yedigün* magazine which then became the first writing he had published: "Kuyu" ("Well") and "Hisler ve Düşünceler" ("Thoughts and Feelings").[45]

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[42] See the Nesin Foundation's short English-language biography: http://www.nesinvakfi.org/aziz_nesin_bio.html

[43] See Ali Nesin's first 30 years timeline excerpt on the Foundation website: http://www.nesinvakfi.org/aziz_nesin_ilk_30_yil.html.

[44] See http://www.nesinvakfi.org/aziz_nesin_ayrintili_yasamoykusu.html 05-10-38 entry through the end of his military service in 1944.

[45] In the Introduction to *Vatan Sağolsun* (*For the Good of the Country*) (1968), Aziz Nesin relates how arguably Turkey's most-famous poet of the last century, Nazım Hikmet, asked Nesin to stop writing poetry and focus on stories and novels, and Nesin laughs at his hubris in thinking that Hikmet said this because he was jealous of Nesin's poetry: "I understood from his speech that Nazim was jealous (!) of me." ("Bu sözlerden Nazım'ın beni kıskandığını (!) anladım") (p. 11).

2.3 Nesin's challenge

All of this background is necessary in understanding what was at stake for Nesin when he began to write while still in the military, for that was the great challenge that he took against an overwhelmingly dogmatic institution. In a number of places, such as the Introduction to *Vatan Sağolsun* (*For the Good of the Country*), Nesin discusses how his army "…superiors did not look kindly on soldiers who published in newspapers…" (11) ("...gazetelerde yazan askerlere üstleri iyi gözle bakmadıklarından..."). While this makes it sound like the only problem he would have had is that they wouldn't have been entirely pleased, a later interview conducted by Emin Çölaşan in 1987 for *Hürriyet* newspaper (reprinted in *İnsanlar Konuşa Konuşa* / *People Are Always Speaking*, 1988) is a bit clearer on the risk Nesin undertook in having writing published as a soldier.

> As a military student, and even more so as a soldier, writing poetry and such things was a truly shameful thing. That is, it was so shameful that the way some people despise homosexuals today, that's the way in which poets were viewed in the army. For that reason, I was not able to come out as a writer… [Particularly] once I had become a lieutenant, I would not have used my own name as a writer.[46]
>
> Askeri öğrencilikte ve hatta askerlikte şiir falan yazmak, çok ayıp bişeydi. Yani o kadar ayıptı ki, bugün homoseksüelleri bazı insanlar nasıl küçümsüyorlarsa, askerde şiir yazana da o gözle bakılırdı. Onun için, ben kendimi yazar olarak ortaya çıkaramazdım… Subay çıktıktan sonra da yazılarımda kendi adımı kullanmazdım. (169)

[46] The connection between writing and homophobia seems surprising today, but Vonnegut also describes a similar connection in the popular mind, blaming this for why straight, male writers up through the 1960s and '70s "arrive at [the] lectern drunk, having slugged somebody in a bar last night to prove that I am not what was a loathsome creature not long ago, which is to say a homosexual" (*Fates Worse Than Death*, p. 29).

While Nesin does not state it directly, this comparison goes far beyond a little displeasure by one's superiors to scenarios of constant harassment, possible torture, or even being dishonorably discharged—perhaps for an alternate, bogus reason.[47]

How incredible the need to write must have been, then, for a person from such immensely poor beginnings to risk everything he had accomplished so far, particularly given that by 1941 he was married and they had a daughter.[48] Moreover, while he was smart enough not to publish under his own name (which at that time was Mehmet Nusret Nesin), he did publish under his father's name: Aziz Nesin (*Vatan Sağolsun* p. 11). And even though Nesin never accused the Army of wrongfully dismissing him, he was indeed discharged in dubious circumstances. Nesin describes his discharge to Çölaşan in the same interview as follows:

> On assignment in the year 1944, I was discharged by court order for the crime of improperly using my authority and position!
> …I gave soldiers leave… One of my soldiers was named Ali Riza and was forty years old… He wanted leave to see his family. Unable to stand it, I gave him fifteen days leave and, as it was forbidden to give leave, I had used my position improperly. (p. 169)
>
> 1944 yılında vazife, yetki ve görevi kötüye kullanmak suçundan mahkemelik olarak ayrıldım!
> ...Askerlere izin verdim... Ali Riza adında bir askerim vardı kırk yaşında... Ailesini görmek için boyuna izin istiyor. Dayanamayıp onbeş gün izin verdim ve izin vermek yasak olduğu için, görevimi kötüye kullandım.

Although Nesin never says directly that his dismissal was for reasons other than those officially given by the military, he does describe how, during the Writer's Union of Turkey trial in 1983, his military file was requested by the prosecution only

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[47] While a proper discussion of how 'some people despise homosexuals today' is well beyond the scope of the current dissertation, one small example that will give an idea of the situation is that of the character Özgür on the TV drama "20 Dakika" ("20 Minutes"). In April, 2013, this character became the first to announce he was gay on a Turkish TV drama in a scene where he told his father that he had not been able to be honest about his sexuality because "It is a crime to be gay in Turkey!" ("Türkiye'de eşçinsel olmak suç!").

[48] See http://www.nesinvakfi.org/aziz_nesin_ayrintili_yasamoykusu.html. 31-12-39 and 16-12-40 entries.

to have word come that it had accidentally been sent to the national paper pulping body (SEKA, or Selüloz ve Kağıt Fabrikaları / Cellulite and Paper Factories) and had been destroyed (p. 168).

Nesin's military career came to an end with a sentence of four months and ten days in military prison.[49] Nonetheless, upon his release, "He began his writing career as a professional" ("Profesyonel olarak yazarlığa başladı") according to Ali Nesin's timeline,[50] and indeed, in the year 1945 alone, Nesin wrote and edited for Karagöz and Tan newspapers, Yedigün and Cumartesi magazines, and published his own satirical leaflet entitled "Parti Kurmak Parti Vurmak" ("Start a Party, Hit a Party"), which became the title piece in his first published collection of stories the next year, 1946.

Writing, for Aziz Nesin in his late 20s and early 30s, was truly a challenge of immense proportions given his background. He had come from a family that, aside from his ill mother, did not have the money to eat meat—a family where Nesin and his mother sat in darkness without lighting the oil lamp until his father came home just to save a few precious pennies (*Istanbul Boy*, p. 125). Even so, he managed not once but twice to win a place at competitive schools, first Darüşşafaka and then again at Küleli (and again to military university in Ankara, although that was probably less difficult given that he had finished the Küleli military high school). Upon graduation, he entered the military as a third lieutenant, and rose quickly in the ranks. And despite the fact that writing meant giving up everything he had worked for and that had come to separate him from the desperate poverty of his childhood, Nesin took the challenge and began writing his own particular brand of humorous

[49] Ibid. 04-07-44 entry.
[50] Ibid. 00-00-45 entry.

story—one that would, in the spring of 1972 and multiple times afterwards, lead the Turkish literature specialist Talat S. Halman to observe how "Satirical fiction is dominated by Aziz Nesin (b. 1915), Turkey's best satirist ever" (*Books Abroad*, p. 229).[51] For a year and a half, Nesin wrote his particular political humor, until he was tried in 1947 for writing and publishing a leaflet against American imperialism, and sentenced to prison and internal exile for a total of 14 months.[52]

2.4 The challenge in *Yaşar Ne Yaşar Ne Yaşamaz*

As described in the introduction to this dissertation, *Yaşar Ne Yaşar Ne Yaşamaz* has a split plot, with Yaşar's stories of his life leading up to how he landed in prison alternating with his experiences in prison as he heads towards his eventual release. Thus, the pinnacle event that allows this dual plot to function occurs in the third chapter of the novel, when Yaşar arrives at the prison and quickly becomes the storyteller for his cell block; without his arrival, we wouldn't have his prison story, and without his becoming the storyteller, we wouldn't learn about his pre-prison life. Moreover, given how Yaşar's inevitable drift into storytelling is quite similar to Nesin's own move into writing professionally, the title of this third chapter is particularly interesting—"Doğrusunu Yalnız Defter Bilir," or "Only the Notebook

[51] In the Foreword to Jacob S. Jacobson's translation of *Böyle Gelmiş Böyle Gitmez*, volume 2 (*Istanbul Boy*), Talat S. Halman expands on this sentiment, saying "The range of his comic faculty is dazzlingly broad—from ironic piquancy to black comedy, from whimsical philosophical observations to ribald lampoons, from banter to burlesque" (ix).

[52] See http://www.nesinvakfi.org/aziz_nesin_ayrintili_yasamoykusu.html entry 00-02-47. I have called the second half of Nesin's punishment 'internal exile' as he was forced to live in the Turkish city of Bursa, exiled from his native Istanbul. This experience led him to write his non-fiction account *Bir Sürgünün Anıları / Memoirs of an Exile*, published in 1957.

Knows the Truth"[53]—as the Aziz Nesin archive is full of the notebooks in which he first wrote everything before typing it out later.[54]

When Yaşar first arrives in the prison and tells the other inmates his name, he says, "'[If] you want the truth, I really am not living" (p. 29) ("Doğrusunu istersen ben yaşamıyorum ki")—which plays on the existential struggle present in Yaşar Yaşamaz's full name, for his first name roughly translates as Will Live and his last name translates as Can't Live.[55] His cellmates commiserate with him about being in prison, or what they call "no life at all" (p. 29) ("Bu da yaşamak mı be!"),[56] to which Yaşar answers, "But each of you experiences good and bad, more or less… I can't live, I am always absent" (p. 30) ("Siz gene iyi kötü yaşıyorsunuz azbuçuk... Ben hiç yaşamıyorum, hepten yokum"). While Yaşar is of course beginning the tale of how he has never been able to get a national identity card (and all the trials and tribulations that he faces because he does not have an official identity, including his eventual incarceration), at the same time this articulation of his absence can be read as the first step in his becoming the storyteller (which, in turn, reflects Nesin's struggle to become a writer).

At the same time, Yaşar has interestingly escaped the dogmatic institution of the State by not ever having an identity card, which quite possibly allows him (even

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[53] I am aware that 'defter' here means an official book of population statistics, but I have taken the liberty of using the primary definition for 'defter'—notebook—because I think the praxis of Nesin's writing and Yaşar's storytelling is worthy of note.

[54] In the Emin Çölaşan interview, Nesin states he actually wrote in Ottoman script first, then re-wrote a second time in Turkish with Latin characters, and finally typed his writing (*İnsanlar Konuşa Konuşa*, p. 170).

[55] "Yaşar" (approximately 'Will Live') is a name parents often choose for the next child after miscarriages or after parents have lost a previous child at an early age—this is yet another parallel in Aziz Nesin's life, as four brothers died in infancy before he was born (See http://www.lightmillennium.org/winter_02/aziznesin_memoirs_hayri.html).

[56] Nesin seems to be problematizing living in institutions as not living at all—which makes the reader wonder whether Nesin was not so much kicked out of the army as straining to get out of it.

in prison) a certain freedom to tell stories (in a way that mirrors Aziz Nesin's own ability to write stories by taking on his father's name).

Roland Barthes begins "The Death of the Author" by asking who is speaking in a passage in Balzac's *Sarassine*, and by the end of the introductory paragraph, Barthes comes to the conclusion that

> It will always be impossible to know, for the good reason that all writing is itself this special voice... literature is that neuter, that composite, that oblique into which every subject escapes, the trap where all identity is lost, beginning with the very identity of the body that writes. (*Image, Music, Text*, p. 142)

Yaşar begins to take on the official dogma of the state—the tautology that he does not exist—when he lands in prison, where, as his cellmates say, "Who is living Yaşar Yaşamaz! As if any of us is really living" (p. 29) ("Kim yaşıyor ki Yaşar Yaşamaz! Hangimiz yaşıyoruz sanki"). The offhanded way this remark is tossed out as the whole group is laughing at the contradiction of Yaşar's name belies the underlying cynicism of the statement. In fact, this statement combined with Yaşar responding that he is always absent intimates that this protagonist has fallen into the Barthesian 'oblique into which every subject escapes'. Yaşar's story begins here, where in Foucault's words, he "…must assume the dead man in the game of writing" (p. 207).

In the way this mirrors Nesin's own beginnings as a writer, Yaşar's self-erasure can be cast as Nesin writing his own death. On the one hand, Nesin's taking up the challenge of writing in the face of the army's anti-writing dogma is not entirely intransitive; at the same time, however, as third lieutenant Mehmet Nusret Nesin disappears, there is a strong element of intransitivity—particularly because, as Ali Nesin says on the Nesin Vakfı (Foundation) website, Aziz Nesin was only paid one lira per story (a paltry sum even at that time). In a sense, Yaşar's loss of identity reflects Nesin's dive into his own absolute disappearance:

> As soon as a fact is *narrated* no longer with a view to acting directly on reality but intransitively, that is to say, finally outside of any function other than that of the very practice of the symbol itself, this disconnection occurs, the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, writing begins. (p. 142)

In putting his whole military career aside to take up the terribly risky career of writing, Nesin's challenge against dogmatic authority may seem to be a reckless one, particularly in light of his impoverished origins. This view, however, is predicated on Nesin entering into such a choice thinking he, Mehmet Nusret Nesin (his proper name), was simply changing careers. But in looking at Nesin's life from the perspective presented through Yaşar's story, we see that Nesin takes on another name, 'Aziz Nesin' (his father's name that literally means 'Saint What Are You'), and begins writing not as he himself challenging the military, but rather through the act of symbolically killing himself. Thus, in a way Mehmet Nusret Nesin dies and 'Aziz Nesin' appears simultaneous with the writing. In Barthesian terms, "…the modern scriptor is born simultaneously with the text, [and] is in no way equipped with a being preceding or exceeding the writing..." (p. 145).

The same happens for Yaşar Yaşamaz, whose first and last name has a second meaning when combined, which is "As Soon As He Lives".[57] Furthermore, the text states, "...Yaşar sat in the best place [for him to be heard], and, *living*, would tell the story of his non-living" (p. 115, my emphasis) ("...Yaşar da koğuşun en uygun yerine oturup, yaşarken yaşamazlığının öyküsünü anlatıyordu"). Yaşar does not really live until he becomes a storyteller, in the same way that 'Aziz Nesin' comes to life with the start of his writing. As Foucault describes the author function, "The author's name serves to characterize a certain mode of being of discourse: the fact that the

[57] In fact, the subject is not stated in this formation, so it literally means "As Soon As He/She/It/We/They/You/I Live," and as such depends on context.

discourse has an author's name… it is a speech that must be received in a certain mode and that, in a given culture, must receive a certain status" (p. 211). Even though Yaşar's story is one of non-existence, the telling of it nonetheless generates the very recognition, or status, that the State refuses to confer on him.

Thus, the humanistic challenge that both Nesin and Vonnegut take up against the dogma of the military and the militaristic message, is not an alternate dogma but rather absenting themselves—dying—as they take up writing (as Yaşar says, 'I can't live, I am always absent'). Nesin embraces this loss of his old identity in what suddenly becomes the most radical of all possible challenges. Nesin's son, Ali Nesin, has written a piece on the first thirty years of his father's life entitled "The Three Chances that His Life Gave to Aziz Nesin" ("Yaşamın Aziz Nesin'e Tanıdığı Üç Şans"), in which he defines the first two chances as a mother and father who loved Aziz Nesin, and then says "Were these two chances enough to make Aziz Nesin Aziz Nesin? Of course they weren't. More was needed. I have always been astonished at how Aziz Nesin became Aziz Nesin"[58] ("Bu iki şans Aziz Nesin'i Aziz Nesin yapmaya yeter mi? Yetmez elbet. Fazlası gerekir. Aziz Nesin nasıl Aziz Nesin oldu diye hep şaşırmışımdir"). Ali Nesin argues that Aziz Nesin's poor education (his 'third chance') made him who he was because he had to learn multiple different ways of figuring things out, and Ali Nesin equates this to the thinking style of the best mathematicians (Ali Nesin is himself a professor of mathematics). While there is no doubt truth in this explanation, as Ali Nesin points out, "How could he [Aziz Nesin] have received a good education? Was it even possible for someone born in 1915 and in Turkey to receive a good education?" ("Nasıl iyi eğitim alabilirdi ki?

[58] See http://www.nesinvakfi.org/aziz_nesin_ilk_30_yil.html

1915 ve Türkiye doğumlu birinin iyi eğitim alması mümkün müdür?") Instead of this good but somewhat contradictory explanation, an application of the Barthes quotes above (despite the fact that it is not what Barthes goes on to say in the rest of his essay) could well argue Mehmet Nusret Nesin died by entering the writing, and Aziz Nesin became "empty outside of the very enunciation which defines it, suffices to make language 'hold together', suffices, that is to say, to exhaust it." This may in fact inform observations by a plethora of Nesin's contemporaries that he seemed to be writing non-stop all his life.[59]

When Yaşar becomes the storyteller for the first cell block, he replaces the previous storyteller who had been kicked out because he broke the cardinal rule and stole from the thieves. Yaşar is compared with the old storyteller thus: "[The old] storyteller wouldn't start telling his stories until he had smoked his heroin and lay down. Yaşar Yaşamaz, beyond speaking more sweetly, would speak in the center of everyone so they could all see his face as he spoke" (p. 43) ("[Eski] Anlatıcı, eroini çekip yatağına uzanmadan anlatamazdı. Yaşar Yaşamaz, ondan daha tatlı anlatttıktan başka, herkesin ortasında anlattığından konuşurken yüzü görülüyordu"). This, too, aligns with the Barthesian paradigm of the scriptor, in which the old conception of the writer as depicting a fictional world is replaced by the writing as verbal form:

> The fact is (or, it follows) that *writing* can no longer designate an operation of recording, notation, representation, 'depiction' (as the Classics would say); rather, it designates exactly what linguists, referring to Oxford philosophy, call a performative, a rare verbal form (exclusively given in the first person and in the present tense) in which the enunciation has no other content (contains no other proposition) than the act by which it is uttered... (p. 145-146)

[59] See, for instance, Abdullah Gürgün's *Aziz Nesin ve İsveç Serüveni* (*Aziz Nesin and His Adventure in Sweden*); Gürgün says Nesin worked "…like a bee right up to the last moment" (p. 14) ("...son an a'kadar arı gibi çalıştı").

This focus on writing as 'a rare verbal form' is confirmed in Foucault's "What is an Author?" in both the quotation he takes from Beckett at the outset, 'What does it matter who is speaking?', and his first introduction to the 'author function' (quoted above) where he says "The author's name serves to characterize a certain mode of being of discourse… it is a speech that must be received in a certain mode" (p. 211).

Concerning the Barthes quotation on the 'rare verbal form' first person, *Yaşar Ne Yaşar Ne Yaşamaz* presents an interesting conundrum in terms of point of view. While the narrative is technically in third person, all of Yaşar's stories about his past leading up to his incarceration are in first person—the very narratives that have been described as "the stories of his [Yaşar's] non-living." And herein lies a contradiction, for someone must tell the story of the storyteller telling the story. In other words, the contradiction for Yaşar is that, even as he comes alive in the performance of his non-life and in so doing begins to find a way to challenge the State dogma that he does not exist, nonetheless it is his non-living that he relates, and a non-living that describes him telling his story. That is, Yaşar only comes alive through his death, and it is ultimately Yaşar's embracing his non-living that frees him (metaphorically and literally) when he walks out of prison, as opposed to his futile attempts pre-prison to convince the State that he does exist and so deserves an identity card. At the same time, these stories of non-living are the ones that make him a storyteller and so give him life. In a nod to this paradox, at the very end of the novel, Yaşar finishes his story a couple of days before he leaves and yet, "Every evening after dinner, the convicts of the first cell block had a hard time spending the couple of hours [before bed], feeling that something was missing" (p. 342) ("Her akşam yemeğinden sonra birinci koğuşun hükümlüleri, ne yapacaklarını bilmedikler bikaç saati zorlukla geçiriyor, bir eksiklk duyuyorlardı"). Consequently, despite the fact that Yaşar is still

right there in prison, he has once again ceased to exist for those around him, because his telling the story of his non-living is over.[60]

This is part and parcel with the inescapable sense of failure that accompanied Nesin's taking up the challenge and beginning to write—a subject that will be explored at length in the next chapter.

2.5 The function of humor in Yaşar's challenge

In addition to the non-conventional time structure whereby Yaşar tells of his past leading up to incarceration as he works through the days towards his release, the very first chapter of the novel is a flash-forward which relays an incident from right after Yaşar's last story (the one in which we find out how he landed in prison—not surprisingly because he goes crazy in the records office demanding that he be recognized as alive by the State, finally physically attacking the civil servant who refuses him). The flash-forward incident in the first chapter begins by describing the prison imam's view of his 'flock':

> He had come to care so little for those who had been arrested and convicted that as he passed through the yard of the prison, all the faces looked like one another. It was as if all the faces had come through a lathe. (p. 11)
>
> Tutuklu ve hükümlüler onu o denli ilgilendirmiyordu ki camiye girip çıkmak için cezaevi bahçesinden geçerken bütün yüzleri birbirine benzetiyordu. Sanki tornadan çıkmış gibiydi bütün yüzler.

This seems callous at first, particularly for someone who has been entrusted with the prisoners' spiritual well-being—and, left at that, the later incident between Yaşar and

[60] Interestingly enough, Yaşar's stories about his non-life are both intransitive (in that nothing is affected, over and over) and yet transitive in the way they get him finally thrown into prison and thereby starting to tell his story.

the imam would naturally be pure satire. But the imam is humanized, despite his position as a cog in the doubly dogmatic machine of the State and religion, for

> From time to time, he had nurtured hope for some among these sinning slaves. When these few would fall into prison, they would not come out of the mosque all day… but the moment they were free of prison, they went back to their ways of sin, they would let the devil get the better of them. (p. 11)
>
> Zaman zaman bu günahlı kullardan kimileri için umutlara kapıldığı olmuştu. Böyleleri cezaevine düşünce, gündüzleri camiden çıkmazlar... ama cezaevinden kurtulur kurtulmaz da eski günah yollarına sapar, şeytana uyarlardı.

This is how the imam comes to be so jaded—resembling, even though this connection is never directly made in the novel, the standoffish civil servants who refuse to recognize Yaşar Yaşamaz's official existence despite his standing right there in front of them.[61]

The incident at the center of the first chapter begins when, "With little time left before the end of his sentence, Yaşar Yaşamaz gave himself to religion" (p. 12) ("Hapis cezasının bitmesine pekaz kala Yaşar Yaşamaz, kendini dine vermişti"). Yaşar starts constantly cleaning the mosque and attending prayers right behind the imam. At first, the imam ignores him, but after some time, he reluctantly allows himself to believe that Yaşar has, indeed, changed, and ends up praying that "Whatever you wish for, may Allah turn it into gold my son!" (p. 12) ("Allah tuttuğunu altın etsin evladım!"). And suddenly, it does—Yaşar is always flush with money. In a fashion that is a classic example of Nesin humor, it turns out that Yaşar has been using the imam's robes to smuggle heroin into the prison, which the imam discovers and so chases Yaşar out of the mosque, although he doesn't dare report him for fear he will also be caught up in the ensuing investigation (p. 13-19).

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[61] It should be noted that there are a few notable exceptions in the book to the mass of wooden civil servants.

At the end of the novel, this whole chapter is re-told in a compressed, one-paragraph version (p. 342). This short paragraph is immediately after the one (partially quoted above) that describes how:

> After Yaşar had told [the story] of all that had happened to him, he did not continue to tell [stories]. Every evening after dinner, the convicts of the first cell block had a hard time spending the couple of hours [before bed], feeling that something was missing. (p. 342)
>
> Yaşar, başından geçenleri anlattıktan sonra, artık anlatıcılığını sürdürmedi. Her akşam yemeğinden sonra birinci koğuşun hükümlüleri, ne yapacaklarını bilmedikleri bikaç saat zorlukla geçiriyor, bir eksiklik duyuyorlardı.

Only now that it has been placed into the context of Yaşar's full life do we realize that this incident takes place immediately after Yaşar is no longer the storyteller. While Yaşar clearly will not go back to non-recognition, his life after storytelling nonetheless returns him to a kind of non-living status—that of working for a dogmatic institution, even if this dogma is gaming the system at every turn in the way that he plays the imam in order to smuggle heroin into the prison.

Once the storytelling has stopped, he becomes again caught up in the world of dogmatic institutions. On the night after Yaşar is released, the convict known as the sculptor (he makes statues out of spit out wads of paper) says, "We filled him up…" (343) ("İyice doldurduk..."), but in fact it is when Yaşar is the empty storyteller/writer that he is most alive, and that his challenge against the dogmatic institution of the State (and others) is the strongest (for that, in fact, is the heart of the novel). While the humor of the first chapter, as it introduces us to Yaşar Yaşamaz, is decidedly humanist in its anti-religion and anti-prison stances, the repeat of this story at the end makes us realize that as Yaşar's stories have come to an end, we do not know this new Yaşar, and neither do those who were so enthralled by his stories before:

> As Yaşar Yaşamaz left the prison, his clothes astonished all of the inmates. On the date of his release, all of a sudden he was so well dressed that he was better dressed than the guards, the civil servants, the director—no one was as well dressed as he was. (p. 342)
>
> Cezaevinden çıkarken Yaşar Yaşamaz'ın kılığı bütün hükümlüleri şaşırttı. Tahliye olacağı gün birdenbire öyle şıklaşmıştı ki, cezaevinin müdürü, memurları da içinde, cezaevinde onun kadar şık giyimli hiçkimse yoktu.

This external transformation into an assumedly successful illegal career in Barthesian terms ends Yaşar's life for us and for the other convicts, as he was only ever truly alive in and through the emptying act of his storytelling, through which the formal details to be found in a short paragraph become a humorous, humanist chapter.

2.6 The background to Vonnegut's challenge

Almost no two characters' early childhoods could have been more different than the two autobiographically described by Aziz Nesin and Kurt Vonnegut. *Fates Worse Than Death* (1991) is essentially the second volume of Vonnegut's autobiography, as it is described as the sequel to *Palm Sunday* (1980). The first book delineates how the Vonnegut family was upper class for Vonnegut's "…father, an architect of modest means, married one of the richest girls in town" (*Palm Sunday*, p. 189). However, in his seventh year, because Vonnegut's family lost much of their money in the stock market crash of 1929, he was "…taken out of private school a couple of years before, so that my classmates were no longer the children of the rich and the powerful. They were the children of mechanics and clerks and mailmen and so on" (237). While their circumstances never quite came to the level of the Nesin family, the Vonneguts had clearly plummeted in society—a fact that Vonnegut attributed to

his mother's fight with madness possibly caused by chemical-dependency, and eventual suicide when he was 22 years old.[62]

Nonetheless, Vonnegut was accepted to Cornell University, and in *Fates Worse Than Death*, he describes how he started trying out practical jokes there. His first practical joke was to enter "…the final examinations of several large courses in which I was not enrolled, [where I] stood up, tore the questions to pieces, threw them into the face of the instructor, and exited, slamming the door behind me" (p. 21). Vonnegut then allows himself a brief moment of self-congratulations in which he says, "…this sort of behavior at finals became epidemic" (p. 21). Even at this early stage, Vonnegut's humanistic desire to stand up to the tyranny of rigid dogma—in this case that of the classic university exam—was already taking shape, and what's more, it took the form of humor.

All the more surprising, then, is Vonnegut's discussion of what he deems yet another practical joke.

> My final practical joke at Cornell, like my first one, made a jackass out of nobody but myself… I had enlisted in the Army and was waiting to be called. A Major General came to inspect us. I went to that inspection wearing every sort of medal, for swimming, for scouting, for Sunday-school attendance or whatever, that I could borrow from anyone.
> …I am sure… that his report shadowed me, as it should have, during my subsequent three years as a full-time soldier, ensuring that I, until the very end, would never rise above the rank of Private First Class. (p. 21)

Once again, in an interesting but opposite parallel, Vonnegut describes how he became a soldier at about the same time in life that Nesin graduated from the military academy and began his service, but while Nesin quickly rose through the ranks, Vonnegut condemned himself to being the lowest possible rank right from the

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[62] *Fates Worse Than Death*, p. 33-34.

beginning—almost as if he hungered to feel the full dogmatic weight of the military upon him.

2.7 Vonnegut's challenge

Unlike Nesin, Vonnegut did not publish his first pieces while in the military, he published his first story, "Report on the Barnhouse Effect" in *Collier's* in 1950.[63] At the same time, it could be argued that Vonnegut began his writing career (though unpaid) at *The Cornell Sun* where he was a staff reporter from 1941-1943,[64] writing light, witty pieces such as the following which are hard to reconcile with his later writing:

> (April 24, 1941)
> A Kiss
> If you're as crazy about the facts of life as we are this definition will send you. A kiss is a noun but it is generally used as a conjunction. It is seldom declined and is more common than proper. It is not very singular in that it is usually used in the plural—anyway, it agrees with men. (p. 92)

While both of these are salient starting possibilities, I will make the argument here that Vonnegut *did* begin his particular combination of humanist, humorous writing during his time in the army—namely, in the letter to his family that he wrote on May 29, 1945, alerting them to the fact that he was alive, as "I'm told that you were probably never informed that I was anything other than 'missing in action'" (1945, p.1).[65] As he relates on the first page of the letter, he had been taken prisoner by the

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[63] See the Paris Review interview, p. 197 and *Palm Sunday*, p. 88.
[64] See *Kurt Vonnegut: The Cornell Sun Years 1941-1943*. While he did publish a series of humorous short pieces in *The Cornell Sun*, they were transcriptions of jokes and not humorous stories of a humanistic nature as his novels and short stories invariably were.
[65] The letter has been scanned in its entirety at https://archive.org/details/KurtVonnegut1945LetterToFamily.

Nazis on December 19, 1944. In the six months' time between December and the following May, Vonnegut's family and friends probably thought he had died.

The tone of the letter, perhaps rightly so, is not one of apology for circumstances beyond his control, nor is it outrage that "Chances are you failed to receive any of the letters I wrote from Germany" (p. 1). Instead, what would later become Vonnegut's identifiably dark, wry sense of humor rolls off the page, beginning with the second paragraph:

> …our division was cut to ribbons by Hitler's last thrust through Luxembourg and Belgium. Seven Fanatical Panzer Divisions hit us… The other American Divisions on our flanks managed to pull out: we were obliged to fight. Bayonets aren't much good against tanks… and our casualties out-numbered those who could still fight – so we gave up. The 106th got a Presidential Citation and some British Decoration from Montgomery for it, I'm told, but I'll be damned if it was worth it. I was one of the few who weren't wounded. For that much thank God. (p. 1)

Here are the beginnings of the short, half-serious, half-facetious phrases (like "So it goes") that would later become synonymous with Vonnegut's writing: "we were obliged to fight", "so we gave up", and "For that much thank God." At the same time, while the first few lines begin from a distinctly pro-US and anti-Nazi stance, even by the end of this second paragraph, he is already questioning the import of these medals—a questioning that he himself relates to his earlier, comic display of medals to the Major General at Cornell prior to the war:

> When the war was over (forty-five years ago!), I like everybody else was entitled to wear a badge and several ribbons… It is my wry satisfaction now, since I know what I did to deserve such ornaments, to regard them as no more meaningful than the borrowed trinkets I wore at that fateful ROTC inspection so long ago. The joke at the beginning was the joke at the end. (*Fates Worse Than Death*, p. 21)

The horror Vonnegut saw and experienced in WWII in general and particularly around the firebombing of Dresden is bookended here by jokes on the inability of

these (or any) 'trinkets' to represent what had happened. This will be further explored in Chapter 3 which is focused on Vonnegut and Nesin's humor.

Another aspect of this letter home once Vonnegut is freed portrays a quintessential humanist stylistic in that it is a critique of both sides in the conflict. On the one hand, Vonnegut describes how "the supermen" marched the prisoners (Vonnegut included) "…sixty miles, I think, where we were loaded and locked up, sixty men to each small, unventilated, unheated box car. There were no sanitary accommodations—the floors were covered with fresh cow dung" (p. 1). At the same time, Vonnegut is careful to note in the same paragraph how "…the Royal Air Force bombed and strafed our unmarked train. They killed about one-hundred-and-fifty of us" (p. 1). This theme of his fellow US POWs being killed by Allied forces recurs numerous times throughout the letter. And later, just after he describes how "They beat me up a little. I was fired as group leader. Beatings were very small time: -- (*sic*) one boy starved to death and the SS Troops shot two for stealing food", he very simple states:

> On February 14th, the Americans came over, followed by the R.A.F. [T]heir combined labors killed 250,000 people in twenty-four hours and destroyed all of Dresden—possibly the world's most beautiful city. But not me. (p. 2)

The killing of three and hundreds of thousands are allotted almost the same space in the letter, as this humanist look at the inhuman reality of war reveals ever-increasing horrors with each line.

As opposed to Vonnegut's first foray into writing in the form of his *Cornell Sun* pieces, here a full array of humor types is on parade, from satire and sarcasm to self-effacement and even irony. Vonnegut is beaten because he "…told the guards just what I was going to do to them when the Russians came" (p. 2); but when they are finally abandoned by their German guards as the Russians come closer, "…the

Russians were intent on mopping up isolated outlaw resistance in our sector. Their planes (P-39's) strafed and bombed us, killing fourteen, but not me" (p. 3).[66] At this point, Vonnegut's small band of American POWs have been attacked more times by the Allies than by the Germans—a fact that Vonnegut makes comic, even as he keeps it tragic.

2.8 The challenge in *Slaughterhouse Five*

The full title of this novel is *Slaughterhouse Five or The Children's Crusade: A Duty-Dance with Death*. Approximately halfway through the first chapter of *Slaughterhouse Five,* which is metafictionally narrated in the first-person,[67] 'Vonnegut' describes a meeting with Mary O'Hare, the wife of an army friend of his (p. 6-8). Vonnegut can't figure out why she is angry with him until she blurts out, "'You were just babies then!'" (p. 7) Vonnegut realizes that she is under the impression he is going to write a *pro*-war book where the reality of how they "had been foolish virgins in the war" would be re-written with lead characters that could be played by the likes of John Wayne, but "She didn't want her babies or anybody else's babies killed in wars. And she thought wars were partly encouraged by books and movies" (7). Vonnegut then relates how he corrected her misimpressions:

> So I held up my right hand and I made her a promise. 'Mary,' I said, '…I give you my word of honor: there won't be a part for Frank Sinatra or John Wayne.

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[66] The first time Vonnegut makes a comment like this it is "but I didn't" which in the later instances he changes to this 'but not me,' further demonstrating how he is refining these short phrases starting in this letter.

[67] Much scholarship has gone into the porous divider between Vonnegut and his characters. While Thomas Wymer and Todd F. Davis effectively argue that Billy Pilgrim should not be conflated with Vonnegut, Kathryn Hume makes the case that "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" ("Vonnegut's Self-Projections: Characters and Symbolic Fiction," 1982, p. 177).

> 'I tell you what,' I said, 'I'll call it The Children's Crusade.'
> She was my friend after that. (p. 8)

The three titles compacted into one for this novel are the first indication of the humanist humor at work here. The first title is the name of the meat storage locker where Vonnegut slept as a prisoner of war (‘Schlachthof Fünf,’ or ‘Slaughterhouse Five’)—cold, deep quarters that, ironically, ended up saving his and the other POWs’ lives. Then comes Vonnegut’s promise to Mary O’Hare, who understood that the soldiers used in various wars are merely expendable child-pawns in games of power (and the phrase brings home the absurdity of the Children’s Crusade and really all wars fought by 18-year-old children; I will return to this in Chapter 3). The last section of the title is clear enough in its reference to the needless and stupid destruction of war—the very same as that apparent in his letter to his family in May of 1945, in which even when the other US divisions pulled out on either side of the one Vonnegut was in, his was “obliged to fight”—in a duty-dance with death (this short phrase so wonderfully and immediately demands why they were “obliged to fight”).

In fact, the tone of the letter Vonnegut writes his family in May of 1945 indicates that this writer is so traumatized he is not in a position to worry about “entering into his own death” by taking up writing. Rather, the tone is essentially one of nihilism, given the repetition of the line “But I didn’t” (p. 2) after descriptions of how people in his group died. Maurice Blanchot, in “Literature and the Right to Death,” also describes the writer’s beginnings in nihilistic terms:

> …realizing that the work cannot be planned, but only carried out, that it has value, truth, and reality only through the words which unfold it in time and inscribe it in space, he will begin to write… like a nothingness working in nothingness, to borrow an expression of Hegel’s. (p. 304)

We can almost see the exhausted, traumatized Vonnegut typing away to his family at home, trying to do the impossible—namely, to briefly (humorously!) describe the horrors he had been through over the last six months they probably assumed he was dead. It would be hard to find a better description of 'a nothingness working in nothingness' than this.

Even more incredibly, circumstances cut Vonnegut off from his family yet again as he explains in the last line of the letter: "I can't receive mail here, so don't write" (p. 3). Vonnegut has fulfilled the very role of Barthes' scriptor from his family's perspective as they read this letter, in that they must have assumed Vonnegut was dead immediately prior to the arrival of the letter (or at least they had been told he was 'missing in action'), and with this last line, he is once again completely unreachable—and so he comes to exist only through the letter itself.

All of which leads to the question of why, if this is indeed when Vonnegut becomes a 'nothingness working in nothingness,' it took Vonnegut 24 years after this letter was sent to write *Slaughterhouse Five* (1969). The first chapter begins with the sentence, "All this happened, more or less" but this is quickly challenged by the very next sentence, "The war parts, anyway, are pretty much true" (p. 1). A further confusion arises when, on the next page, the writer says, "…I thought it would be easy for me to write about the destruction of Dresden…" (p. 2), but then goes on to state how, 24 years earlier,

> …not many words about Dresden came from my mind then—not enough of them to make a book, anyway. And not many words come now, either, when I have become an old fart with his memories and his Pall Malls, with his sons full grown. (p. 3)

This explains why the scenes focusing on World War II appear to comprise less than half the novel itself.[68] Vonnegut does a poor job explaining the 24-year interim between his letter home and the appearance of the novel, but it seems this is not a conscious contradiction. Additionally, as Blanchot puts it, this is "…the [writer's] certainty that what bursts into the light is none other than what was sleeping in the night. The writer… apparently cannot be asked to justify this sentence, since for him nothing else exists" (305). Thus, Vonnegut cannot see how the novel itself disproves his statement that 'not many words about Dresden' have come from his mind—he sees his novel as a thin failure and even its actuality cannot disprove this sentence for him.

Much of the first chapter, in fact, is Vonnegut's description of how hard it was to write this book, but also how he kept coming back to it. At one point towards the end, he returns to this erroneous idea that it is overly short in a paragraph directed to his editor and publisher Seymour Lawrence (Sam):

> It is so short and jumbled and jangled, Sam, because there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre. Everybody is supposed to be dead, to never say anything or want anything ever again. Everything is supposed to be very quiet after a massacre, and it always is, except for the birds.
> And what do the birds say? All there is to say about a massacre, things like '*Poo-tee-weet*?' (p. 24)

Vonnegut has returned to the "But not me" sentiment of his letter home twenty-some years earlier, but the twist that 'Everybody is supposed to be dead' not only makes an anomaly of Vonnegut but even denotes how the entire novel arises from this glitch in what should have happened.

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[68] While I have not done an exact page count, there are 23 war-related scenes developed in the novel, probably averaging 4 pages each when all the pieces are put together, which only makes for approximately 100 pages out of the novel's 275 total pages.

Thus, the first character in *Slaughterhouse Five*—the metafictional 'Vonnegut' character—speaks from the position of the death that 'is supposed to' have befallen him, in a way that is very similar to how Aziz Nesin speaks from the position of the 'dead' Mehmet Nusret Nesin. Moreover, in the same way that Yaşar only comes to exist during his stories of non-existence, in the first few pages of Chapter 2 of *Slaughterhouse Five*, the narrator describes how the main character, Billy Pilgrim, was in a plane that "…crashed on top of Sugarbush Mountain, in Vermont. Everybody was killed but Billy. So it goes. While Billy was recuperating in a hospital in Vermont, his wife died accidentally of carbon-monoxide poisoning. So it goes" (p. 31).[69] After this, he returned home and "…he was quiet for a while" (p. 32). But just after the death of all around him that he, too, should have died:

> And then, without any warning, Billy went to New York City, and got on an all-night radio program devoted to talk. He told about having come unstuck in time. He said, too, that he had been kidnapped by a flying saucer in 1967. The saucer was from the planet Tralfamadore, he said. He was taken to Tralfamadore, where he was displayed naked in a zoo, he said. He was mated there with a former Earthling movie star named Montana Wildhack. (p. 32)

In other words, he tells the story of his non-existence, and in so doing, is finally alive—later, as he types out letters to the editor describing his story, "The cockles of Billy's heart, at any rate, were glowing coals. What made them so hot was Billy's belief that he was going to comfort so many people with the truth about time" (35). This delight contrasts the earlier description of Billy's condition, when he is unable to discuss it: "He is in a constant state of stage fright, he says, because he never knows what part of his life he is going to have to act in next" (29). In the end, Billy's

[69] In the re-telling of the airplane crash, on page 199, the co-pilot also survives—this may have been a simple oversight or it may be a cue given to the reader not to completely trust the third-person narrator.

telling of his story melts into the novel, as he begins to explain his first coming 'unstuck in time'—like Yaşar, he only comes alive once he is able to tell his story.

2.9 The function of humor in Vonnegut's challenge

The 'Vonnegut' narrator in the first chapter talks about how he told people he met for years that he was working on a book about Dresden. One such person was the movie producer, Harrison Star.

> "You know what I say to people when I hear they're writing anti-war books?"
> "No. What *do* you say, Harrison Starr?"
> "I say, 'Why don't you write an anti-*glacier* book instead?"
> What he meant, of course, was that there would always be wars, that they were as easy to stop as glaciers. I believe that, too.
> And even if wars didn't keep coming like glaciers, there would still be plain old death. (p. 4)

The sarcasm and satire of the italicized words ('what *do* you say' and 'anti-*glacier* book', respectively) are certainly humorous, but perhaps most interestingly, the passage arguably hits its greatest point of humor in the surprising truth of the final sentence: 'there would still be plain old death.' This harkens back to the short phrase punctuating Vonnegut's letter home after being a POW: 'But not me.' These short phrases are one of Vonnegut's best humorous devices, and they almost exclusively focus on death—they catch the reader's attention and point out the arbitrary nature of death.

When Billy Pilgrim starts to tell his story about being taken by the Tralfamadorians and how he hops around in time, he describes the origin of what would become Vonnegut's signature short phrase after the publication of *Slaughterhouse Five*, "So it goes":

> When a Tralfamadorian sees a corpse, all he thinks is that the dead person is in a 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." (p. 34)

"So it goes" and "But not me" both incorporate a blasé attitude to death that does not separate the circumstances, numbers, or any other details. At the same time, the short, spoken aspects of each phrase underscore the truth of any phrase uttered/written about death—namely, that the speaker/writer is not dead. Both phrases seem to indicate that death happens, and that life nevertheless goes on.

In the end, Vonnegut, like Nesin, 'entered into his own death' in the action of taking up writing; yet each of them is then able to make short, declaratively humorous pronouncements that prove he has also 'made himself a reality through [this] action' in Blanchot's words (as quoted at the outset to this chapter). In a sense, it is this affirmation of life from a place of death that Vonnegut points out when he discusses how death and humor are connected in *A Man Without a Country* (2005):

> I was working on a funny television series years ago. We were trying to put a show together that, as a basic principle, mentioned death in every episode and that this ingredient would make any laughter deeper without the audience's realizing how we were inducing belly laughs. (p. 16-17)

In a book review of *Going All the Way* by Dan Wakefield,[70] Vonnegut repeats and refines this sentiment.

> This book [*Going All the Way*] is full of belly laughs, but I am suspicious of belly laughs as entirely happy experiences. The only way to get a belly laugh, I've found, is to undermine a surface joke with more unhappiness than most mortals can bear. (p. 118)

[70] Reprinted in Vonnegut's *Wampeters, Foma, & Granfalloons (Opinions)*, p. 117-119.

In the end, this ‘belly laughter’ comes from a place of great pain—as if from one who has ‘entered his own death’ but is nonetheless kept alive through the expression of the work itself.

The next chapter investigates the failure incumbent in taking up the humanist challenge which has already begun to arise in this chapter. While the challenge arises in the face of a dogmatic institution (the State, the military, even time), the failure does not arise from this confrontation but rather from the writing itself. The great sacrifice inherent in the humanist challenge—entering into one’s own death and simultaneously living only in the work—fails to realize results, or certainly results commensurate with such a sacrifice, and this is a central part of the next chapter, as is the unimaginable result on the rare occasion when the humanist challenge succeeds.

CHAPTER 3

HUMANIST FAILURE

3.1 Yaşar's exigent failure

Yaşar Yaşamaz's stories of his life before prison are humorous not only in each individual instance but also in the slow accumulation of alternating existence and non-existence, depending on whether the institution in question wants to use him or is expected to help him.

> That's the way it is, fellows, [when] I'm going to school, you're dead they say. When it's time for military conscription, you're alive they say. I want to claim my inheritance, you're dead they tell me. They want to collect my father's taxes, they say I'm alive. If I'm alive, give me my identity card, I say—no, you're not alive, they say. When they're going to throw me in the lunatic asylum, you're alive they say… (p. 89)
>
> İşte böyle ağbiler, okula gideceğim, ölmüşsün diyorlar. Askere alacakları zaman yaşıyorsun diyorlar. Mirasımı almak isterim, ölmüşsün derler. Babamın vergi borcunu alacakları zaman yaşıyorsun derler. Yaşıyorsam nüfuskâğıdımı verin derim, yok, sen yaşamıyorsun derler. Tımarhaneye atacakları zaman yaşıyorsun derler...

This formulation presents a double-edged failure, wherein Yaşar fails to secure any recognition when he needs it, and yet is nothing but successful in securing recognition when it would be better not to.[71] The back-and-forth quality of this description (and others like it peppered throughout the novel), Yaşar's unending persistence and the concomitant hopelessness of his situation, recalls the ancient myth of Sisyphus. The obligations of military service, paying his father's back taxes, getting thrown in first a mental institution and then prison—what are these

[71] This failure that cuts both ways is equally applicable to Nesin and Vonnegut writing, as we shall see later in this chapter.

undertakings if not the great struggle of pushing a boulder up a hill? This is then followed by the expectation each time that the boulder will stay this time, that he will be able to get his inheritance, get a job, marry his love Anşe, and somehow finally receive his proper State identification card.

Albert Camus' "The Myth of Sisyphus" deals in depth with this story of "futile and hopeless labor" (p. 75); however, Camus' first line in the extended essay opens the subject of the "…one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide" (p. 4), and the essay only returns to the title myth towards the end of the piece. At first, this seems strange because the myth of Sisyphus does not center on suicide, but it soon becomes apparent that Camus is drawing a parallel between the absurdity of Sisyphus' famous punishment—"ceaselessly rolling a rock to the top of a mountain, whence the stone would fall back of its own weight" (p. 75)—and the absurdity of existence. Camus gives a number of reasons for this absurdity:

> You continue making the gestures commanded by existence for many reasons, the first of which is habit. Dying voluntarily implies that you have recognized, even instinctively, the ridiculous character of that habit, the absence of any profound reason for living, the insane character of that daily agitation, and the uselessness of suffering. (p. 4-5)

Further on, Camus questions the two main ways of refuting this absurdity: "Does its [existence's] absurdity require one to escape it through hope or suicide—this is what must be clarified, hunted down, and elucidated while brushing aside all the rest" (p. 7).

While Camus indicates that hope is connected with a belief in God and/or an afterlife, and interrogates Kierkegaard's and Jaspers' thought from this perspective, I will apply Camus' arguments first to Yaşar's case in terms of Yaşar's constant hope that an external authority will give him recognition of his existence, and then to Yaşar's acceptance of the absurdity of his situation. Even after Yaşar lands in prison

and starts telling the tales of his non-living, while he has clearly lost all hope of finding a legal way of resolving his problems, he begins to put an increasing amount of hope into a super-criminal, Karakaplı Nizami Bey (Mr. Justice Upright). Mr. Justice Upright is, as the thieves in his cell block tell him, a man who can get anything done one way or another.

> An older convict who was greatly respected among the thieves said, "Ah, ah... my dear son Yaşar, why didn't you go and see Mr. Justice Upright… If you had gone to see him, he would have both gotten you an identity card just like you wanted and he would have grabbed your inheritance for you like that. He would have gotten you not just your father's inheritance but also your uncle's."
> Yaşar said, "But I don't have an uncle." (p. 123)

> Hırsızların piri sayılan yaşlı bir hükümlü,
> – Ah, ah... dedi, yahu Yaşar oğlum, sen neden Karakaplı Nizami Beyi gidip görmedin be... Ona gitseydin, hem sana istediğin gibi bir nüfuskâğıdı çıkartır, hem de mirasını şıp diye kopartır alırdı. Yalnız babandan kalan mirası değil, amcandan kalanları da alır verirdi sana.
> Yaşar,
> – Benim emicem [amcam] yok ki... dedi.

Despite the strange name given to this super-criminal, which surprises Yaşar momentarily (p. 124), Yaşar is intrigued, especially as his fellow convicts continue to bemoan his not having gone to "Mr. Justice Upright" when each of his attempts to gain official recognition or a job fail.

At one point, the "oldest convict in the cell block" ("Koğuşun en yaşlı hükümlüsü") follows one of these sessions of lamenting Yaşar's not using Justice Upright by saying, "A thousand thanks be to God, at least this country has Mr. Justice Upright if nothing else—if it weren't for him, our work would have long been done" (170) ("Allahıma bin şükür, bu memleketin hiç olmazsa Karakaplı Nizami Beyi var, o da olmasaymış, işimiz hepten bitikmiş..."). These types of comments, almost imbuing Justice Upright with god-like, or savior, qualities, push Yaşar to try and find him.

> Yaşar had set his mind on finding Mr. Justice Upright and asking this benevolent man who ran to everyone's aid to help him get an identity card. Even as he went to sleep in the prison, he didn't feel as hopeless as before. (p. 193)
>
> Karakaplı Nizami Beyi bulmak, ondan, o herkesin yardımına koşan iyiliksever adamdan kendisine bir nüfuskâğıda çıkarmasını ona rica etmek, Yaşar'ın kafasına iyice yerleşmişti. Cezaevinde yatarken bile, artık eskisi gibi umutsuz değildi.

In Camus' terms, Yaşar is slowly but surely putting all his hope for escape from the absurdity of his existence into finding and asking Justice Upright for help—and once he hears that Justice Upright is in the prison, he zeroes in on the prisoner with the highest number of convictions, King Sami (Kral Sami), as the most likely candidate (p. 193), so he starts treating this particular prisoner to food and tea and buys him clothes, all in hopes of convincing this Justice Upright (King Sami) to help him get an identity card. Unfortunately, at the end of the chapter, the convicts known as the Sculptor and the Petition Writer shatter Yaşar's hope when they describe how Mr. Justice Upright works:

> "Everything is by the book. What does doing it by the book mean? It means following the law. Laws are known as the book of justice, right… Well, if a man does things by the book of justice, it means he's doing an upright job."
> The Petition Writer explained it further: "That's why it's called Mr. Justice Upright." (p. 213)
>
> – Her işi kitabına uydurur. Kitabına uydurur ne demek? Kanununa uydurur demek. Kanunlara da karakaplı kitap denir ya... Yani herifçioğlu, karakaplı kitaba uydurur, nizamına göre iş yapar.
> Dilekçeci daha da açıkladı:
> – İşte buyüzden ona Karakaplı Nizami Bey denir.

As the truth begins to sink in, Yaşar thinks only of how much he has given to King Sami for naught. Only when the Cigarette Butt Hunter says, "Yaşar, son, all of your suffering has been for nothing" (214) ("Oğlum Yaşar, sen bunca çileyi boşuna çekmişsin"), does the full extent of Yaşar's failure come home to him.

Camus describes what happens when the illusion is broken and we find ourselves alone amidst the absurdity of existence:

> …in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. (p. 6)

Yaşar had started to build expectations that everything would be wonderful when he got out and Mr. Justice Upright helped him get his official identity card, then he could properly marry his childhood love, Anşe, and find a proper job and place to live. However, in one instant, this 'promised land' evaporates, and, fittingly, the title of the next chapter is "If You Die You Can't Die, If You Live You Can't Live" ("Ölsen Ölünmez, Yaşasan Yaşanmaz"), the first line of which is "Yaşar Yaşamaz fell into a profound disillusionment" (216) ("Yaşar Yaşamaz büyük düş kırıklığına uğramıştı"). In Yaşar's story of his pre-prison life in this chapter, he tells of how he finally cannot take it anymore and so he tries to commit suicide. The way he begins the story, his current problems melt into the story of his attempted suicide:

> – Yes fellows, my dear sirs… Can one live like this? Is this living? What I've suffered, man! After I was unable to prove I was alive, what does it matter, living or not living—
> King Sami said, "God's sakes, Yaşar, don't—"
> "Is it a matter of 'don't or won't' at this point—my soul has had enough—"
> "Don't—or are you going to take your own life?"
> "Death, death, what's death, man—I told myself, 'Yaşar, son, choose one of the many ways of dying!' I'll take rat poison and be free—I went to the pharmacy. (p. 220)

> – Evet ağbiler, emiceler [amcalar]... Böyle yaşanır mı? Bu da yaşamak mı? Nedir benim çektiğim be! Yaşadığımı ispat edemedikten sonra, yaşamışım n'olacak, yaşamamışım n'olacak...
> Kral Sami,
> – Aman Yaşar, sakın... dedi.
> – Sakını makını kaldı mı artık ağbi... Canıma tak demiş...
> – Yapma... Yoksa canına mı kıyacaksın?
> – Ölüm ölüm, bir ölüm ağbi... Kendi kendime, "Oğlum Yaşar, ölumlerden ölüm beğen!" dedim. İçerim fare zehirini, kurtulurum be... Gittim eczaneye.

Even as it fits his distraught state, this melding of suicide and storytelling seems to be an odd combination. Yet, Camus makes the same connection at the outset of "The Myth of Sisyphus":

> An act like this [suicide] is prepared within the silence of the heart, as is a great work of art. The man himself is ignorant of it. One evening he pulls the trigger or jumps. Of an apartment-building manager who had killed himself I was told that he had lost his daughter five years before, that he had changed greatly since, and that that experience had "undermined" him. A more exact word cannot be imagined. Beginning to think is beginning to be undermined. (p. 5)

Yaşar is undermined by his discovery that Justice Upright is not really a person, but this undermining has clearly happened before, through all his trials and travails prior to landing in prison. Yaşar's constant struggle with disillusionment, when he is left alone in the absurdity of his existence,[72] is akin to Sisyphus watching the boulder roll back down the mountain, followed by his descent to again take up his position behind the rock.

When Camus looks at the myth of Sisyphus towards the end of his essay, he says, "It is during that return, that pause, that Sisyphus interests me... [for] That hour like a breathing-space which returns as surely as his suffering, that is the hour of consciousness" (p. 76). This myth seems one of exceptional punishment, but Camus goes on to demonstrate how it metaphorically fits most people's experience of life: "The workman of today works every day in his life at the same tasks, and this fate is no less absurd. But it is tragic only at the rare moments when it becomes conscious" (p. 77). Therefore, in Sisyphus' return to the bottom of the hill to once again take up

[72] The description of Yaşar's attempted suicide is probably the best possible proof of life's absurdity, for he first tries rat poison, but the pharmacy has diluted it to such an extent that he just has a hallucination and wakes up, so then he tries to jump in front of a train, but the train never comes. Following a handful of such failures to pull of his own death, Yaşar gives up and decides to treat himself to a great meal, at which, of course, he is poisoned and almost dies.

his place, it would seem that his worker's consciousness is no doubt taken up with his suffering.

And yet, Camus goes on to say, "If the descent is thus sometimes performed in sorrow, it can also take place in joy. This word is not too much" (p. 77). Certainly, as Yaşar descends into his stories of his non-life, as the previous chapter points out, he finds recognition from the first cell block that he is never able to get from official State institutions. But Camus goes further: "One does not discover the absurd without being tempted to write a manual of happiness" (77). Yaşar's manual is comprised of the stories he tells—stories of almost unending frustration and difficulty that nonetheless (presumably) lead to his exiting the prison a new man and finding and marrying Anşe without worrying about his heretofore overwhelming need to get an official identity card. Camus finishes the same paragraph by describing the necessity of turning away from the needs and desires of the external authority:

> "I conclude that all is well," says Œdipus, and that remark is sacred... It drives out of this world a god who had come into it with dissatisfaction and a preference for futile sufferings. It makes of fate a human matter, which must be settled among men. (p. 77-78)

In a great contradiction, Yaşar's manual of happiness (which is nonetheless suffused with suffering) led him right to the door of suicide, and leads him back to storytelling when he fails by putting all his faith in King Sami as Mr. Justice Upright. This failure necessarily accompanies his challenge to the dogma of the State through his attempt to replace one external authority with that of Justice Upright. Once he becomes conscious, however, of the absurdity of his situation, he is able to take control of it, for he begins to take ownership of his non-story away from external dogmas (even though it remains a non-story nonetheless).

Camus describes how Sisyphus' happiness arises from his refusal of the gods. "All Sisyphus' silent joy is contained therein. His fate belongs to him. His rock is his thing. Likewise, the absurd man, when he contemplates his torment, silences all the idols" (p. 78). Once Yaşar tells the story of his attempted suicide, he starts to find multiple ways of making money for himself, such as smuggling heroin into the prison taped to the inside of the imam's robes. In this way, as one of the other convicts says at the end of the book, he no longer needs Mr. Justice Upright, "Because he has himself become a first-class Mr. Justice Upright…" (343) ("Çünkü, dedi, kendisi birinci sınıf Karakaplı Nizami Bey oldu…"). Moreover, the chapter immediately following his description of his attempted suicide begins with the phrase "To get bread from a stone" (232) ("Taştan ekmeğini çıkarır"), which is used to describe someone who is so resourceful they are capable of doing anything to meet their needs (ekmek parası kazanmak). In Sisyphean terms, Yaşar has taken control of his 'futile sufferings' by becoming conscious of them—the rock has not disappeared, but this is now 'his rock.'

3.2 The experience of failure in *Slaughterhouse Five*

In the first chapter of *Slaughterhouse Five* (1969), we are told this is a "book about Dresden" (p. 4), and the first-person metafictional narrator of that chapter repeats this assertion a number of times. In the novel, at Valencia and Billy Pilgrim's eighteenth wedding anniversary, a barbershop quartet starts to sing, at which point:

> 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. (p. 220)

Billy goes upstairs and lies down, wondering what could have caused such a strong reaction, and then he remembers being in a meat locker during the bombing of Dresden (p. 225-226). What has caused Billy Pilgrim to react so strongly to the barbershop quartet, he realizes, is the memory of the guards when they come out of the meat locker the next day:

> 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—' (p. 227)

This levity about what was described 100 pages earlier as "the greatest massacre in European history" (128) may well be more shocking than the announcement a dozen pages later that 135,000 people were killed in the Dresden firebombing (p. 240).[73] How is it that Billy Pilgrim, who is mild-mannered and soft-spoken up to now, has such a severe psychosomatic response to a barbershop quartet and yet posits that the four guards might well be singing this ludicrous song at the sight of what had been Dresden and was now "like the moon" (p. 229)?

In the essay, "The Gaze of Orpheus" (1955), Maurice Blanchot makes the case that Orpheus' going down to the underworld to take Eurydice up again towards the surface is "…the limit of what art can attain…" (p. 437). Blanchot describes how merely descending to the depths is not enough:

> His *work* is to bring it back into the daylight and in the daylight give it form, figure, and reality. Orpheus can do anything except look this "point" in the face, look at the center of the night in the night. He can descend to it, he can draw it to him—an even stronger power—and he can draw it upwards, but only by keeping his back turned to it. This turning away is the only way he can approach it: this is the

[73] The text makes a comparison with the 71,379 killed by the nuclear bomb dropped on Hiroshima to illustrate the extent of this catastrophe; it also conflicts with Vonnegut's claim in the Introduction (p.2) that 250,000 civilians were killed in the firebombing.

meaning of the concealment revealed in the night. (p. 437)

This is perhaps why, in a novel about the Dresden firebombing, "…the actual bombing of Dresden never appears", as Todd F. Davis points out in *Kurt Vonnegut's Crusade* (2006, p. 77). On the page after Billy remembers the four guards looking like a barbershop quartet, all he can say is "'Dresden was destroyed on the night of February 13, 1945'" (p. 228), before again telling of the aftermath. Despite the fact that this is the central moment in the novel and in the life of the character Billy Pilgrim, he is unable to describe 'the center of night in the night.'

Blanchot continues:

> But in the impulse of his migration Orpheus forgets the work he has to accomplish, and he has to forget it, because the ultimate requirement of his impulse is not that there should be a work, but that someone should stand and face this "point" and grasp its essence where this essence appears, where it is essential and essentially appearance: in the heart of the night. (p. 437).

This fits well with what Todd F. Davis says about Pilgrim's progress towards the work describing the firebombing of Dresden: "…Billy Pilgrim has been shaken to his very foundation by the bombs of war and longs to reconcile himself to the experience. But reconciliation is not to be his" (p. 76). In fact, Pilgrim forgets all about the experience until he sees the barbershop quartet, which forces him to remember not the actual event but the effect it has on the guards. Looking at *Slaughterhouse Five* as a whole, Davis describes how "Indeed, the novel itself appears emphatically and painstakingly to display the failure of traditional narratives to explain the violation of war" (p. 76).

However, the metafictional first-person, 'Vonnegut' narrator of the opening chapter ends his preamble to the novel by describing how, on the way to Dresden, he re-reads the story of Lot's wife in the Gideon bible in his hotel room, after which he says:

> And Lot's wife, of course, was told not to look back where all those people and their homes had been. But she did look back, and I love her for that, because it was so human.
> So she was turned to a pillar of salt. So it goes. (p. 28)

Lot's wife impresses Vonnegut because even though she was told not to, she turned back and, in losing everything, is all the more human. Similarly, Orpheus is not supposed to turn and look directly at Eurydice, and yet he does just that and pays the price. Blanchot admits this is a betrayal, but says that not turning to look would also be a betrayal:

> …it is certainly true that by turning around to look at Eurydice, Orpheus ruins the work, the work immediately falls apart, and Eurydice returns to the shadows…But if he did not turn around to look at Eurydice, he still would be betraying, being disloyal to, the boundless and imprudent force of his impulse… (p. 437-438).

In terms of *Slaughterhouse Five*, the Vonnegut narrator keeps describing the book in negative terms, as described in the previous chapter, such as "It is so short and jumbled and jangled, Sam..." (p. 24). In that he does not describe the Dresden bombing as such, it is a failure (Eurydice returning to the shades), but the book itself is real and complete, and in that sense, it would be just as much of a betrayal if he did not look at it and make it fall apart.

Among the last lines of this first chapter, the Vonnegut narrator says, "People aren't supposed to look back. I'm certainly not going to do it anymore. I've finished my war book now. 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" (p. 28). This metafictional Vonnegut, like Orpheus, has put everything into giving the artwork 'form, figure, and reality' as he brings this Dresden book to the light of day, and yet in bringing the night into the daylight, in an immensely human gesture, he has lost everything. In a manner that recalls the discussion of how the writer only exists through the writing,

as seen in Chapter 1 of this dissertation, Blanchot describes Orpheus' necessary failure thus:

> Orpheus' mistake, then, would seem to lie in the desire which leads him to see Eurydice and to possess her, while he is only destined to sing about her… he has life and actuality only after the poem and through the poem, and Eurydice represents nothing more than that magical dependence which makes him into a shade when he is not singing and only allows him to be free, alive, and powerful within the space of the Orphic measure. (438)

As this Vonnegut narrator closes the first chapter, he says he has now finished the book, and has already begun to inhabit a liminal space between the freedom of 'the Orphic measure' and that of the non-writing writer's shade.

3.3 The failure of writing for Vonnegut

In his study, *Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.*, Stanley Schatt points out, "For [the first] twelve years Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., was ignored by reviewers and literary critics, and he responded with feelings of resentment and self-doubt" (148). As Vonnegut put it in a later interview with David Standish:

> I wasn't even getting reviewed. *Esquire* published a list of the American literary world back then and it guaranteed that every living author of the slightest merit was on there, somewhere. I wasn't on there. Rust Hills put the thing together, and I got to know him later and I told him that the list had literally made me sick, that it had made me feel subhuman. (*Conversations* 106-107)[74]

Still, there is more at work here than a mere lack of recognition, because, at the same time, as Blanchot describes in "Literature and the Right to Death," "For [the writer] the work has disappeared, it has become a work belonging to other people, a work which includes them and does not include him…" (*The Work of Fire*, p. 306).

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[74] Schatt quotes most of this in *Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.* on page 148.

Vonnegut's becoming sick and feeling subhuman make more sense when the work that is no longer his simultaneously is *not* then owned by others. How much more claustrophobic the following sensation must have been for Vonnegut when his first two novels were not widely read:

> [The writer] exists only in his work, but the work exists only when it has become this public, alien reality, made and unmade by colliding with other realities. So he really is inside the work, but the work itself is disappearing. (p. 306)

Moreover, not only is the work disappearing and taking Vonnegut with it, but at the same time, the space in which Vonnegut inscribed the work—'Vonnegut's America,' if you will—is also disappearing through the very action of America's ignoring his work.

And yet, in a very real sense, America did not turn its back on Vonnegut—rather, the publishing business and critics did. In the interview with Standish, Vonnegut remembers, "I always had readers, even when not much money was coming in. I was in paperbacks, you see, and from the first, I was getting friendly notes from strangers who had found me in PXs and drugstores and bus stations" (*Conversations* 106). At the same time, as Schatt points out, "critics dismissed the book [*Player Piano*] as mere science fiction" (148). This contradiction between grass-roots acceptance and critical rejection seeps into Vonnegut's own description of himself, his work, and of that time from the vantage point of later success:

> Oh, well, what the hell. I was building a power base anyway, with *sleazo* paperbacks. This society is based on extortion, and you can have anything you want if you have a power base. The computers of my paperback publishers began to notice that some of my sleazo books were being reordered, were staying in print. So management decided to see what was in them. Hardcover publishers sniffed an opportunity. The rest is history—a Guggenheim, professorships, Elaine's. Allen Ginsberg and I both got elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters this year and *Newsweek* asked me how I felt about two such *freaks* getting into such an august organization. I said, 'If we aren't the establishment, I don't know who is.' (*Conversations* 107, my emphases)

It almost seems as if Vonnegut continued to think of himself as a 'freak' writing 'sleazo' books. With his success at the time of the interview, it was safe for him to describe himself and his writing disparagingly, but it may well not always have been so.

In "Literature and the Right to Death," Blanchot speaks of the apparent power of the writer:

> At first sight, one has the impression that the formative power of written works is incomparably great; one has the impression that the writer is endowed with more power to act than anyone else since his actions are immeasurable, limitless: we know (or like to believe) that one single work can change the course of the world. (p. 315)

And in the first paragraph of his Introduction to the collected volume of interviews (1999) entitled *Conversations with Kurt Vonnegut*, editor William Rodney Allen presents just such an argument for Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five*:

> Thirty years have passed since the publication of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the ground zero of Kurt Vonnegut's career. Coming when it did, at the height of the war in Vietnam, the novel captured the imaginations of enough readers—especially young ones—to make Vonnegut for a time the most popular writer in the country. Perhaps not since *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had a work of fiction so deeply affected the public's perception of an ongoing American war. If, as Lincoln famously remarked, Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel helped start the Civil War, then *Slaughterhouse-Five*—along with non-fictional events like the Tet Offensive and Kent State—helped get the United States out of Vietnam. (ix)

This would appear to be the polar opposite of a 'freak' writing 'sleazo' books.

Yet Vonnegut belies Allen's assessment of the power of his work in the 1973 interview with Standing that itself is reprinted in *Conversations*. The interviewer and Vonnegut start to speak on the role of writers in society when Vonnegut says,

> Writers are specialized cells doing whatever we do, and we're expressions of the entire society… And when a society is in great danger, we're likely to sound the alarms…
> You know, coal miners used to take birds down into the mines with them to detect gas before men got sick. The artists certainly did that in the case of Vietnam. They chirped and keeled over. But it made no difference whatsoever. Nobody important cared. (p. 76-77)

While Allen's Introduction came 26 years after Vonnegut's downplaying of artists' (and particularly his own) effect on ending the war, Vonnegut repeated his opinion on the effectiveness of artists in ending the Vietnam conflict even after *Conversations* came out, in a 2003 editorial for the leftist magazine *In These Times*:

> When it became obvious what a dumb and cruel and spiritually and financially and militarily ruinous mistake our war in Vietnam was, every artist worth a damn in this country, every serious writer, painter, stand-up comedian, musician, actor and actress, you name it, came out against the thing. We formed what might be described as a laser beam of protest, with everybody aimed in the same direction, focused and intense. This weapon proved to have the power of a banana-cream pie three feet in diameter when dropped from a stepladder five-feet high.[75]

Vonnegut's pessimistic view on his and the rest of the artistic community's ability to stop the war echoes the pessimism of his 'sleazo' comments about his early work. In fact, even as it is impossible to know what was in Vonnegut's heart of hearts (if you will), it does seem safe to say he managed to escape Blanchot's description of the suddenly prodigal writer:

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[75] "Kurt Vonnegut vs. the !&#*!@," *In These Times*, January 27, 2003 (accessed on 10.19.2013).

> But when a book… is suddenly made into a masterpiece by circumstantial events, what author is not going to take credit for the glory himself, in his heart of hearts, what author is not going to see his own worth in that glory, and his own work in that gift of fortune, the working of his mind in providential harmony with his time? (p. 309)

The space for this glory to exist for Vonnegut may well have disappeared given that 'Vonnegut's America,' or the space in which he had inscribed his first two critically unacclaimed novels, burst into the daytime of presence only to be rejected.

In the next exchange between Standish and Vonnegut (in the same interview), this lack of self-glorification becomes even more apparent. Standish points out the contradiction between Vonnegut's stated wish to change things for the better and the ability of Vonnegut's invented alien race, the Tralfamadorians, to see all time; as Standish puts it, for Tralfamadorians, "all moments in time exist simultaneously".[76] Vonnegut replies quite directly: "You understand, of course, that everything I say is horseshit" (*Conversations* p. 77).

The Tralfamadorians' view of reality resonates with a point Blanchot makes about writers; namely, how "[the writer] is only master of everything, he possesses only the infinite; he lacks the finite, limit escapes him" (316). Blanchot then describes the particular dangers of fiction:

> [It] is that distance, that remove from the everyday which necessarily takes the everyday into consideration and describes it as separateness, as pure strangeness. What is more, it makes this distance into an absolute value… the capacity to grasp everything and attain everything immediately, for those who submit to its enchantment enough to emerge from both their life, which is nothing but limited understanding, and time, which is nothing but limited perspective. All this is the lie of a fiction. (p. 316)

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[76] Interestingly enough, the Tralfamadorians first appear in *The Sirens of Titan*, Vonnegut's relatively unsuccessful second book, but they are not described as having this view of reality. It is only in the Tralfamadorians' second appearance, in *Slaughterhouse Five*, that they are described as being able to see all time at once.

With the invention of the Tralfamadorians, Vonnegut holds a mirror up to the experience of 'those who submit' to the enchantment of fiction. On the one hand, Vonnegut's readers hereby transform into much more advanced beings who hold all time in their hands in the form of the book. By the time they make their appearance in *Slaughterhouse Five*, the Tralfamadorians appear to know nearly everything, including how the universe ends. "'We blow it up," a Tralfamadorian explains to Billy Pilgrim, the protagonist, "experimenting with new fuels for our flying saucers. A Tralfamadorian test pilot presses a starter button, and the whole Universe disappears'" (149). And yet, the Tralfamadorians are fascinated with Billy Pilgrim and put him in a museum. A Tralfamadorian explains the reason to Pilgrim:

> 'If I hadn't spent so much time studying Earthlings,' said the Tralfamadorian, 'I wouldn't have any idea what was meant by "free will." I've visited thirty-one inhabited plants in the universe, and I have studied reports on one hundred more. Only on Earth is there any talk of free will.' (p. 109)

This, then, may also help explain why Vonnegut felt so 'inhuman' when he received little critical notice for his first two books, despite the obvious support of real readers. Akin to the Tralfamadorians himself, despite his possession of the infinite as embodied in his novel, it is the finite world and critics that catch his—and no doubt most writers'—interest.

To return to the Standish interview with Vonnegut, after "You understand, of course, that everything I say is horseshit", Standish does not miss a beat, immediately replying, "Of course" (77). Vonnegut does not take offense; rather, he takes a stab at using the enchanting power of fiction:

> Vonnegut: Well, we do live our lives simultaneously. That's a *fact.* You *are* here as a child and as an old man… I recently visited a woman who has Hodgkin's disease. She has somewhere between a few months and a couple of years to live, and she told me that she was living her life simultaneously now, living *all* the moments of it. [Standish]**:** It still seems paradoxical.

> Vonnegut**:** That's because what I've just said to you is horseshit. But it's a useful, comforting sort of horseshit, you see? (77, ellipsis and emphasis in original)

Whether Vonnegut's particular brand of 'horseshit' is believable or not, it is clear he indeed works quite hard at making it comforting, even when writing about horrific events. In the Introduction to *Conversations with Kurt Vonnegut*, Allen says, "*Slaughterhouse-Five* was fiery and cool, despairing yet comforting—and it worked. And still works" (p. xi).

In the next section of the Standish interview, Vonnegut connects the comfort to be found in 'horseshit' with belief. He says, "That's what I object to about preachers. They don't say anything to make anybody any happier, when there are all these neat lies you can tell" (p. 77). He takes this one step further and describes an Episcopalian priest, Bob Nicholson, who was unable to find comfort in scripture:

> Every time one of his parishioners died, he went all to pieces. He was outraged by death. So it was up to his congregation and the relatives of the deceased to patch him up, get him pumped up on Christianity sufficiently to get through the funeral service. I liked that very much: Nothing he was going to say in the standard Episcopalian funeral oration was going to satisfy him. He needed better lies. (p. 77-78)

This is one of the few times Vonnegut says something anti-religious; namely, that the lies of religion are simply not good enough—the lies are not enchanting enough for the 'reader' of the funeral service to submit to.

It would seem that the lack of critical attention given to Vonnegut's early works in the end saved him from being overwhelmed by the blockbuster success of *Slaughterhouse Five*. Moreover, the inscription of his early novels in his own America which then disappears along with the work ironically leads to an America that, for Vonnegut, is less and less enchanting (despite the individuals who still connect with him as always), until his alienation turns to bitterness towards the end

of his life. In other words, analogous to the Episcopalian funeral service not meeting the priest's needs, the lie of the America Vonnegut created no longer satisfies him.

Nowhere is this disillusionment more clear than at the end of his life, in his editorials as senior editor (1995-2005) for the leftist magazine, *In These Times* and in his last book published during his lifetime, *A Man Without a Country*.[77] Here, in one of his last editorials that was reprinted right in the middle of *A Man Without a Country*, he clearly delineates his disillusionment—and his 'outrage' (akin to the Episcopalian priest's outrage at death) comes searing through at the end:

> Many years ago, I was so innocent I still considered it possible that we could become *the humane and reasonable America* so many members of my generation used to dream of. We dreamed of such an America during the Great Depression, when there were no jobs. And then we fought and often died for that dream during the Second World War, when there was no peace.
> But I know now that there is not a chance in hell of America's becoming humane and reasonable. Because power corrupts us, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Human beings are chimpanzees who get crazy drunk on power. By saying that our leaders are power-drunk chimpanzees, am I in danger of wrecking the morale of our soldiers fighting and dying in the Middle East? Their morale, like so many bodies, is already shot to pieces. They are being treated, as I never was, like toys a rich kid got for Christmas. (54, my emphasis)

This quotation plainly states the two distinct poles of Vonnegut's relationship with his country—an idealized vision, on the one hand, that was worth fighting and dying for, and a sordid embarrassment on the other.

However, a closer look at this first part shows how Vonnegut has turned a blind eye to the 'horseshit' of 'Vonnegut's America' (that is, the inscribed America of his writing). In the 1977 *Paris Review* interview also included in the

[77] To date, three volumes of Vonnegut's work have been published posthumously.

Conversations volume,[78] Vonnegut remembers the Allied firebombing of Dresden towards the end of the Second World War:

> It [the bombing] was a moment of truth, too, because American civilians and ground troops didn't know American bombers were engaged in saturation bombing. It was kept a secret until very close to the end of the war. One reason they burned down Dresden is that they'd already burned down everything else. You know: 'What're we going to do tonight?' Here was everybody all set to go, and Germany still fighting, and this machinery for burning down cities was being used. It was a secret, burning down cities—boiling pisspots and flaming prams. (p. 174)

This is hardly the 'humane and reasonable America' that Vonnegut feels many in his generation 'fought and often died for'. Here, especially in the devil-may-care attitude of 'What're we going to do tonight' there is already the feeling that the thousands of civilians who were killed were, in fact, treated 'like toys a rich kid got for Christmas'.

3.4 Vonnegut's attempted suicide

In Joe David Bellamy and John Casey's interview with Vonnegut (in the collection, *Conversations with Kurt Vonnegut*), Bellamy asks Vonnegut two times in a row about the process of writing *Slaughterhouse Five*—repeating exactly the same question, "What about your novel *Slaughterhouse Five*?" In the first answer, Vonnegut keeps his remarks superficial, commenting at length on the thinness of the book itself. In the second answer, Vonnegut describes how, as a US soldier in WWII, he witnessed "the greatest massacre in European history, which was the

[78] As mentioned in Chapter 1, this interview was actually four interviews put together and then added to by Vonnegut himself.

destruction of Dresden by fire-bombing" (*Conversations,* p.114). Then Vonnegut continues:

> Anyway, I came home in 1945, started writing about it, and wrote about it, and wrote about it, and WROTE ABOUT IT. This thin book is about what it's like to write a book about a thing like that. I couldn't get much closer. I would head myself into my memory of it, the circuit breakers would kick out; I'd head in again, I'd back off. The book is a process of twenty years of this sort of living with Dresden and the aftermath. (p.115)

Here, we can imagine how, in the process of writing, Vonnegut is making multiple descents down to Hades. As Blanchot begins "The Gaze of Orpheus," "art is the power that causes the night to open" (437). The description in the interview of how Vonnegut and the other American POWs were 'tasked' with cleaning up after the Dresden firebombing, begins to paint a picture of why 'the circuit breakers would kick out':

> Every day we walked into the city and dug into basements and shelters to get the corpses out, as a sanitary measure. When we went into them, a typical shelter, an ordinary basement usually, looked like a streetcar full of people who'd simultaneously had heart failure. Just people sitting there in their chairs, all dead. A fire storm is an amazing thing. It doesn't occur in nature. It's fed by the tornadoes that occur in the midst of it and there isn't a damned thing to breathe. We brought the dead out. They were loaded on wagons and taken to parks, large open areas in the city which weren't filled with rubble. The Germans got funeral pyres going, burning the bodies to keep them from stinking and from spreading disease. (*Conversations,* p. 173-174)

Moreover, Vonnegut may well have gotten bogged down in such horrific details and that could well have explained why Vonnegut tells Mary O'Hare in his conversation with her in the first chapter of *Slaughterhouse Five*, "I must have written five thousand pages by now, and thrown them all away" (p. 19).

At some point, Vonnegut must have felt how, "For Orpheus, then, everything sinks into the certainty of failure, where the only remaining compensation is the uncertainty of the work—for does the work ever exist?" (p. 440) This question

returns us again to Davis' point that the bombing itself is never seen. Unfortunately, however, Davis does not connect this fact with the incessant drive pushing Vonnegut to write or to be made 'into a shade when he is not singing [writing]'.

Instead, in his discussion of how some critics conflate Vonnegut with the character of Billy Pilgrim, Davis says that both "…tell their stories in order to cope with the darkness that threatens to engulf them…" (p. 79). What if it is not 'to cope with' the darkness but rather *because of* this darkness that Vonnegut struggles for 20 years with the writing of *Slaughterhouse Five*?

In one of his essay collections, *Fates Worse Than Death*, Vonnegut writes briefly about his attempted suicide in 1984, some 38 years after the firebombing of Dresden and 19 years after the publication of *Slaughterhouse Five*:

> I had tried to kill myself. It wasn't a cry for help. It wasn't a nervous breakdown. I wanted "The Big Sleep" (Raymond Chandler). I wanted to "Slam the Big Door" (John D. MacDonald). No more jokes and no more coffee and no more cigarettes: I wanted *out* of here. (p. 181)

Davis, in *Kurt Vonnegut's Crusade*, chalks this up to:

> …Vonnegut's [recent] trip to Mozambique, where he witnessed the deaths by starvation of little girls about the age of his own daughter Lily, as well as a recollection of a trip he took to Biafra, … where he watched in horror as children were denied proper food… and, as a result, they 'all had red hair and their rectums were everted, dangling outside like radiator hoses.' (p. 8, quoting *Fates Worse Than Death,* p.174-175)

Two pages later, Davis points out how "…Vonnegut's work is an appraisal of our current condition on the planet that leads him to conclude that the universe is indeed absurd" (p. 10). While this makes perfect sense given what Vonnegut witnessed (and given Vonnegut's writing style in general), Davis's next statement conflicts directly with both this absurdity and Vonnegut's attempted suicide: "Yet Vonnegut does not succumb to the darkness" (p. 10).

As David Streitfeld highlights in a 1991 piece for T*he Washington Post*, Vonnegut's attempted suicide wasn't Vonnegut's only interaction with suicide: "There has always been an ample supply of references to suicide in Vonnegut's work" ("Kurt Vonnegut's Big Chill" C1-2). Moreover, as Streitfeld quotes Vonnegut:

> Suicide, Vonnegut wrote a decade ago, 'has always been a temptation to me, since my mother solved so many problems with it. The child of a suicide will naturally think of death, the big one, as a logical solution to any problem.' (C1-2, quoting *Palm Sunday*, p. 125)

If Davis' 'darkness' is suicide here and, in a larger sense, death, then it seems fairly straight forward that Vonnegut did indeed 'succumb to the darkness,' and only managed to live because he didn't do a good job succumbing.[79]

There is, however, something more at work here. Davis claims that, "Out of his lost faith, Vonnegut created his most formally postmodern novel to date" (p. 77). He clarifies this as follows:

> World War II and the eventual bombing of Dresden, Germany, may be seen as the results of… absolutism… and for Vonnegut there can be no justification of such absolutism. Therefore, Vonnegut makes use of metafictional techniques in order to expose his own struggle with Dresden, and by doing so he establishes an open relationship with the reader that allows for more communication than the traditional modernist paradigm. (p. 77)

On the one hand, it would be difficult to take issue with Davis's argument that the darkness of war and the firebombing of Dresden inspired Vonnegut's experimental

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[79] In the preface to *Armageddon in Retrospect*, Kurt Vonnegut's son, Mark Vonnegut, also downplays the seriousness of his father's attempted suicide. Mark Vonnegut says the following during an argument with a psychiatrist concerning his father's suicide: "Of all the medications he took, there wasn't a toxic level of anything" (14). Kurt Vonnegut's description of the situation (as related above) nonetheless clearly supports the perspective that he 'succumbed to the darkness', though he was not (thankfully) successful.

approach in *Slaughterhouse Five*. And yet there *is* an absolutism at work here that Davis seems to be actively trying to forget—and that is death itself.

Vonnegut is able 'to enter his own death' in Barthes' terms by taking up writing, but when the circuit breakers kick him out of the writing, he is exposed to the first half of Beckett's famous sentence, "I can't go on, I must go on", and the fact that he once succumbed to the darkness (as a shade when not writing) cannot be ignored.

Like Orpheus rising with Eurydice towards the surface, Vonnegut does not look directly at the darkness of the war and the firebombing in order to lead it upwards. As he is finishing the novel, however, he writes the introductory first chapter and in so doing he turns towards the death living in the work, and in this moment it seems to Vonnegut to have been written by 'a failure.' Un-writing Vonnegut's sense of failure by trying to explain it away, rather than seeing it as exigent to the work, does indeed reveal it "as the inessential."

3.5 Nesin's failure: The failure of success

Aziz Nesin, like Vonnegut and like Yaşar, also contemplated suicide at one point in his life. Ataol Behramoğlu, in his book *Aziz Nesin'li Anılar* (*Memories with Aziz Nesin*), relates how, "In November, 1983, as he was being hidden in a room in Istanbul after receiving an 8 year sentence in the Peace Association Trial, Aziz Nesin suffered a stroke and was confined, unmoving, to a bed in Çapa Hospital" (p. 11) ("1983 Kasım'ında, Barış Derneği Davası'ndan 8 yıla mahkum olarak İstanbul'da bir odada gizlenmekteyken, Aziz Nesin de felç geçirmiş, Çapa hastanesinde kımıltısız yatmaktaydı"). There can be no doubt that Nesin's constant troubles with the

Turkish government (examined at length in the next chapter) caused him great stress and may well have led to his stroke. And yet, at the same time, is it not also possible that his health problems could have come from, or been exacerbated by, his constant 'entering his own death' and coming back to the surface?

One of Aziz Nesin's sons, Ateş Nesin, discusses how a change came over his father after this stroke:

> The stroke that overcame his will and determination in the year 1984, along with the two major surgeries that he underwent in later years and the Sivas events truly affected my father. With his head held perfectly straight and his unseeing eyes looking forward, he was preparing for his own death in an honorable, intense way.
> … Aziz Nesin, who was afraid of nothing his whole life and who said "I understand everything but can't understand anything about death" seemed to me to be hiding his faith inside him like a secret and was afraid he would let it out before he died. (p. 154)

> 1984 yılında azmi ve iradesiyle üstesinden geldiği felç, daha sonraki yıllarda geçirdiği iki ağır ameliyat ile Sivas olayları babamı çok sarsmıştı. Artık hiç görmeyen gözleriyle başı dimdik, onurlu bir şekilde ağır ağır, kendini ölüme hazırlıyordu.
> … "Her şeyi anlıyorum da ölüm bir türlü anlamıyorum" diyen ve yaşamı boyunca hiçbir şeyden korkmayan Aziz Nesin, bir sır gibi içinde sakladığı inancını düşünceme göre ölmeden önce dışarıya vermekten korkmuştu.

Ateş Nesin, himself a Muslim, has interpreted this introspection as faith, but what if, instead, it is Aziz Nesin teetering on the edge of the abyss that his writing has opened up?

In his April 24, 1986, letter to Ataol Behramoğlu, Aziz Nesin discusses his stroke and the suicidal thoughts that came to him in the days after it:

> I wasn't able to respond to your letter of 18 March earlier, forgive me. I was struggling night and day with [writing] the Petition of the Intellectuals… Then the stroke descended on me…
> I couldn't feel my side and I couldn't talk. I decided I would persevere for one week—if there were no developments, I would kill myself, because it was such an 'anti-Aziz' illness. It broke my honor; it was insulting, in my eyes, to be in need of others for half of your life. But after twenty-four hours I could move a toe on my right foot and I understood I would beat death, because if we can

> touch this world with even the pinkie toe's toenail, no matter what, we'll keep on living… I knew I'd beat [death] as I still had a lot to do.
> Now I'm not completely better but, as I can still work—still write—I'm better. (p. 66)

> 18 Mart tarihli mektubunda daha önce yanıt veremedim, bağışla. O sıra, gece gündüzlü, Aydınlar Dilekçesi işiyle üğraşıyordum... sonra inme inince...
> Bir yanım hiç tutmuyor ve konuşamıyordum. Karar verdim, bir hafta dayanacaktım, bir gelişme olmazsa kendimi öldürecektim. Çok "Anti-Aziz" bir hastalık çünkü. Onurum kırılıyordu, başkalarını gereksinerek yarım yamalak kendi gözümde aşağılanıyordum. Ama yirmidört saat sonra sağ ayak parmağım oynayınca, ölüm yeneceğimi anladım. Çünkü bu dünyaya, serçe parmağımızın tırnağının ucuyla bile dokunabiliyorsak, ne olursa olsun, yaşamayı sürdüreceğiz... Yeneceğime inanıyordum; çünkü daha çok işim vardı.
> Şimdi tam iyi değilim ama, çalışabildiğime, yazabildiğime göre iyiyim sayılır.

Here, almost two years after his stroke, Nesin still seems to have been quite affected. What is most striking about this candid letter is that it is clear Nesin believes writing and working on the Petition of the Intellectuals (Nesin and other intellectual's public challenge of the military junta that perpetrated the 1980 coup) is what caused the stroke. Nonetheless, he gauges whether he is better or not on his ability to continue to write. It seems writing has brought him close to the edge of death itself—like Orpheus—and yet his ability to move his toe gives him hope that he will be able to return to the work, to writing.

Despite his rebound from this stroke, Nesin felt his fellow citizens were woefully not engaged in politics and not aware of their Sisyphean existence. In the early 1990s,[80] Nesin uttered one of his most famous—if not the most famous—

[80] Two separate sources place this event around 1991 but do not offer a specific date: Hürriyet Newspaper states it was "in the early 1990s" (http://hurarsiv.hurriyet.com.tr/goster/ShowNew.aspx?id=19230421), and Vatan Newspaper states it was "some 20 years" before 2011 (http://haber.gazetevatan.com/aziz-nesin-o-sozu-ne-zaman-ve-nasil-soyledi/410566/1/gundem).

quotation attributed to him. At a panel on humor in the Aegean town of Torba, he was asked "As the ancestors of Nasrettin Hoca, we [Turks] are intelligent, aren't we?" to which Nesin answered, "60 percent are idiots" (*Vatan Gazetesi* 13.11.2011) ("Nasrettin Hoca'nın torunları olarak zeki insanlarız değil mi?" "Yüzde 60'ı aptaldır"). In 2007, twelve years after Aziz Nesin's death in 1995, actor and poet Müjdat Gezen said in a television interview that he had asked Nesin about this immediately afterward backstage at the Torba event and Nesin answered, "I was going to say 92 percent but I couldn't get the words out" (*Vatan*) ("yüzde 92 diyecektim dilim varmadı"). This 92 percent references the 1982 constitutional referendum put forth by the 1980 military-coup-leader Kenan Evren, a referendum which garnered 92 percent support, despite Evren's overseeing the imprisonment and torture of large numbers of intellectuals and leftists, Nesin included.

More than simply being terribly disappointed with his fellow citizens, however, in a 1992 *Hürriyet* newspaper interview with Nuriye Akman, Nesin first revisits his comments on the percentage of idiots in Turkish society, and then says, "If a mother's child were retarded, what would she do—she would dedicate her life to the child. I'm doing just the same" (as reprinted in the *Vatan* article) ("Bir annenin çocuğu geri zekâlı olsa ne yapar, hayatını ona adar. Ben de aynısını yapıyorum işte"). This analogy, while not clearly stating a sense of failure, ascribes a tremendous burden and sense of responsibility to Nesin, which presents the other side of the rock being Sisyphus' thing—namely, that those who are conscious are now responsible for those who are unaware.

3.6 The Sivas massacre

On July 1, 1993, Aziz Nesin gave a speech in the small city of Sivas in south-eastern Turkey, at a celebration supporting Alevis—a Muslim sect who make up a sizable minority in Turkey. Then, as Nesin wrote in his incident and complaint report submitted to the Istanbul Attorney General:[81]

> Following the midday religious service, a group of approximately 500-600 people exiting the mosque gathered in front of the hotel and verbally attacked me by name through shouted slogans. This verbal attack started at approximately 1.30 p.m. The crowd chanted phrases such as 'We Want Sharia, Turkey Is Muslim, God Is Great [Allah akbar], Sivas Will Be Aziz Nesin's Grave.' (July 9, 1993)
>
> Öğlen namazına müteakip, camiden çıkan takriben 500-600 kişilik grup otelin önünde toplandılar ve ismimi telaffuz ederek sözlü sloganlar atarak saldırıda bulunuyorlardı. Bu sözlü saldırı takriben 13.30'da başladı. Topluluk, "Şeriat İsteriz, Müslüman Türkiye, Allahuekber, Sivas Aziz Nesin'e Mezar Olacak" şeklinde sloganlardı.

What is surprising about these chants is the related elements that they set forth: Sharia has multiple and sometimes conflicting definitions, but at its most basic, it is a political/governmental system based on the tenets of Islam. The second phrase takes this one step further by putting forth that the nation in its entirety is Muslim, followed by the overarching empowerment of God.

The final chant is bone-chilling in its murderous desire. At the same time, it is also incredible that this one name—Aziz Nesin—has become in this moment the antagonist of the religious state, the religious nation, and God. How is it that this one writer has become such a massive force in the eyes of the incensed crowd?

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[81] As posted in its entirety (in Turkish) on the halkçı gazetesi website: http://www.halkcigazetesi.com/haberdetay.asp?ID=412, accessed on 19.08.2013.

When the writer 'enters into his own death' by writing, and brings the dead Eurydice up from Hades as 'the limit of what art can attain,' then, as Blanchot says in "Literature and the Right to Death":

> …it is accurate to say that when I speak, death speaks in me. My speech is a warning that at this very moment death is loose in the world, that it has suddenly appeared between me, as I speak, and the being I address… (p. 323-324)

Much of Blanchot's work does not enter into politics directly and so it may seem that when he describes writing setting loose death in the world, he is not thinking of a political writer like Nesin; however, this essay is different and deals directly with Saint-Just, Robespierre, and Sade, and does discuss how the writer can get caught up in violent politics. As Blanchot points out,

> Revolutionary action explodes with the same force and the same facility as the writer who has only to set down a few words side by side in order to change the world… This is why, at that point, the only tolerable slogan is Freedom or Death. Thus the Reign of Terror comes into being. (p. 319)

Thus, despite its incongruity in his other works, in this essay Blanchot may very well have been thinking of just such a writer as Nesin, bringing death into the world with his writing, and as the crowd chanted outside the hotel and it was his death they sought.

Unfortunately, these chants were not the end of what has come to be known as the Sivas Massacre. As Nesin continues to relate in his official complaint, the crowd outside kept on growing up to 8 p.m. without any attempt by the local government to contain the crowd, after which point the attack became physical, with people from the crowd throwing first rocks, then objects from a nearby construction site, then cobblestones pried loose from the street at the hotel's walls and windows. Nesin then spoke on the phone with the governor of the province and, separately, two parliamentarians, all of whom assured him measures were being taken to stop the

crowd. Others with Nesin claimed to see the arrival of police, gendarmes, and soldiers. Nonetheless, some time afterwards (Nesin was unable to recall exactly when), the crowd then smashed the cars outside the hotel, extracted the gasoline from the tanks, and set it on fire.

> I heard all of this, but I couldn't know who it was [doing these things], because I wasn't looking out the window, I was just trying to protect myself and awaiting my own end. I don't know what time it was. The hotel started to burn. Smoke engulfed the hotel. (*Halkçı Newspaper*)

> Bunların ben sesini duyuyordum. Bunlar kimlerdi, bilemiyorum. Çünkü pencereden bakmıyor, sadece otel içinde kendimi korumaya çalışıyordum ve akıbetimi bekliyordum. Kesin saatini bilemiyorum. Otel yanmaya başladı. Dumanlar çıktı, oteli sardı.

Finally, help comes in the form of a fireman's ladder up to his window. Even then, as he is descending, a fireman comes up the ladder, and "As we met halfway down the ladder, this fireman—who I supposed was going to save me—says to me, 'You despicable scoundrel,' and started to beat and kick me, throwing me off the ladder" (*Halkçı Newspaper*) ("Merdivenin orta yerinde karşılaştığımızda, bu itfaiye eri -beni kurtaracağını zannediyordum- bu itfaiye eri, bana, 'Namussuz, alçak' diye vurmaya başladı ve beni tekmeledi, merdivenden aşağı attı"). While Nesin is reeling in the street, a civilian from inside the firetruck takes a hooked instrument out and tries to kill Nesin with it (*Halkçı Newspaper*). In the end, he manages to get away in a police car and they take him to the hospital and shortly after he flies to the capital, Ankara.

The last couple of lines of Nesin's complaint state who the complaint is against and, interestingly enough, who it is not against.

> That is all the details of the event. This event exploded from a social trash heap. My grievance is with all officials who were the cause of this event. I have no wish to name in this complaint any individual names. The sole individual name I wish to register a complaint against is the Minister of Internal affairs, he [Nesin] said, then he read this testimony and signed it. (*Halkçı Newspaper*)
>
> Olay bundan ibarettir. Bu olay patlayan bir sosyal çöplüktür. Olaya sebebiyet veren tüm görevliler hakkında şikayetçiyim. Herhangi bir şahıs ismi zikrederek şikayette bulunmak istemiyorum. Şikayette bulunmak istediğim yegâne şahıs İçişleri Bakanı'dır, dedi, beyanı okundu, imzası alındı.

Here is the opposite side of the coin from the attackers' chant above—who else *can* Nesin name in this complaint, given that it was quite literally a sea of faceless assailants? And, one wonders, what could the Minister of Internal affairs have done some time after 8 p.m. when s/he was purportedly reached on the phone by the parliamentarians Nesin spoke with (assuming s/he was not previously aware of the situation)—call in the army, against whom Nesin had been speaking for the last 13 years?

No doubt some action could have been taken to save the 33 intellectuals and two hotel staff members who were killed, and whoever did not take that action is responsible. Also, there were clearly instigators of the riot, and they, too, are responsible. At the same time, while not lessening that responsibility in any way, it also should be pointed out that by the time the hotel was set on fire, the situation was so out of control that two of the instigators ended up being burned to death. Furthermore, while there were many anti-Alevi extremists amongst the crowd, and it is possible that a similar attack following the Alevi festival would still have occurred, it is also exceedingly possible that were Nesin not at the Madımak Hotel, it would not have been burned and 35 innocents might not have lost their lives.

Nesin himself seems to have privately blamed himself for these people's deaths. As his son, Ali Nesin, stated shortly before the twentieth anniversary of the

Sivas massacre (re-reported in the English-daily newspaper, the *Hürriyet Daily News*):

> Professor Ali Nesin, son of the renowned writer and humorist Aziz Nesin, has said his father broke down after the Sivas massacre and died within two years of the attack, commemorated the 20th anniversary of the July 2 violence.
> Ali Nesin said his father had suffered much because of the 'allegations against him, as well as the sorrow of the [relatives of the] deceased' that came after the massacre in the Central Anatolian city of Sivas, in which an Islamist mob set fire to a hotel on July 2, 1993, during a culture festival in the city, killing 35 people. (02.07.2013)

In addition to Aziz Nesin's suffering and probable self-blame following the massacre, in returning to the close of his official complaint, it seems he may be throwing blame on the country as a whole—'this event exploded from a social trash heap.' This sentiment is echoed and expounded upon in the last phone call between Behramoğlu and Nesin before the latter's death, as recounted in *Aziz Nesin'li Anılar* (*Memories with Aziz Nesin*) while they are talking about securing funds for the Turkish Writers' Union by televising union meetings:

> During our last phone conversation, "Brother Aziz," I [Behramoğlu] said, "do you think it's worth struggling this much for our writers?" "In fact," he answered me, "you might now come back at me with some patriotic line but you could ask the same question about our country… Because our country is in shit and is going in deeper… But ingenuity isn't about working for a country where everything is a bed of roses, it's about being able to do something for a country in shit… Why? Because it's our country, that's why… (18, all ellipsis in original)

> Bu son telefon konuşmamızda, "Aziz Ağabey" demiştim, "sizce yazarlarımız için bu kadar uğraşmamıza değer mi?" "Aslında," diye yanıtlamıştı beni, "sen şimdi yine birtakım vatanseverlik söylevleriyle bana karşı çıkarsın amai bu soru vatanımız için de sorulabilir... Çünkü vatanımız bok içinde ve daha da çok boka gitmekte... Ama marifet, güllük gülistanlık bir vatan için değil, bok içindeki vatan için bir şeyler yapabilmeye çalışmaktır... Neden? Çünkü bizim vatanımızdır da ondan..."

Nesin could easily have left this 'social trash heap,' this 'country in shit' and gone to live somewhere else, but he lived in Turkey his whole life.

The bond between Nesin and his nation is difficult to explain. His 'mothering' instincts for this nation he described as 60-92% idiots would make sense save that he appeared to be actively supporting the 8-40% instead. There is, however, another possibility for this bond, as expressed by Blanchot immediately after his 'death is loose in the world' quotation above:

> …[Death] is there between us as the distance that separates us, but this distance is also what prevents us from being separated, because it contains the condition for all understanding. Death alone allows me to grasp what I want to attain; it exists in words as the only way they can have meaning. Without death, everything would sink into absurdity and nothingness. (p. 324)

It is absolutely not the aim of this work to blame Aziz Nesin for the events in Sivas in 1993. Rather, in contrast to how Vonnegut's sense of failure at not being able to make his fellow citizens conscious led to his depression and attempted suicide, Nesin's similar sense of failure and an incensed lynch mob under the sway of religious dogmatism led to the death of 35 civilians. In both cases, their writing did in fact bring death into the world as Blanchot describes, despite Nesin's and Vonnegut's stated feelings of inadequacy.

CHAPTER 3

HUMANIST HUMOR

Chapter 1 contained descriptions of the vicissitudes faced early in life by both Vonnegut and Nesin. In fact, Nesin brings this up in general terms in his scholarly work on modern Turkish humor, *Cumhuriyet Döneminde Türk Mizahı* (*Turkish Humor in the Republican Period*) (1973), when he describes how early adversity and oppression give rise to good humorous writing:

> In general, to put it simply, one [type of] resentment, fury, and ambition for those who live through deprivation and hardship is humor. If we examine the lives of the best-known humorists, we will see they did not have an easy, normal life, but rather that they barely made it through because they came from difficult places… A humorist will not be born among people who grow up in wealthy families in a comfortable environment and under normal circumstances. Everyone who experiences difficulty and pain won't be a humorist, of course, but hard circumstances develop each person's ability to be a humorist. (p. 49)
>
> Kısaca şunu söyleyelim; genellikle yoksulluk ve yoksunluk yaşamından gelen bir kızgınlık belirtisi, bir hınç alma yada bir eksikliği giderme biçimidir. Tanınmış gülmececilerin yaşamlarını incelersek, bunların erinç ve doğal yaşam sürmediklerini, dar geçitlerden geçip çok zor yerlerden geldiklerini görürüz... Her zorluk çeken ille de mizahçı olamaz elbet, ama zor yaşam koşulları gülmececilik yeteneğini geliştirir.

Vonnegut seems to agree with this sentiment when, in *Fates Worse Than Death*, he says that his mother's insanity may be hereditary and, furthermore, "You cannot be a good writer of serious fiction if you are not depressed" (p. 28-29). On the next page, Vonnegut says "I will say anything to be funny, often in the most horrible situations…" (p. 30). All of this points to humorous writing, from Nesin's and Vonnegut's perspectives, arising from poor emotional (and often physical) states.

This is hard to correlate with Henri Bergson's account of laughter as a social corrective in his pioneering study, *On Laughter* (1900), for it seems that purveyors of

laughter (humorous writers among them) would hardly want to engender more oppression at the hands of the dominant group(s) of society. At the end of his treatise, Bergson states:

> Laughter is, above all, a corrective. Being intended to humiliate, it must make a painful impression on the person against whom it is directed. By laughter, society avenges itself for the liberties taken with it. It would fail in its object if it bore the stamp of sympathy or kindness. (p. 53)

This certainly could describe the unintentional cruelty of Vonnegut's sister's anecdote wherein the funniest thing she ever saw was a woman coming horizontally out of a bus (as quoted in the Introduction to this dissertation). But it doesn't seem applicable to the humor in Nesin or Vonnegut's works overall, not the least because the reader's laughter hardly functions as a way for society to 'avenge itself for the liberties taken with it.' Instead, given both writers' strong challenges against the dogmatic structures of society, it seems much more likely their humor functions in the exact opposite fashion; that is, as a weapon *against* society's use of oppressive structures.

Indeed, Nesin does describe just exactly that in *Cumhuriyet Döneminde Türk Mizahı* (*Turkish Humor in the Republican Period*). In discussing how people can overthrow a despotic authority, Nesin advocates how, "…humor should be used as a weapon to rot and destroy a power that cannot be overturned from within through the use of ridicule, that is, instead of taking up arms" (p. 47). ("…deviremediği iktidar gücünü içinden çürütüp yıkmak için onunla alay etmek yani silahın yerine mizahı kullanmak"). A couple of pages later, Nesin returns to humor's power:

> Humor writing is a [form of] subversion.[82] The humor writer can consciously orient their indignation and anger at a target that truly needs to be demolished, and they can use it for the benefit of the

[82] "Gülmece" is a word Nesin coins at the outset of this work to discuss humorous writing in particular.

> people—all of the best humor writers have done so—making it a positive demolition. (p. 49)
>
> Gülmece bir yıkıcılıktır. Gülmece yazarı, kızgınlıklarını, öfkesini, bilinçli olarak gerçekten yıkılması gereken hedefe yöneltebilir ve gülmece silahını halk yararına kullanabilirse—bütün büyük gülmececiler böyle yapmışlardır—bir olumlu yıkıcı olur.

In a way, Nesin's discussion of humor turns Bergson's formula on its head. Bergson argues that society laughs at individuals who are overly rigid in order to correct them until they better fit institutionalized norms. Nesin, on the other hand, argues that the best individual writers use humor to demolish rigid institutions for the good of the people.

4.1 The slow burn of humanist humor

When Yaşar begins his term in prison, the other occupants of cell block one complain to the height-challenged guard known as 'Halfportion' ('Yarımporsiyon'): "Man, Halfportion, you're handing out new prisoners every which way and you've given our block this wimp" (28) ("Ulan Yarımporsiyon, vere vere bu zibidiyi mi verdin bizim koğuşa be"). By the time he tells his penultimate story, "May Fate Go Blind" ("Felek Gözün Körolsun"), however, Yaşar's humorous stories of 'non-living' have come to inspire his cellmates. He inspires them only after he has lived through the failure of giving King Sami all his money and acting as his servant because he thinks he has found Mr. Justice Upright.

Yaşar begins the story by telling of how another man he met before prison, who also had a life full of hardship and deprivation, would curse fate whenever anything went wrong, saying such phrases as "May Fate Go Blind" ("Felek Gözün Körolsun"). At the end of the story, suddenly the prisoner known as the Spirit Maker

(Kolonyacı),[83] who "Rarely joined in conversation, and never got into arguments…" ("Konuşmalara pek katılmayan, tartışmalara hiç girmeyen..."), interrupts Yaşar's last sentences to say:

> "That Süleyman Usta found the right way. Whoever he wanted to curse, he would throw everything he had to say at fate until the flames in his heart died down."
> Then, as if the flames of his heart were exploding out of his mouth, for the first time he screamed in the cell block:
> "Damn you, you son of a bitch fate, you ate my past and future, you destroyed my home and hearth… You damn fate, when I…"
> A cry rose in the cell block.
> "May fate go blind!"
> "Go stone-cold blind!"
> "Damn you fate, you burned us!"
> "Die fate, die!" (p. 326)

> – O senin Süleyman Usta'n, kolayını bulmuş, dedi. Felek deyip deyip kime demek istiyorsa ona diyor diyeceğini ve de yüreğinin yalazını söndürüyor.
> Sonra, gerçekten yüreğinin yalazlarını ağzından fılkırtır gibi, ilk kez koğuşta bağırdı:
> – Ulan ben o feleğin ansını avradını, gelmişini geçmişini, yedi geçmiş geleceğini, eşiktekini, beşiktekini... Ulan ben o feleğin...
> Öteki hükümlüler de sövgüye, ilenmeye katıldılar.
> Koğuşta bir uğultu yükseldi.
> "Felek gözün kör olsun!"
> "Ulan gözün kör olsun!"
> "Ulan felek, yaktın bizi!"
> "Ulan felek, olmaz ol!"

In *Rabelais and His World*, Mikhail Bakhtin associates the Prologue of *Gargantua* to "the popular verbal genres of hawkers." Bakhtin's elaboration is almost a perfect parallel with the inmates' reaction to Yaşar's story above:

> The words are actually a cry, that is, a loud interjection in the midst of a crowd, coming out of the crowd and addressed to it. The man who is speaking is one with the crowd; he does not present himself as its opponent, nor does he teach, accuse, or intimidate it. He laughs with it… This is an absolutely gay and fearless talk, free and frank, which echoes in the festive square beyond all verbal prohibitions, limitations, and conventions. (p. 167)

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[83] 'Kolonya' of course is usually translated as 'cologne,' but I have taken the liberty of calling it 'spirits' here as Nesin makes it clear that this is the use the prisoners put this inmate's concoction to.

Through his humorous story and his laughter with his fellow inmates, Yaşar *truly* belongs to the crowd in a way that is much more important than any membership card (a national identity card included) could ever be. As Bakhtin intimates, the hawker's laughter is akin to his cry in that both easily transgress the borders erected by societal norms and institutions.

At the same time, while Bakhtin does not enter into such a discussion, the hawker's cry and laughter, while powerful and coalescing, are fleeting instances of joy and inhibition, for the prisoners remain in the prison—a sign of the failure inherent in the limited power of the humanist challenge. Nesin's claims of humor's power to 'rot and destroy' authoritarian structures certainly seem undercut by the very narrative of *Yaşar Ne Yaşar Ne Yaşamaz*, as even though Yaşar gets out of prison and appears to now be able to succeed (with the help of using the forging and other illicit techniques of Mr. Justice Upright), nonetheless, in the end he has merely changed his own personal status and hasn't brought the dehumanizing State bureaucracy to its knees. In fact, the Spirit Maker's resistance and camaraderie is as ephemeral as laughter itself—for all its potential power, it cannot be sustained for long periods.

4.2 'Haydaa' in *Yaşar Ne Yaşar Ne Yaşamaz*

The structure of most chapters in *Yaşar Ne Yaşar Ne Yaşamaz* begins with a scene in the prison, followed by Yaşar telling a story about his pre-prison life, and then we return to the prison environment as prisoners exchange comments and consolations with one another (and Yaşar) after his story. The signal given at the end of Yaşar's pre-prison story is when he says something like "That's the way it is guys…" ("İşte

böyle ağbiler...") and then summarizes key ups and downs of the story, focusing on how he is recognized when he has to sacrifice something, but remains unrecognized when it comes his turn to receive services or acknowledgement from the State.

After Yaşar's summary, the other convicts invariably speak as one and give voice to a sympathetic exclamation at the unfairness of Yaşar's situation, crying out "Haydaaaa!" For instance, at the end of the chapter entitled "Göster Kimliğini, Şapkanı Al" ("Show Your Identity Card, Take Your Hat"), Yaşar's expensive, imported fedora has ended up in the lost and found section of the local courthouse and he has run all over the building to get a permission slip to get it back, only to have the person in charge of the lost and found demand to see his identity card before returning it:

> "That's the way it is guys... After living through everything that came before, I put a fedora on my head, and the governmental offices also snatched that out of my hands... My beautiful hat's gone; it was dark green, thick felt, it had a black band, it was of original Italian make, at that time you couldn't have bought it even for five hundred lira, and it had two air holes in it... It flew away, my hat is gone... Telling myself I'd better get a job, I came out with no job and no hat."
> A deep, sleepy exclamation of surprise arose from the convicts: "Haydaaaa!" (192)

> İşte böyle ağbiler... Bunca yaşadım, başıma bir föter kondurmuştum, onu da devlet dairesi kaptı aldı elimden... Gitti benim güzelim şapkam, koyu yeşil idi, uzun tüylü idi, siyah kordelesi var idi, halis İtalyan malı idi, bu zamanda beşyüz liraya bile alınamaz idi, yanda iki de have deliği var idi... Uçtu benim şapka, uçtu gitti... İş bulayım derken güzelim şapkamdan da oldum.
> Hükümlülerden uykulu ve derinden bir şaşma ünlemi çıktı:
> – Haydaaaa!

The exclamation at the end is a phonetic rendering of the way in which the phrase 'haydi ya' is uttered in common parlance. 'Haydi ya' in this context might roughly be translated as 'Oh, come on' or 'Give me a break.' Even as 'haydi ya' is an exclamation of sympathy at these points in the novel, given a stronger emphasis,

‘haydi ya’ means ‘come on’ in the more traditional sense of ‘let’s go.’ In fact, this phrase in Turkish is used with farm animals to get them moving, much like the English ‘giddiyup’ or ‘hiyaa’.[84] Therefore, even as Yaşar’s fellow inmates are saying ‘Oh, come on [world], give Yaşar a break,’ under this simple phrase lies the nearly contradictory phrase, ‘Come on [you animal], get going.’ Thus, Yaşar’s story meets with a sympathetic response that nonetheless also drives him on, to continuously take up his story again and again (through which he finally feels alive—until he is released, which seems as much a movement of death as of liberation, with his beautiful suit and the other inmates carrying his belongings for him).

4.3 Laughter as an instrument of reification

In multiple places in his work, Theodor W. Adorno describes laughter as an instrument of the culture industry which reifies the subject through a parody of reconciliation. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1972), Adorno problematizes Bergson’s work on laughter, stating:

> In wrong society laughter is a sickness infecting happiness and drawing it into society's worthless totality. Laughter about something is always laughter at it, and the viral force which, according to Bergson, bursts through rigidity in laughter is, in truth, the irruption of barbarity, the self-assertion which, in convivial settings, dares to celebrate its liberation from scruple. (p. 112)

Here is none of Nesin’s confidence in humor’s ability to demolish targets for the good of the people—quite the opposite in fact, as laughter for Adorno is used to destroy happiness. In the same paragraph, Adorno does go on to apparently amend his focus to what he calls ‘wrong laughter’:

[84] Taken from http://www.turkcebilgi.com/haydi on 6/4/2015.

> What is infernal about wrong laughter is that it compellingly parodies what is best, reconciliation. Joy, however, is austere: *res severa verum gaudium* [true joy is a serious business]… The culture industry replaces pain, which is present in ecstasy no less than in asceticism, with jovial denial. Its supreme law is that its consumers shall at no price be given what they desire: and in that very deprivation they must take their laughing satisfaction. (p. 112-113)

Here, 'wrong laughter' sounds almost as if it is the laughter of an individual or group watching a televised sitcom, laughing but not really experiencing true joy because there is no risk, no pain in the broadcast. However, in *Aesthetic Theory* (1997), Adorno goes further and says that *all* humor reifies, through his clear distinction between art and "what were once the lower arts and entertainment":

> This sphere [of lower arts and entertainment], a testimony of culture's failure that is constantly intruded upon this culture, made it will itself to failure—just what *all humor*, blessedly concordant in both its traditional and contemporary forms, accomplishes. Those who have been duped by the culture industry and are eager for its commodities were never familiar with art: They are therefore able to perceive art's inadequacy to the present life process of society—though not society's own untruth—more unobstructedly than do those who still remember what an artwork once was. (p. 16, my emphasis)

Thus, Adorno draws the line between art and humor—a line that he almost always holds firm, even in his analyses of Beckett's plays in the same work, about which he says, "…plays like *Godot* and *Endgame*—in the scene in which the protagonists decide to laugh—are more the tragic presentation of comedy's fate than they are comic; in the actors' forced laughter, the spectator's mirth vanishes" (p. 340). Adorno's appreciation of Beckett's work is clear, and Adorno cannot help but push these plays over the line into the category of dissonant art. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment,* Adorno describes this dissonant art as escaping reification by the culture industry because "…it is possibility promised by its impossibility [and] Art is the ever broken promise of happiness" (*Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 136). This broken promise at least begins to make us aware of what the culture industry's

reification has covered over. But Adorno, in a move that echoes the famous privileging of tragedy over comedy, claims that this spark of awareness is only carried in art, not humor (of any sort)—hence his repeated attempts to take the humor out of Beckett.

4.4 The broken promise of happiness in humor

In *The Paris Review* roundtable of four writers discussing Kurt Vonnegut's work, one of the writers, Josip Novakovich, in answer to interviewer's observation that "One of the most interesting facets of Vonnegut's humor… is its ability to make the reader laugh while informing a very serious commentary," discusses and quotes from a section in the Introduction to *Slaughterhouse Five* when the Vonnegut narrator and his fellow Dresden survivor Bernard O'Hare look up what the Children's Crusade:

> The merciless sense of absurdity [in Vonnegut's work] is the cutting knife for the stone, and you can see just from this quick quote how Vonnegut can strike all notes at once—absurdity, sadness, humor, despair. "[The] Children's Crusade started in 1213, when two monks got the idea of raising armies of children in Germany and France and selling them in North Africa as slaves. Thirty thousand children volunteered, thinking they were going to Palestine … Most of the children were shipped out of Marseilles, and about half of them drowned in shipwrecks. The other half got to North Africa where they were sold." Actually, that's not funny when I think about it, but at first, the absurdity of it made me laugh and then gasp as though I was drowning in a shipwreck.

Novakovich is describing a double instance of Adorno's broken promise of happiness: The first is, of course, that of the children who have been duped by the two monks in the name of what very loosely could be called the 'culture industry' of the time, religion. The second, however, is the way in which Vonnegut's humor at first makes Novakovich laugh at this scene of the combined slavery and death of 30,000 children—but, as Novakovich points out, this laughter opens up the space for

the horrible realization of pain before reification can cover this over. This comment also returns us to Vonnegut's approach to humor writing where he includes death in order to get real 'belly laughs' (as opposed to the light laughter of a sitcom studio audience which is kept short enough for seamless reification through the movement into the next scene, the next shallow joke).

Charles Baudelaire, in "On the Essence of Laughter" (in *The Mirror of Art*, 1855), alludes to Novakovich's experience of laughing and then being shocked. As he is talking about Christianity's uneasy relationship with laughter, Baudelaire describes how "Laughter and tears cannot make their appearance in the paradise of delights" (p. 135). Going even further, Baudelaire describes how, even though "The Being who sought to multiply his own image has in no wise put the teeth of the lion into the mouth of man—yet man *rends* with his laughter…" (p. 135, my emphasis). Novakovich's laughter at the absurdity of 30,000 children heading off to their doom suddenly rends his own consciousness and he is caught up short—and perhaps this, despite Adorno's condemnation of laughter, is why Baudelaire says "…the phenomena [of laughter and tears] engendered by the Fall will become the means of redemption" (p. 135). This is not a Christian redemption in the next world but one like Critchley's description of "laughter's messianic power" discussed in the Introduction to this dissertation, in which laughter is messianic because it "returns us to [this world] ineluctably by showing that there is no alternative."

4.5 The shock that awakens: "So it goes"

Nothing in Vonnegut's writing is more likely to cause both laughter and shock at the same time than the infamous short phrase, "So it goes." This first came up in Chapter 1 of this dissertation, in which this and similar phrases were used to advance the

argument that Kurt Vonnegut's letter home to his family after he was released from being a POW at the end of WWII was the beginning of his particularly humorous, humanist writing. This argument rests on the fact that his signature half-serious, half-facetious phrases are evident in this letter for the first time, in particular the repeated refrain after each of Vonnegut's descriptions of death and mayhem, "But not me."

In *Slaughterhouse Five*, this phrase is transformed into the now infamous "So it goes." As Thomas Wymer (1976) points out, this phrase is "…applied indiscriminately to such matters as dead champagne, dead lice, dead soldiers, the death of the Universe, of characters in Trout's novels, of 135,000 Dresden residents, of Jesus, and the death of the novel" (p. 259-260). Wymer sees this as

> …a *reductio ad absurdum* which parodies indifference… "so it goes" functions ambiguously as the sign of the persona's indifference and as Vonnegut's ironic comment on Tralfamadorian indifference, a device of double irony common in Swift. (p. 260)

Wymer then goes on to demonstrate Swift's double irony in "A Modest Proposal" in the conclusion to that piece:

> …after having presented his outrageous proposal as a modest one, [Swift] concludes, "Therefore let no man talk to me of other expedients," and proceeds to list a set of alternatives so practical and humane that it becomes clear that the ironic mask has been dropped… (p. 260)

Wymer points out how, at several points in the first chapter, the first-person 'Vonnegut' narrator also "steps out of his satiric persona," such as in the apology to the publisher Seymour Lawrence because there is little to say after a massacre (as quoted in Chapter 1 of this dissertation), and descriptions of how he has told his sons not to take part in massacres or to work for companies that make "massacre machinery" (as cited in Wymer's article, p. 260).

It would be difficult to argue with these parallels, and Wymer goes on to demonstrate the function of double irony vis-à-vis Vonnegut's condemnation of Billy

Pilgrim's continual indifference throughout the novel to the horrors he experiences. Yet, as Wymer also unwittingly highlights, there is one major difference in the satire and irony used by Vonnegut and Swift: "Indeed, there is a bit of Billy Pilgrim in every man, and Vonnegut also uses the persona to acknowledge his own share of man's common inhumanity" (p. 260). While there may well be 'a bit of Billy Pilgrim' in all of us, presumably there is not 'a bit of the baby eater' in each reader of "A Modest Proposal." In this key aspect, Swift's satire in "A Modest Proposal," while certainly in some ways similar to that of *Slaughterhouse Five,* is external for both the reader and the writer.[85]

Wymer's point about how Vonnegut 'also uses the persona to acknowledge his own share of man's common inhumanity' is very much what Foucault calls "the-man-and-his-work criticism" in the way it projects Billy Pilgrim's indifference onto Vonnegut. But there is plenty of inhumanity in Vonnegut's original phrase that he used in his letter to his family: "But not me." In this phrase lies recognition of the dumb luck through which Vonnegut survived when so many were killed around him, along with the implication of an inexorable and concordant sense of guilt at not having died with the others.

At the same time, the first half of Wymer's quote above is not at all "the-man-and-his-work criticism," focusing as it does on how there is "a bit of Billy Pilgrim" in all of us—and it is my argument that this is what lies under the change from "But not me" to "So it goes." In the twenty-four years between Vonnegut's letter home and the completion of the *Slaughterhouse Five* manuscript, Vonnegut

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[85] While it goes well beyond the scope of the current project, it is interesting to note (as I have in the Introduction) that Swift's combined position as a Protestant minister in the Church of Ireland and his status as a pamphleteer for the Irish patriot cause distance him in important ways from both groups discussed in "A Modest Proposal"—he is not a Catholic like the poor of which he speaks and yet his is not a loyalist either like those who inhumanely complain of how horrible the beggars are.

turned “his own share of man’s common inhumanity” into a mirror not for himself alone but for all of humanity, showing us our own responsibility in this inhumanity. And it is the stop-dead brevity of phrases like “So it goes” that slap us in the face with our own indifference, in the way that Josip Novakovich describes his laughter followed by the sense of drowning, above.

In writing about professional humorists[86] in “On the Essence of Laughter,” Baudelaire outlines “…the existence of a permanent dualism in the human being—that is, the power of being oneself and someone else at one and the same time” (p. 152). In an article on this essay of Baudelaire’s (and in a way reminiscent of Vonnegut’s sister’s story of someone coming out of a bus horizontally), Justus Nieland (2006) looks through a Baudelairean lens at the person laughing when someone falls down in order to further explicate this dualism:

> …the doubleness of laughter in the Baudelairean formulation [occurs when] the *laugher* at once distances himself from that condition of human fallibility he locates in his comic object and identifies with this fallenness. Laughter, for Baudelaire, is the comic product of this moral contradiction; the quintessentially modern joke is that our capacity for reflection ushers in an awareness of a more fundamental incapacity – our imperfection, our human finitude. (p. 81, my emphasis)

Now we have come full circle to the point that it is not only Vonnegut who connects deep belly laughs with death, but the *laugher* themselves, for their awareness of death as the ultimate limit of our human finitude becomes clear to them in varying degrees, from a humorous imperfection through to experiences akin to that of Novakovich reading Vonnegut.

[86] His piece focuses on caricaturists and laughter, but it is clear the ‘art’ he is describing in this section is not only the drawings of caricaturists but rather the art of making others laugh in general.

4.6 Humorous death in *Yaşar*

Throughout Aziz Nesin's novel, the only character who dies is Yaşar's father, and that is not written about directly because it occurs when Yaşar is in the army and so we do not actually witness the event. In this way, *Yaşar Ne Yaşar Ne Yaşamaz* is quite different from *Slaughterhouse Five*, given the latter's focus on death as accentuated through the repetition of "So it goes." However, when Yaşar arrives at the prison and tells his fellow inmates his first story, in the scene in the population bureau where Yaşar's father is arguing to get Yaşar's identity card, death underlies the humor in a very clear manner that sets up all of the adversities Yaşar faces in each of the rest of his stories.

At first, Yaşar is awed by how much the civil servant (who is so thin he looks like he is just skin and bones) knows about his father and their family: "I was so surprised that this man who was nothing but skin knew everything that I pulled on the edge of my father's jacket and whispered, 'Dad, this guy knows everything. How does he know it all, dad?'" To which Yaşar's father says, "Quiet, son, he's a proper government official, of course he knows these things. It's all written in the records—he even knows what you last ate" (p. 34) ("O zar gibi adamın herbişeyi nasıl da bildiğine pek şaştığımdan, 'Baba, bu adam herbişeyi biliyor. Nerden bildi baba?'... "Sus oğlum, devletin koskoca bir memuru, hiç bilmez olur mu? Kütükte yazılı hepsi... Adamın karnındakini bile bilir"). However, it is when Yaşar's father asks the civil servant to register his son and get an ID card that death enters the picture:

> The skin man clicked his tongue and wagged his head right and left, and said over and over, "Good God, good God…"
> "What?" my father asked, "Why are you saying 'good God'?"
> "I can't issue an ID for the dead, buddy. Who would issue an ID for the dead and buried? You son's dead…"

When I heard this, I started to cry.
"Heavens, what kind of a thing is that to say, sir? This here is my son, beside me…" my father began.
And I started wailing, "Daaad, I'm dead… He says I'm dead."
"Quiet, son! How would he know if you were dead?" my father replied.
"You said he knows everything… he's a proper government official, of course he knows."
My eyes had become two fountains.
My father jerked my hand up, saying "Quiet! I'll give you a smack!" at which point I started weeping uncontrollably. (p. 34-35)

Zar adam "cık cık" sesleri çıkarıp başını da sağa sola sallayarak "Allah Allah... Allah Allah..." deyip durdu.
Babam da, "Ne olmuş ki... Ne Allah Allah?" diye sordu.
"Ölüye nüfuskağıdı çıkar mı yahu? Nerde görülmüş ölüye nüfus verildiği? Senin oğlan ölmüş..."
Ben bunu duyunca ağlamaya başladım.
Babam, "Aman o nasıl söz Memur Bey? Benim oğlum işte bu, yanımda..." dedi.
Ben, "Babaaa, ben ölmüşüm... ölmüşüm diyor," diye ağlıyorum.
Babam, "Sus oğlum, senin öldüğünü o ne bilsin?" diyor.
"Sen herbişeyi bilir o, dedin ya... Devletin koskoca bir memuru, hiç bilmez mi?"
İki gözüm iki çeşme ağlıyorum.
Babam, tuttuğu elimi silkeleyip, "Sus! Şimdi çarparım!" diye azarladıysa da kendimi tutamıyorum ki, boyuna ağlıyorum.

It turns out that Yaşar is listed as a soldier who died in Gallipoli in the First World War. As the father and the official argue more and more, Yaşar slides to the floor, wailing and sobbing, and manages to get out, "I'm dead—why didn't you ever tell me I'm dead, dad?" (p. 35) ("Ben ölmüşüm baba, neden bana hiç demediniz?") To his father's credit, he manages to argue it out with the official—all the while telling Yaşar to stop moaning and threatening him—until they all go up to the director's office to sort things out (p. 35-40). There, as little Yaşar turns into such a mess that he begins to beg his father to leave, Yaşar's father says, "…Quiet, son, stop crying and sniveling, don't drive me nuts! Quiet! Don't cry when you should be laughing" (p. 40). The scene ends when Yaşar's father snaps: "Slapping me across the face, my father said, 'Shut up, fool! I'm not sending you to the state school,' at which point I

came to my senses and was finally able to stop crying" (p. 41) ("Babam, 'Sus ulan! Hükümet okuluna gitmeyiver!' diye suratıma bir tokat çarpınca aklım başıma gelip sustum").

In terms of Adorno's criticism of how laughter functions in the hands of the culture industry, Yaşar's first story makes a startling comparison with those of the previous storyteller ın cell block one. This storyteller is a heroin user, and the manner in which he speaks is described at length:

> The storyteller was one of those men who, when he spoke, it seemed that honey was flowing out of his mouth. When he was describing something, listeners would fall into his mouth. He spoke so very sweetly that everyone strove to listen to him. Such entertainment was impossible to find in the prisons. (p. 21)
>
> Anlatıcı, ağzından bal akar dedikleri adamlardandı. Bişey anlatırken, dinleyicileri ağzının içine baktırırdı. Öyle tatlı, öyle tatlı anlatırdı ki, herkes onu dinlemeye can atardı. Cezaevlerinin bulunmaz eğlencesiydi.

This storyteller provides 'jovial denial' for the prisoners, free from pain, and as they are lured in by his melodious voice, they are nothing if not 'duped by the culture industry and are eager for its commodities.' In contrast, however, Yaşar's tale of his instant but brutal death at the hands of the State's bureaucratic machine is simultaneously wonderfully humorous and yet, in thinking of the wailing, sobbing child, we come to a similar slap to Vonnegut's "So it goes"—the same slap that threatens to drown Novakovich after he laughs at the Children's Crusade.

Indeed, following his description of his "death," the inmates are in the opposite state from how they were with the previous storyteller: "Yaşar Yaşamaz looked into the faces of each of the inmates around him. All of them had snapped to attention and were listening to him. Not a peep was heard in the cell block" (p. 41) ("Yaşar Yaşamaz, çeversindeki hükümlülerin yüzlerine bir bir baktı. Hepsi de dikkat kesilmiş, onu dinliyordu. Koğuşta çıt çıkmıyordu"). In the same way that "So it

goes" brings home the fact of death and implicates society itself (as opposed to the inward-looking "But not me"), at the end of Yaşar's story of his "death," it is not the inmates who are falling into Yaşar's mouth but rather Yaşar who is looking at each and every one of them—and the effect is as if his father's slap has landed on their very faces.

4.7 Laughter as transcendence

Through the scene in *Yaşar Ne Yaşar Ne Yaşamaz* described in Chapter 1 of this dissertation, wherein Yaşar pretends to be pious in order to smuggle heroin into the prison by having it taped to the inside of the imam's robes, Nesin seems to be literally playing with Marx's famous phrase, "Religion is the opiate of the masses." In a similar fashion, right before Billy Pilgrim first comes "unstuck in time," the text describes how "Billy was a chaplain's assistant in the war. A chaplain's assistant is customarily a figure of fun in the American Army. Billy was no exception" (p. 38). It goes on to say that Billy "bore no arms" and "had a meek faith in a loving Jesus which most soldiers found putrid" (p. 38), and he carries a portable altar and an organ "made by a vacuum-cleaner company in Camden, New Jersey" (p. 39). While these items not all that makes Billy Pilgrim ridiculous, his position and accoutrements are the first way in which he becomes 'unstuck' from the action and the people around him.

Georges Bataille, in "Un-knowing: Laughter and Tears," describes how he began to study philosophy after reading Henri Bergson's *On Laughter*. While he calls it "not very satisfying reading" (p. 93), it nonetheless gets him to the point

where, "…I thought that if I could manage to learn what laughter was, I would know everything" (p. 94). And then Bataille presents a startling revelation:

> I should explain that when this experience began, I was, in short, quickened by a very definite religious faith, in conformity with a dogma, and that this was very important to me, to the point where, as far as possible, I suited my action to my thoughts. Certainly, when I began to envisage the possibility of furthest descent within the sphere of laughter, the first effect was the feeling that everything offered by dogma was decomposed and swept away in a sort of deliquescent tide… From that moment on, I could adhere to [my faith] only as something transcended by laughter. (p. 94)

Bataille puts almost all human experience (such as this 'definite religious faith') into the category of the known, against which he finds that real "questioning is laughter, poetry" (*Bataille Reader*, 1997, p. 57); this is what he describes as the 'unknown.'

Bataille takes up Baudelaire's dualism and extends it in the chapter entitled "Laughter" in the *Inner Experience* (in the *Bataille Reader*). He begins by describing how laughter is "Communication linking up *two* beings…" (p. 59) in a similar manner to Baudelaire's dualism, but Bataille then pushes this to an erotic level:

> …to look at each other and laugh can be a type of erotic relation (in this case, rupture has been produced by the development of intimacy in lovemaking). In a general way, what comes into play in physical or psychological eroticism is the same feeling of 'magical subversion' associated with one person slipping into another. (p. 61)

While recalls both Yaşar's looking intently at every convict's face, making sure he is reaching each of them as he tells his humorous stories of his pre-prison life; at the same time, it also recalls Wymer's description of how "there is a bit of Billy Pilgrim" in each of us. Bataille then goes on to say, "Most frequently compenetration (contagion) sets two worlds against each other and limits itself to a transition, to the fall of an individual of one of these worlds into the other. The most meaningful fall is death" (p. 62). Again, this is similar in some way to Baudelaire's dualism, whereby

the laugher identifies with the imperfection of the subject of laughter and in so doing becomes aware of their own finitude.

In the very next paragraph, Bataille expands on how death operates in the mixing of two or more people through laughter:

> This movement is related to an intermediate figure, in which compenetration again involves two individuals; one of them, the one we look at (the actor), can die. It's the death of one of the terms that gives communication its human character. From that time on, it no longer unites one individual being to another, but an individual being to the beyond of beings. (p. 62)

The inmates who had been laughing only a moment earlier about Yaşar's terrible troubles at the population bureau even at seven years old, become deathly silent in the last instant, when they are transported 'to the beyond of beings'; the same can be said for Josip Novakovich's description of his laughter at the absurdity of 30,000 children heading off to death or slavery in the Children's Crusade—suddenly, he is no longer laughing and instead is on the verge of drowning, and so is united with that same 'beyond of beings.'

4.8 The humanist humor of Aziz Nesin and Kurt Vonnegut

The following is an attempt to summarize the wide and varied points made about humanist humor in this chapter.

First of all, it arises from difficult circumstances and this prevents it from being a corrective humor or a palliative one. Rather, it is often used as a weapon of critique and change and can be quite powerful in the moment and lead to people who would not otherwise do so taking up a humanist challenge against dogmatic oppression (as exemplified in the Spirit Maker's tirade and all of the inmates expressing their pain and frustration). However, this cry and this laughter are

ephemeral and unsustainable for long periods—in fact, like Vonnegut's constant in-and-out struggle to write his Dresden book, this humanist humor can only be coaxed into being anew each time, as Yaşar does through the repetition of his stories, and as Vonnegut does through the jumps in time that Billy Pilgrim experiences.

Adorno struggles with the laughter in Beckett, trying to take away its mirth to legitimize it as art instead of humor; while I do not agree with Adorno that humor cannot function as art does in showing the broken promise of happiness, a number of integral points concerning this radical humanist humor arise from Adorno's argument. These include how humor can only achieve what art does when it itself is art, how real humor must incorporate pain and not simply act as an instrument of the culture industry in the process of reification, and, perhaps most importantly, how laughter (even if it is able to incorporate the seriousness of joy) cannot be reconciliatory—this is the ever broken promise of art.

Death lies under deep laughter, and humanist humor uses devices such as the absurdity of the Children's Crusade, "So it goes," and the child Yaşar's bureaucratic martyrdom to deliver laughter and awareness of this death together (Wheeler points out how this is also true in *Candide*, as quoted in the Introduction to this dissertation: "At one moment we are forced to tears at contemplating the atrocities of inhumanity; the next we are forced to laugh at its absurdities"). Within this framework, humanist humor can and often does use satire, but it demands an inclusion in this humor of both the writer and the reader, neither of whom can escape acknowledging their share of humanity's inhumanity.

Finally, as one of the deepest forms of laughter, humanist humor can be transcendent, particularly over and against those dogmatic institutions it attacks. It brings people together not only in facing these dogmatic institutions but in a mixing

of the self and other paradigms (what one might call a very small taste of reconciliation). Yet, as Adorno describes how joy must contain pain, Bataille's laughter is simultaneously tragic:

> Notwithstanding that joy which is present in laughter and which is so paradoxically associated with objects of laughter which are not generally joyous, that joy cannot, in my view, be separated from the feeling of the tragic.
> I believe, moreover, that this is not wholly exterior to the joy commonly present in laughter, insofar as for each of us, for all of us, it is always possible for the impulse of common joy to pass into the feeling of the tragic, and without any diminution of that joy. It remains true, however, that in most cases, we take care not to do so. ("Un-knowing: Laughter and Tears", p. 96)

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

Aziz Nesin's and Kurt Vonnegut's humanist humor leads to that rare laughter that is both joyous and tragic—laughter that is transcendent even as it nonetheless returns us to our share of inhumanity, and makes us aware of the broken promise of happiness in their art. This may come across as just the kind of over-inflated statement that often opens the conclusions of dissertations, but Yeşim Gökçe for the Turkish Cultural Foundation's website made just such a statement about Aziz Nesin (as first quoted in the Introduction):

> Aziz Nesin is the flagstone [*sic*] of humorous Turkish literature. Even today, many people consider his work as a guiding light. Every one of his books and stories displays the profound love that he feels towards humankind, and relies on black humor to make a commentary on the situation of the country. Whether they are acquainted with literature or not, any speaker of Turkish is typically familiar with at least one of his stories.

'Profound love,' 'guiding light'—these phrases would be more at home on a website promoting a spiritual practice or group, and yet here they are in this glowing review of Nesin's work. And Vonnegut receives similar praise in Jerome Klinkowitz's *Kurt Vonnegut's America* (2009), despite the writer's uncertainties: "As for himself, Kurt Vonnegut feared that he'd be forgotten, or at best regarded as a relic of the 1960s. Ironically, his death proved how wrong he was" (p. 2). Klinkowitz then describes how Vonnegut's passing led to a full day of news coverage of the event, from public radio outlets to all of the national news programs, as well as of course *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report*, and *The David Letterman Show*. But it is Klinkowitz himself who compares the silencing of Vonnegut's voice to the silence of the original Armistice Day: "Aged veterans of the First World War had told Vonnegut

that in 1918, when at this precise minute the gunfire and explosions had suddenly stopped, the silence sounded like the voice of God" (p. 1).

It is my hope that I have begun to make the case that, over the course of this dissertation, it is *because of* these two writers' humanist humor, and not in spite of it, that these accolades of near-sainthood have come to be bestowed on them.

This humanist humor was anything but easy for them to write, not only for the mob after Nesin in Sivas, but for the actual difficulty in making it truly humorous. As Vonnegut puts it in *A Man Without a Country*:

> 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. (p. 83)

Nesin even mocks how difficult it is to write humor in an anecdote he often repeated about how he came to be a humor writer:

> From childhood on, it's been my ambition to set down words that would make people weep. I took a story, written with this intent, to a magazine. The editor-in-chief, who should have been sobbing as he read my story, showed such a lack of understanding that he laughed long and loud, … This, my first disillusionment in writing, continues: My readers laugh at most of the things I've written to make them cry. (*My Life in Exile*, 1961, p. 6)[87]

Nonetheless, a few pages later, Nesin describes how he was blacklisted from publishing anything because of his leftist politics, and then says, "During the times I couldn't work as a writer, though I tried many jobs like grocer, salesman, accountant, newspaper peddler, and photographer, I was a failure at all of them" (p. 8). In the

[87] This is taken from Jacob S. Jacobson's translation of *Bir Sürgünün Anıları*.

end, Nesin and Vonnegut write humanist humor—and *must* write it—despite their flaws and their feelings of failure and disillusionment.

No doubt there are many flaws in this dissertation, as well as alternative pathways that could have been explored further. Always, my main focus has been to present how these two writers' humanist challenge and exigent failure, combined with their humor, has resulted in truly radical writing. This project has led to some interesting and counterintuitive pairings of theorists with these two writers—despite the fact that Vonnegut never lived anywhere else but the US and Nesin nowhere other than Turkey, it turns out that mostly French theorists are exploring the radical possibilities of laughter and as such, ended up comprising the majority of my theoretical framework, aside from Nesin's and Vonnegut's own writings on humor theory.

The greatest indication of the power and radical nature of laughter is the continued attack on its free expression everywhere in the world. As Nesin points out in *Cumhuriyet Döneminde Türk Mizahı* (*Turkish Humor in the Republican Period*):

> [A] shocking fact that demonstrates the pressure the government brings to bear against humor is the speech to the Turkish Parliament, in the year 1950, given by Adnan Menders of the Democratic Party, the first prime minister of the first government to bring down twenty-seven years of single party governance and usher in a system of multi-party governance. In this speech, Menderes attacked humorous newspapers. Think about it: After twenty-seven years of single-party rule, another party comes to power for the first time… [and] as if the country has no other problems, as if all problems have been solved or the key to solving all problems is silencing humorous newspapers, he slams humorous publications [in his address]. (p. 13)
>
> Gülmeceye (mizaha) karşı iktidar baskısını gösteren bundan daha şaşılası bir belge de, yirmiyedi yıllık tek parti iktidarı düzenini yıkarak, çok partili siyasal düzene geçişimiz ilk siyasal değişikliği olarak 1950 yılında iktidara gelen Demokrat Parti'nin ilk hükümetin ilk başbakanı olan Adnan Menderes'in Büyük Millet Meclisi'ndeki daha ilk konuşmasında gülmece gazetelerine saldırısıdır. Düşününüz: Yirmiyedi yıllık tek parti iktidarından sonra ülkede ilk olarak bir başka parti iktidara geliyor... ülkenin başka hiçbir sorunu kalmamış, bütün sorunlar

> çözümlenmiş, yada bütün sorunların çözümlenmesi gülmece gazetelerinin susturulmasına bağlıymış gibi, gülmece gazetelerine çatıyor.

Vonnegut, in discussing how school boards across the U.S. decided to take *Slaughterhouse Five* out of their libraries, puts the problems facing humanist humor even more directly:

> My books are being thrown out of school libraries all over the country—because they're supposedly obscene. I've seen letters to small town newspapers that put *Slaughterhouse-Five* in the same class with *Deep Throat* and *Hustler* magazine. How could anybody masturbate to *Slaughterhouse-Five*? (190)

In the end, humor is often sidelined by academics and by literature because it is not seen as serious enough, while, at the same time, governments and religious censors see it as immensely dangerous and act in every way they can to shut it down. It is my hope that this dissertation contributes to the voices arguing the opposite—that humor is incredibly important academically and culturally worldwide, and that it should not be attacked and silenced by dogmatic authoritarian structures.

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