Kurt Vonnegut: Breakfast of Champions

Kurt Vonnegut’s *Breakfast of Champions* is a bleakly comic postmodern reflection on literature and language. Vonnegut deliberately pays little attention to the plot, which involves science fiction writer Kilgore Trout (a Vonnegut avatar who appears in some of Vonnegut’s earlier novels) traveling to an art festival in Midland City, where he accidentally sends automobile dealer Dwayne Hoover into a maniacal, violent rampage when Dwayne is exposed to the idea, found in one of Trout’s novels, “that human beings are robots, are machines.” The novel is perhaps most well-known for its metafictional elements, its self-awareness of its status as a work of fiction. The author (named Philboyd Studge, but impossible to distinguish from Vonnegut himself) regularly intrudes into the narrative, undercutting any mimetic realism by pointing out that he created the characters and can freely change this fictional universe. The common metafictional portrayal of the author as God appears when the characters refer to the author as the “Creator of the Universe.” Late in the novel, the author, hiding behind his sunglasses, physically places himself in the same bar as his two main characters, remarking, “I was there to watch a confrontation between two human beings I had created: Dwayne Hoover and Kilgore Trout.” Having crossed the already tenuous line dividing storyteller from story, the author suffers a broken toe when Dwayne physically assaults almost every major character in the book. All of this rather slight plot structure leads up to a final encounter between the author and Trout, creator and created. At the novel’s conclusion, the author reveals to Trout his status as a character, saying, “Mr. Trout . . . I am a novelist, and I created you for use in my books.” But the author seems to renounce his traditional authorial rights and responsibilities by announcing, “I am going to set at liberty all the literary characters who have served me so loyally during my writing career,” and tells Trout directly to his face, “Mr. Trout, you are free, you are *free*.” This freedom, however, is marred by sadness, as the metafictional play is subjected to Vonnegut’s crushing depressiveness and his pessimistic view of society. Whatever Vonnegut’s strengths as a (black) humorist or inventor of imaginative scenarios, I think it would be hard to make a case for his skills as a craftsman of language. Extending its self-reflexivity to the question of language, *Breakfast of Champions*, however, perhaps offers a defense of Vonnegut’s rejection of traditional literary language, as well as traditional literary form. First, the novel makes clear the marginal status of literature and the dubious appeal of linear narrative. Trout, whose science fiction novels are transparent allegories “about a tragic failure to communicate,” decides to visit the Midland art festival in order to squash the midwesterners’ dreams of obtaining Culture. Trout’s stories primarily appear in pornographic magazines, so he has to visit an adult book store in Manhattan in order to obtain copies of his works. Completely disillusioned about the world of
letters, Trout, who misanthropically believes “that humanity deserved to die horribly,” hopes “to show provincials, who were bent on exalting creativity, a would-be creator who had failed and failed.” Later on, the author (or author-character) heavily criticizes another, far more successful, novelist invited to the fair, Beatrice Keedsler, stating, “I thought [she] had joined hands with other old-fashioned storytellers to make people believe that life had leading characters, minor characters, significant details, insignificant details, that it had lessons to be learned, tests to be passed, and a beginning, a middle, and an end.” According to the author, this belief in the power of narrative is not innocuous. Americans “were doing their best to live like people invented in story books. This was the reason Americans shot each other so often. It was a convenient literary device for ending short stories and books. . . . Once I understood what was making America such a dangerous, unhappy nation of people who had nothing to do with real life, I resolved to shun storytelling. I would write about life. Every person would be exactly as important as any other. All fact would also be given equal weightiness. Nothing would be left out. Let others bring order to chaos. I would bring chaos to order, instead, which I think I have done.” But the language needed to accomplish this project of “bring[ing] chaos to order,” of writing about life as it really is, is nearly indistinguishable from the corrupted language of commerce and conformity. For example, the novel’s title, a registered corporate trademark repeated by a bartender in the novel whenever a character orders a martini, indicates at the outset the degradation of language in contemporary American society. Brand names, such as those of Dwayne’s franchises, Kentucky Fried Chicken and Best Western, speckle the text, and words advertised on billboards and trucks appear as enigmatic symbols. Local culture, at least outside of racial minorities, offers no linguistic counterforce; the author reflects on the terse, inexpressive language of Midland City: “Most white people in Midland City were insecure when they spoke, so they kept their sentences short and their words simple, in order to keep embarrassing mistakes to a minimum. . . . This was because their English teachers would wince and cover their ears and give them flunking grades and so on whenever they failed to speak like English aristocrats before the First World War. Also: they were told that they were unworthy to speak or write their language if they couldn’t love or understand incomprehensible novels and poems and plays about people long ago and far away.” The author adds, “It didn’t matter much what most people in Midland City said out loud, except when they were talking about money or structures or travel or machinery – or other measurable things.” The conspicuous failure of language motivates the novel’s inclusion of rudimentary explanations and illustrations of common words. As if talking to an extraterrestrial, the author defines words such as “dinosaur” or “apple,” and uses amateurish line drawings to supplement those definitions with visual icons (underscoring the juvenile nature of this discourse, Vonnegut even includes a drawing of a human asshole). At its darkest moments, the novel recasts its metafictional play as mechanized determination, reducing author, characters,
and language itself to the inflexible routines of the machine: “I had come to the conclusion that there was nothing sacred about myself or about any human being, that we were all machines, doomed to collide and collide and collide. For want of anything better to do, we became fans of collisions. Sometimes I wrote well about collisions, which meant I was a writing machine in good repair. Sometimes I wrote badly, which meant I was a writing machine in bad repair.”