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Abstract approved:

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This thesis is an exploration of *Catch-22* (1961) and *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), two early documents of American postmodern literature. In particular, this thesis attempts to present the critical discussions surrounding each novel as parallel to the broader theoretical discussions surrounding the concept of postmodernism. My contention is that, in both of these discussions, due in part to the natural teleological and linear tendencies of literary criticism, and despite the professed openness of postmodern thought to paradox, diligent efforts must be made to periodically reassert collapsed possibilities in literature. With this in mind, I approach *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* in an effort to, first, demonstrate how critics have diminished the potential meaning of each novel in imposing their own notions of a literary-historical trajectory, and, second, how readings of marginalized characters in each novel can reveal untapped potential for further exploration of the broadest definitions of the project of postmodernism.

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The Postwar Novel as Postmodern: Revisiting *Catch-22* & *Slaughterhouse-Five*

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

Peter Spreitzer, Author

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
What is Postmodernism, and What are its Ethics?	5
The Second World War as Postmodernism's Definitive Grand Narrative	16
<i>Catch-22</i>	26
The Chronology of <i>Catch-22</i> and ex-P.F.C Wintergreen	28
The Perceived Incongruence of <i>Catch-22's</i> Ending and Orr	39
<i>Slaughterhouse-Five</i>	50
Billy Pilgrim's Imagination and the Critical Tendency Towards Teleology	52
Postmodernism's Capacity for Outrage and Billy Pilgrim's Complacency	57
Conclusion	69
Works Consulted	72

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Introduction

Is there not a center to even the most decentered of these theories? What is power to Foucault, writing to Derrida, or class to Marxism? Each of these theoretical perspectives can be argued to be deeply – and knowingly – implicated in that notion of center they attempt to subvert (Hutcheon 14).

The arena of postmodern literary criticism, an arena very much committed to the idea of “decentering,” is at once ideally equipped to challenge the authority of any rival ideology and, thanks to this same commitment, constantly on the verge of collapsing under the weight of anxiety stemming from its own lack of authority. To devotees of the many theoretical practices that coexist under that umbrella of postmodernism, the above quotation from Linda Hutcheon should provide some comfort. Here Hutcheon suggests that the influential and still-vital theories of Foucault, Derrida, and Marx persist despite the paradox that they are “implicated in that notion of center they attempt to subvert”—and they are so implicated deeply and *knowingly*. I begin with Hutcheon’s idea of persistence in the face of paradox because it indicates at once the sense of humility and sense of boldness that I posit must underlie all discourse on the postmodern. Participants in this discourse—writers, critics, and readers alike—must humbly accept the instability and uncertainty of meaning that accompanies the project of decentering epistemological authority; but on the other hand, they must also be bold enough to produce meaning from such unstable ground.

At the heart of this thesis lie two American novels about World War II that are typically included in this discourse of postmodernism. The inclusion of *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* is warranted at least in part because both persist in the spirit of Hutcheon's paradox: both are about producing meaning where none seems to exist.

As I approached the literary criticism surrounding each novel, I came to appreciate the difficulty with which critics grapple with the postmodern paradox in their work. The many fascinating conversations that make up the discourse of postmodernism can also be found in the discussion surrounding the war novels of Heller and Vonnegut. While a typical project might concentrate on how postmodernism can help one understand the novels, this thesis is just as much about how *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* can help us better understand postmodernism. More specifically, I hope to establish the following five positions that are critical to my understanding of each novel and its context in postmodern literary discourse:

1. Literary criticism, even postmodern literary criticism, is naturally teleological. Despite the urging of postmodernism, critical texts tend to be placed within the broader context of a literary-historical tradition with a certain trajectory. Further crippling its ability to accommodate the paradoxes of postmodernism, literary criticism tends to impose linear narratives upon its subjects. Such impositions are inevitable and can be productive, but need to be recognized.

2. Hutcheon suggests postmodernists accept their implied roles in postmodern paradoxes deeply and knowingly, to which I add a third suggestion: that we fly in the face of paradox *transparently*. Although writers of literature and criticism may embrace postmodern paradoxes knowingly, they cede control over interpretation of their texts once the texts are made public. Therefore, critics and readers must work vigilantly to prevent such paradoxes from collapsing. In this thesis, I try to open back up such collapsed paradoxes in my readings of *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*.
3. The trajectory implied by the teleology of literary criticism contributes to the insistence that postmodern literature is something fundamentally new. In fact, viewing postmodern literature strictly in terms of its innovative qualities results in an incomplete understanding of how the paradox of postmodernism is itself the persistence of an *old* paradox.
4. At the heart of most attempts to establish a productive definition of postmodernism is the idea that postmodernism includes all attempts to resist grand cultural narratives. While this may be true, dissent from these grand narratives is nothing new; what is perhaps new is the sheer scale of grand narratives in the 20th century.
5. Postmodern texts like *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* specifically resist impositions of linear, unidirectional critical narratives. One such narrative suggests that postmodernism can yield nothing but frustration, complacency, and meaninglessness: that postmodernism is ethically void. However, *Catch-22*, and specifically Yossarian's reaction to Orr's successful escape, shows

how frustration coexists with optimism. *Slaughterhouse-Five*, specifically the way its narrator undermines its protagonist Billy Pilgrim, shows how complacency can be turned into productive anger.

While I hope that this list of ideas begins to tell an intriguing story on its own, I must first properly introduce and develop a sixth idea, which serves as the primary premise of the thesis and remains at the foreground throughout:

6. The public doctrines that pervaded American understanding of the Second World War and, subsequently, the Cold War are the quintessential American grand narratives of the postmodern era. The fundamental characteristic of postmodernist literature, though not necessarily a characteristic distinguishing it from modernist literature, is its ability to offer alternative narratives that (would ideally) disrupt the grand narratives that allow cultures to make sense of their history with minimal guilt and maximal pride.

In the remainder of my introduction, I will attempt to establish this premise, which will enable me to engage the critical discussion surrounding *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* and the larger, overarching discussion on postmodernism as parallel, mutually influencing discussions. By seeking to recoup potential lost by years of critical discussion, this thesis will, in effect, also seek the recovery of powerful ethical capabilities that are often denied to postmodern literature. With this in mind, I will first guide my project toward the broad concept of postmodernism.

What is Postmodernism, and What are its Ethics?

Although an unchallenged definition of postmodernism does not exist (and may not be possible), most critics agree that, for their experimentalism and anti-war messages, *Catch-22* (1961) by Joseph Heller and *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969) by Kurt Vonnegut represent something like the first wave of American literary postmodernism. Yet, I hope to demonstrate here a major problem in deeming any novel “postmodern”: the tendency for the critic’s postmodern expectations to be read into the literature, rather than anything inherent to the novel dictating its classification. Postmodern classification is particularly susceptible to such self-fulfilling critical prophecies because of the highly arbitrary and subjective criteria that distinguish it. However, before approaching such difficulties, it is necessary to first establish some stable ground for the term.

“At the very least,” the *Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory & Criticism* proposes, “postmodernism highlights the multiplication of voices, questions, and conflicts that shattered what once seemed to be (although it never really was) the placid unanimity of the great tradition and of the West that gloried in it” (McGowan 587). By beginning this entry with “at the very least,” John McGowan gives recognition to the many vigorous ongoing debates about the definition of the term “postmodernism,” which include questions of whether it is even a useful term at all. McGowan also refers parenthetically to the frequently overlooked alignment between postmodernism and past eras; this business of disrupting unanimity is nothing new, he admits. What this entry refers to neutrally, or perhaps even positively, as “multiplication of voices” is just as often referred to in terms with

traditionally negative connotations such as “instability” and “meaninglessness.”

Even this alleged “least” disputed definition of postmodernism raises controversies.

Unable to agree on a unifying definition for postmodern literature, critics often engage in the inductive practice of examining how a singular aspect of the body of literature considered postmodern functions. The idea behind such an approach is that taking on a narrower slice of postmodernism can eliminate confusing variables and contradictions. Later in this essay, I intend to establish how postmodernism particularly resists such induction; in short, it is the postmodern critic who willfully reconstructs postmodern criteria from a state of deconstruction. Too few critics practically allow for the contradictions they espouse to embrace in theory. Yet, this process is a valuable starting point for understanding how critics view postmodern literature today. For this reason, I will at times make use of various ethical approaches to postmodern literature to demonstrate both uses and misuses specific to readings of *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

As literary criticism is ultimately an attempt to assess and reconfigure meaning, any critical approach to postmodernism must first come to terms with the lack of a dominant, authoritative source for meaning. Thomas Docherty succinctly articulates the baseline anxiety stemming from the destabilizing force of postmodernism: “No single satisfactory mode of epistemological legitimization is available” (*Postmodernism* 4). Whether the source of lamentation or exultation, the sensitivity of postmodernism includes the acceptance that sources of ethical, authorial, epistemological, and ontological authority – to name just a few – have been indefinitely unmoored. In this environment, every textual utterance can be

analyzed as an attempt to re-moor, or pin down an undulating and unstable network of signs. Each textual utterance, then, is an act of blind faith, establishing a starting point for meaning in the internal world created by the narrative to follow.

Writers who subscribe to this postmodernist sensibility face an incredibly exciting *and* terrifying ethical decision, encapsulated by Zygmunt Bauman in his essay "Postmodernity, or Living with Ambivalence": "There are no longer any rules or norms to guide inquiry, no overall validity, no universal, unequivocal basis for truth or taste" (qtd. in Davis 25). So postmodernism has no central basis of authority in ethical matters; without such an internal basis, how can one approach the ethics of postmodernism? Again, Linda Hutcheon's notion of persistence despite paradox provides a useful way out of this conundrum in answering the question of how any theorizing can avoid being bogged down in its attempts to establish an internal center of logic. Postmodern ethics are ethics that self-admittedly do not make use of a singular claim to authority, but persist anyway. With this in mind, one can expect postmodern ethics to involve a "multiplication of voices" with a multiplicity of answers; rather than sharing a common center, postmodern ethics share the knowledge of their own illegitimacy, or lack of authority, as Hutcheon makes clear.

With this in mind, one way to approach the ethics of the postmodern novel appears to be through examining the ethics of novels that both reflect the sensitivity posited by McGowan in his attempt to broadly define postmodernism and persist despite their lack of authority. Such novels would "shatter what once seemed to be ... the placid unanimity of the great tradition and of the West that gloried in it" (McGowan 587). The "unanimity of the great tradition," problematic as it is, is easily

recognizable as a trope repeated in the multitude of attempts made to define postmodernism, most notably in the writing of Jean-François Lyotard. Lyotard has defined postmodernism as “incredulity toward metanarratives.” Similarly, he refers to the necessity of rejecting “grand narratives” (qtd. in Davis 17). Instead, he proposes, “value and morality may be established within local communities so that daily questions of living may be addressed from a local center” (Davis 27). Lyotard’s definition of the project of postmodernism seems to acknowledge Hutcheon’s idea of persistence in the face of paradox; postmodern ethical centers only apply locally, because to universalize them would violate their own self-awareness of the necessary limits of their authority resulting from their artificiality, as Hutcheon indicates. It follows that one common ethical act made by postmodern novels is to disrupt the “placid unanimity” of grand narratives; such novels signal their postmodern sensitivity through this disruption. Specifically, I will be interested in how *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* disrupt the “mood of war,” referred to by Fussell, that allowed the United States’ actions in the war to pass largely without scrutiny from many Americans (publicly, at least).

But is this really enough for a novel to qualify as ethically postmodern? Surely the finest writers who constitute the group we know as modernists also shattered and disrupted, in their own ways, the grand narratives of their time. In his 1961 essay “On the Modern Element in Modern Literature,” Lionel Trilling wrote, “The characteristic element of modern literature, or at least of the most highly developed modern literature, is the bitter line of hostility to civilization which runs through it” (qtd. in Clark 43). Trilling’s formulation for modernism contains the

same essence as McGowan's and Lyotard's definitions of postmodernism. At this point, the temptation is to place another hurdle in front of the postmodern novel to distinguish it clearly from the modern novel. In this thesis, I will refer to Brian McHale's criteria for postmodern literature to facilitate my readings of *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* and also to facilitate my critique of several common practices within postmodern literary criticism. Essentially, adding criteria like McHale's narrows the definition of the postmodern novel to include a more select group of novels that disrupt existing grand narratives, but also do so in a new way, representing innovation beyond the style of the modernists.

McHale's *Postmodernist Fiction* establishes a particularly useful set of postmodern literary criteria because it attempts to combine the formulations of postmodern poetics made by others. In this respect, McHale's method is more deductive, as he looks to locate and describe a level on which other lists of postmodern criteria concur. To do so, McHale examines the projects of literary theorists including David Lodge, Peter Wollen, and Douwe Fokkema. In order to approach the commonalities of their systems, McHale imports a concept popularized by Roman Jakobson to use as a higher-order function: the dominant. Jakobson defined the term in a lecture given in 1935:

The dominant may be defined as the focusing component of a work of art: it rules, determines, and transforms the remaining components.... A poetic work [is] a structured system, a regularly ordered hierarchical set of artistic devices. Poetic evolution is a shift in this hierarchy (qtd. in McHale 6).

In the dominant, McHale sees an opportunity for a higher order of categorization that might rise above the fray of the many postmodern contradictions, some of

which I have introduced above. He chooses to locate the dominant for postmodernism at the level of philosophical inquiry. He describes his argument simply: "Postmodernist fiction differs from modernist fiction just as a poetics dominated by ontological (being, existence) issues differs from one dominated by epistemological (theory of knowledge) issues" (xii). McHale acknowledges that, as any philosopher would point out, epistemological and ontological concerns always exist together because one can always lead to the other (11). However, he insists that one set of questions must precede the other; the preceding set of questions is the dominant set. And in postmodernist fiction, McHale argues that inquiries into the nature of knowledge and truth are always secondary to inquiries into the nature of being and existence. My readings, specifically that of *Catch-22*, will challenge the strict unidirectional relationship McHale assumes between ontological and epistemological questions, but for now, McHale's reasoning represents quite well the way critics describe the innovations expected of postmodern literature.

McHale's specific postmodern poetics set up a binary relationship between ontological and epistemological questions. This relationship raises a question of whether postmodern literature's disruption of grand narratives needs necessarily to happen through the new narrative's own counterexample, or whether this shattering can happen if a narrative simply resists or refutes an existing grand narrative. What I mean here is that McHale implies that postmodernist literature must reveal a different underlying structure, or dominant, in its execution and in its style. However, such an implication creates a false distinction. Refuting an existing grand narrative *is* creating a stylistically innovative narrative, and vice versa. The

two are faces of the same coin. As an example, I offer John Hersey's *New Yorker* article, "Hiroshima" (1946), about the destruction of that city by atomic bomb. A watershed piece of journalism, it owes its classification as innovative to both its taboo content and its proto-New Journalism style. In simplest terms, writing about content outside of acceptable cultural narratives and writing in an inventive style are merely two ways of describing textual introductions of new perspectives, the recovery of lost voices. By placing a premium on formal innovation, McHale's side of this argument seems to be less than appreciative of the similarities between the forms found in modernist, as opposed to postmodernist, writing. What we might call Lyotard's side of this debate, since it is posited in the spirit of his most basic definition of postmodernism, seems to leave open the possibility, especially if we find credence in Trilling's comments about the main characteristic of modernist literature, that there is no necessary difference between modernist and postmodernist literature except their respective temporal eras.

All of this calls to mind another common entry point into the debate over the proper definition of postmodernism: the linguistic makeup of the word "postmodernism." Basically, this debate concerns the relationship of that word to the era to which it is "post," modernism. It is helpful to momentarily set "postmodernism" aside and consider what the term "modernism" refers to. Literary scholars use the term modernism to describe literary art created (as an *answer* to the era of modernity). Modernity, though an era whose encompassing years are still debatable, is a concept more consensually agreed upon. The shock of the ideas of Darwin, Freud, and Marx, industrialization and the ensuing explosion of capitalism,

the enormous scale of the Great War, and many other symptoms of acceleration in the rate of general change in the world signaled this new era.¹ And the era, modernity, was accompanied by a new sensibility in art: modernism. The sensibility had a basis in exploring the profound implications of human subjectivity, though the definition of this period is likely as debatable as the definition of “postmodernism.” At the very least, its relation to modernity is instructive.

The relationship between postmodernity and postmodernism cannot be as simply formulated. There exists an additional dimension to this latter relationship. Postmodernity is, in part, the persistence of the conditions of modernity either (1) insidiously, because the modernist project has failed and been proven to be harmful, but persists anyway, or, (2) without consummation, despite modernism’s efforts to complete its project. Whether one claims that modernism and its faith in the rational, Enlightenment subject has failed, or whether one instead asserts that its project is simply incomplete likely predicts one’s alignment relative to Jürgen Habermas and Lyotard, who have been embroiled in a high-profile debate over the role of the Enlightenment in postmodernism, described here by Hutcheon:

Both agreed that modernity could not be separated from notions of unity and universality or what Lyotard dubbed “metanarratives.” Habermas argued that the project of modernity, rooted in the context of Enlightenment rationality, was still unfinished and required completion; Lyotard countered with the view that modernity has actually been liquidated by history, a history whose tragic paradigm was the Nazi concentration camp and whose ultimate delegitimizing force was that of capitalist “technoscience” which has changed forever our concept of knowledge (Hutcheon 24).

¹ Walter Benjamin defined the “shock” of modernity as “the distracting element of which ... is based on the changes of place and focus which periodically assail the spectator” (qtd. in Crocker 495).

Essentially, both agree that certain conditions of modernity persist in postmodernity, although the degree to which this is a favorable condition, and the degree to which its solution is rooted in the Enlightenment ideal is up for debate. Lyotard sees the Holocaust as the rational conclusion of liberal humanism; Habermas sees it as the event that has tragically interrupted the rational conclusion of liberal humanism. Certainly, as sensibilities, modernism and postmodernism should have sufficient capacity for optimism and pessimism. Naturally Lyotard would see postmodernism as a good thing if it combats those metanarratives he sees persisting, and just as naturally, Habermas would see postmodernism as a good thing only if it enables the project of modernity its completion.

The immediate point here is that postmodernism is also a response to the historical era of modernity. So, because modernity persists in postmodernity, one relationship postmodernism has to modernism is that they each respond to their historical era, one of which (postmodernity) contains aspects of the other. The second relationship is more linear: postmodernism is also a direct response to the artistic sensibility of modernism. This relationship is itself doubled: postmodernism both extends and rejects modernism. Ihab Hassan calls this complicated relationship “a fourfold vision of complementaries, embracing continuity and discontinuity, diachrony and synchrony” (150). Postmodernism is, in part, a sensibility deployed in art characterized by an extension and expansion of the bitterness and skepticism towards civilization that characterized modernism. At the same time, though, its bitterness and skepticism has at times directed itself at the very vehicles for

bitterness and skepticism deployed by modernism, namely the reliance on the liberal human subject.

My larger point is this: postmodern literature contains contradictions that serious critical inquiries naturally seek to resolve, thus limiting them. Ethical evaluations of postmodernist literature tend to focus on a relationship of similarity between the sensibilities of postmodernism and modernism. By contrast, poetic evaluations of postmodernist literature naturally focus on factors distinguishing postmodernism and modernism. There is nothing wrong with such evaluations, but we must recognize that they take into account only one relationship within the “fourfold vision of complementaries.” Such care is taken to provide inclusive and elastic definitions of postmodernism, yet the same care to avoid equivocation is sometimes lost when the body of postmodernist fiction is approached via ethics or poetics, for example.

Many have noted the irony in even endeavoring to define postmodernism. “In fact,” writes Todd Davis, “the very act of defining seems to fly in the face of postmodernity: can there be any single, essential definition of postmodernism?” (Davis 14). Even more worrisome, as Thomas Docherty notes in his introduction to Ihab Hassan’s essay that famously offers a two-column breakdown of modernism and postmodernism, such binary comparison “is itself somewhat symptomatic of a modernist tendency in criticism: the tendency to master by giving aesthetic form (in this case the form of a dialectical opposition) to diverse and random materials” (145). While there is a certain ridiculousness to listing “Antiform” as a characteristic within a neatly arranged, two-column binary, I think such modernist tendencies are

permissible and inevitable in productive dialogue on postmodernism. Again, Linda Hutcheon's explanation on how theory can persist in the absence of authoritative reason and logic is helpful: persistence in spite of paradox. Practitioners must accept the absence of a basis for meaning, and yet pursue a reasonable basis anyway. Discussion of postmodernism is consistently on the verge of being derailed by the human need for synthesis, linearity, and narrative, a tendency that needs to be countered from time to time in order to make way for the persistence of ambiguity. So to pursue a definition of postmodernism as postmodernists, we must be willing to accept into the body of postmodernist fiction *both* novels that respond to modernism by making a break with it, *and* those that continue the project of modernism by continuing its spirit of skepticism, but applying that skepticism towards newer grand- and meta-narratives.

Both of the novels and novelists central to this thesis have a reputation for skepticism towards the war in which both Heller and Vonnegut served. Paul Fussell's *Wartime* reads as almost a companion to Heller's novel for its tenacity in taking on the "chickenshit" of the war; chickenshit, according to Fussell, is "insistence on the letter rather than the spirit of ordinances," and is distinct from "horse- or bull- or elephant shit – because it is small-minded and ignoble and takes the trivial seriously" (80). In another passage, Fussell again mentions Heller by name, writing, "As novelists like Thomas Pynchon and Joseph Heller have understood well after the fact, the war was so serious it was ridiculous" (132). *Catch-22* embodies this spirit perhaps more than any other single novel.

On the other hand, McHale, with his insistence on poetic innovation as part of a narrower definition of postmodernist fiction, calls science fiction “the ontological genre *par excellence*” (and thus, the postmodernist genre *par excellence*) because of its premises that bring different worlds and types of beings into contact with one another, securing an ontological dominant (16). With this assessment, an argument can easily be made that *Slaughterhouse-Five* is the paradigmatic postmodern American take on World War II, as Vonnegut most frequently blurs the line between “serious” fiction and science fiction.

What I intend to examine in the following pages are the distinct ways in which *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* achieve paradigmatic status as postmodern American Cold War-era novels about World War II. Furthermore, I intend to interrogate how these distinctions reveal biases towards incomplete and exclusionary definitions of postmodernist literature, specifically in these definitions’ conceptions of the relationship between postmodernism and modernism. I have already briefly sketched out the reasoning behind the two approaches: one focusing on how postmodernism continues the modernist project of dissent, and one focusing on how postmodernism innovates formally beyond the modernist novel. Next, I will examine World War II’s role as the exemplary grand narrative in the development of postmodernism.

The Second World War as Postmodernism’s Definitive Grand Narrative

In one passage from *Wartime*, Fussell references what he perceives as a disturbing lack of vitriol among American novelists immediately following the war.

This he attributes to the “mood of war,” a mood characterized by considering the war still too fresh and traumatic in the American collective memory to tolerate the scrutiny of anti-war novels. According to Fussell, the discourse in American culture reserved for understanding the war was instead monopolized by influential and misleading cultural narratives that eased American minds during, and lasted well beyond, World War II. He writes, “...The mood of wartime survived the war, at least until Vonnegut, Heller, and Pynchon succeeded in proposing an attractive alternative” (Fussell 180). We might properly ask Fussell compared to what exactly are the worlds created by these three novelists “attractive alternatives”? The protagonists of the war novels of Vonnegut, Heller, and Pynchon all encounter the absurdly powerful militaristic forces that represent the prevailing attitudes toward the increasing American role in world affairs; and each protagonist is, for the most part, rendered impotent and ineffectual by these forces. *Gravity’s Rainbow’s* Tyrone Slothrop, despite his knowledge of the conspiracy against him, quite literally shatters into fragments in his search for control of his own subjectivity. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Billy Pilgrim is a pathetically inept and passive observer of his own life. And, although *Catch-22* ends on a surprisingly optimistic final note, John Yossarian is stifled at nearly every pass by the inept bureaucracy of the military and magical potency of Milo Minderbinder’s über-capitalistic syndicate. The world of *Catch-22*, in which insanity and dim-witted conformity seem to be the only two options for survival, is not easily justified as an attractive option. At first glance of these synopses, one wonders how Fussell could muster anything beyond pessimism in reacting to the trio’s novelistic proposals for postwar Americans.

One of the most poignant representatives of bureaucratic backwardness in *Catch-22* is Colonel Cathcart, a character who spends the war in his office plotting how he can use those under his command to gain promotion up the Army's ranks. At one point in the novel, Cathcart ponders what measures he might take in order to get his name and picture published in *The Saturday Evening Post*. One idea, eventually abandoned, is to attract the desired media coverage by conducting a prayer session before every bombing mission. After Cathcart decides against this he dismisses his chaplain, but not before reminding him, "You'll let me know if you can think of anything for getting our names into *The Saturday Evening Post*, won't you?" (Heller 207). Beyond the humorous (and distressing) opportunism of the colonel, Heller's reference to *The Saturday Evening Post* also calls to mind how few media sources kept Americans abreast of the events of World War II. Except for a few flashbacks to a military base in Colorado, the entirety of *Catch-22*'s action occurs in Europe. Disturbingly, it is only through the sanitizing coverage of outlets like *The Saturday Evening Post* and newsreels played at the movie theatre that American citizens might become acquainted with the real-life equivalents to Cathcart, Yossarian, and the rest of the characters in *Catch-22*. These are the agents of the grand narratives postmodernism claims to shatter.

In this context, the attractiveness of the worlds of *Catch-22*, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and *Gravity's Rainbow* becomes apparent: at least the novels give recognition to how surrealistically messy the war had been, as opposed to the newspapers and newsreels that would make the war out to seem like a necessary event carried out by rational people. Heller's bitterly satirical description of Cathcart's contrivance to

appear in the *Post* must be what Fussell has in mind as an attractive alternative. The critical awareness demonstrated by these novelists is a vast improvement on acquiescence to the cultural narratives abetted by, for example, *The Saturday Evening Post*. The “attractive alternatives” proposed by three postwar, postmodern novelists listed by Fussell are not, just as the actions taken by the characters in their novels are not, successful proactions. Rather, the novelists share recognition of the incredible persistence of absurdity well into the 20th century. As the capabilities of technology soar, the inability of humanity to come to any practical or theoretical consensus on the meaning and value of life becomes more and more absurd.

The type of absurdity ascribed to World War II is, then, both new and old. It is new because things had never before been so acutely absurd; never before has one button controlling one weapon carried with it the potential for the destruction of all humanity. At the same time, what makes World War II so absurd is the persistence of old problems into a new era. The same paradox sustains the confusing discussions surrounding the philosophical and artistic sensibility ushered in by World War II, postmodernism. Not surprisingly, it is the idea of postmodernism as partially the persistence of the “old” that gets neglected most often in this ongoing discussion. The sequel to the Great War—the Second World War—is just the latest event for postmodernists such as Heller and Vonnegut to ponder life’s absurdity.

In an attempt to satisfy my own curiosity regarding the clarity and significance of the term “postmodern” in literary studies, I turn to two of the three aforementioned, allegedly postmodern novels precisely because they narrate World

War II. How can the war represent both the height of human folly and, simultaneously, the height of *recognition* of the ridiculous? This is the paradox that I believe supplies postmodernists writers with unending frustration, but also with unprecedented freedom. I will take a primarily two-pronged approach to my readings of *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* in the context of the unstable and over-determined definition of postmodern literature. First, I intend to challenge definitions of the postmodern that assume the term to solely indicate a fundamentally new awareness and practice. Here, I demonstrate how such chronologically shortsighted assumptions lead critics to insert their own notions of a literary-historical tradition into their chosen literary subjects.² Second, and with a sufficiently broad notion of the postmodern, I will interpret the ethical signals given in these novels to show how they accomplish their broader postmodern ethical tasks. In order to do so, I will first discuss in more detail the history of the theoretical concept of postmodernism, and the reason why World War II becomes such a crucial starting point in understanding this concept.

To this juncture, I have attempted to represent the relationship between postmodernism and the narratives cultures tell themselves. Before discussing *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* as primary texts for exploration into the postmodern, I must first triangulate this relationship with World War II. By putting the concepts in

² By “chronological shortsightedness,” I mean exactly what the C.S. Lewis-coined phrase “chronological snobbery” means: that what we believe in the present is inherently more sophisticated than what people believed in the past. My term is more diplomatic and more in the spirit of my thesis, as I argue the imposition of a teleology on the literary-historical tradition is a natural tendency that is often useful, and not necessarily snobbish.

contact with one another, I hope to create a strong foundation for easy and natural incorporation of both novels.

As with modernity, many events are at times credited with signaling a new era that became known as postmodernity. As I discuss above in summarizing the theories of Lyotard and Habermas, many see “Auschwitz” as symbolic of the long-term implications of the Enlightenment human subject. Others see the unleashing of the atomic bomb as a key moment in recognizing postmodernity. Alan Nadel writes, “In assuming (both actively and tacitly) the use of atomic weaponry, the United States created an adversarial relationship that, like atomic energy itself, differed in kind as well as in scope from previous power relationships in any part of the globe” (13). Nadel echoes a claim made previously by Hannah Arendt in *On Violence*: “The technical development of the implements of violence has now reached the point where no political goal could conceivably justify their actual use in armed conflict” (3). Arendt’s sentiments touch on what I have called here the persistence of ridiculousness to new heights in the era of postmodernism’s naissance. Such watershed events combined to make clear that modernity was no longer a new era to adjust to, but rather modernity was persisting in a way that needed to be either ended or rectified through a different sensibility.

For these reasons, I will use World War II as a constant factor in my evaluation of the two novels. The Allied, and particularly American, version of the war has become the quintessential grand narrative recognized by postmodernism. Nadel’s book *Containment Culture* traces the grand narrative of the war through its transition into the narrative of the Cold War, a narrative heavily influenced by the

type of containment first articulated by George Kennan in his famous 1947 “X” article in the journal *Foreign Affairs*. Nadel describes this process powerfully and convincingly throughout his book. In one passage, he writes:

The story of containment had derived its logic from the rigid major premise that the world was divided into two monolithic camps, one dedicated to promoting the inextricable combination of capitalism, democracy and (Judeo-Christian) religion, and one seeking to destroy that ideological amalgamation by any means. By the mid-1960s, the problems with the logic of containment—its blindness, its contradictions, and its duplicities—had started to be manifest in a public discourse displaying many traits that would later be associated with “postmodernism” (Nadel 3).

Shortly thereafter, Nadel calls the postwar construction of dominance and authority “perhaps one of the most powerfully deployed national narratives in recorded history” (4). Nadel’s description of how meta-recognition of the logic of containment became “associated” with postmodernism is instructive in reminding us how un-extraordinary postmodernism really is: it stems from a recognition that established logic is, and has always been, incomplete and faulty. What makes postmodernism unique is one of its conditions: it must express its problem with established logic and also be suspicious that there is no better logic to turn to. So the grand narrative surrounding World War II “is one of the most powerfully deployed national narratives” in an era defined by re-writing oppressive grand narratives. Thus, a study two of the most famous American World War II novels is the natural and logical place to examine American postmodernism.

Fussell provides a useful, concrete example of grand narratives at play in postwar United States with his account of the invasion of Sicily in 1943 and how it was portrayed in the *Time-Life* series that chronicles its version of World War II.

During this invasion, American ground troops were told that American airborne troops were going to be flying overhead. However, when the sky filled with the planes of fellow American soldiers, the ground contingent panicked and opened fire on their countrymen overhead. Twenty-three planes carrying 229 men of the 82nd Airborne Division were shot down. How did the *Time-Life* series document this disaster? “The volume *The Italian Campaign* (1978) of the *Time-Life* series...doesn’t mention it at all,” writes Fussell (21). He continues:

That is typical behavior for this series, which has done more than perhaps any other popular account of the war to ascribe clear, and usually noble, cause and purpose to accidental or demeaning events. It has thus conveyed to the credulous a satisfying, orderly, and even optimistic and wholesome view of catastrophic occurrences—a fine way to encourage a moralistic, nationalistic, and bellicose politics (22).

Postmodernism combines the incredulity expressed by Fussell at the persistence of ridiculous narratives such as the *Time-Life* volumes combined with the philosophical acceptance that no supplanting narrative would have any more claim to meaning anyway.

With this in mind, World War II and subsequent Cold War narratives will serve as pivots in my study. Clearly such wartime and postwar narratives are precisely what Lyotard and others have in mind when they talk about postmodernism’s responsibility to cripple and combat grand- and meta-narratives. Therefore, one persistent aspect of my questioning will ask in what ways does each novel do violence to the grand narratives, by taking them on directly, or by re-imagining the war and the subsequent establishment of world order through a representation of that which has not been deemed presentable in the establishment of

official histories. Or, to ask this question in another way: how does each novel take on the powerful voices controlling public discourse, and in what ways does each novel attempt to recover the persecuted voices silenced by the controlling public discourses?

At this point, I would like to reassert my own skepticism of the usefulness of such constructs of historical periods as modernity and postmodernity. Inevitably, the meaning tethered to a name that simply represents a span of years becomes stretched to accommodate more subjective interpretations. Such unregulated expansion naturally diminishes the usefulness of the original designation. For example, in an effort to articulate what exactly is so new about postmodernism, critics and theorists often succeed only by neglecting discussion of similar sensibilities displayed before the postmodern era. In a sense, this process can be considered a part of the definition of postmodernism. What I mean is that postmodernism is simply a continuation of humanity's compulsion towards reason, logic, and taxonomy, now performed with dwindling certainty because of widespread skepticism towards reason, logic, and taxonomy. One implication of this argument I am making is that philosophy is not nearly as dependant on world events as the linguistic proximity between, for example, postmodernism and postmodernity implies. Postmodernity exists because of a particular convergence and commingling of philosophical sensibilities in the 20th century, not because of World War II. Hassan uses *synchrony/diachrony* and *continuity/discontinuity* as the terms of his "fourfold vision of complementaries," though I maintain that this pair of complementaries can also be expressed in terms of *modernity/modernism* and

postmodernity/postmodernism; either way, my point is to establish that these terms exist only in relation to each other. An event such as World War II is of interest to me as a case-study of sorts. How does the construct of postmodernism incorporate World War II into its own logic or anti-logic? Simply put, my aim will not be to show that World War II was an event signaling that postmodernity and postmodernism were upon us, but rather to examine how two writers considered practitioners of the postmodernist sensibility re-imagine World War II as a historical event recast as a postmodern event.

Catch-22

With its narrative constructed from randomly ordered episodes, Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* stands in stark contrast to the simple, linear narratives that typically prove most effective in justifying wars—the manner in which wars are typically described in high school history textbooks, for example. Indeed, the novel is often described in terms similar to the following quotation from the back of the Scribner paperback edition: “*Catch-22* is like no other novel. It has its own rationale.” As the years pass, that unique rationale attributed to the novel becomes more and more conflated with the actions of Heller's protagonist, Lt. John Yossarian. And for good reason: most of novel's episodes feature Yossarian in his near-constant state of frustration produced by knowledge that he, the only sane person left in the Army it seems, is in turn considered crazy by nearly all those who surround him. Part of the conflation between novel and protagonist involves *Catch-22*'s cult status, a product of both the its timely entrée to the American zeitgeist and some ingenious marketing. In a 1994 preface to *Catch-22*, Heller recalls being handed stickers that read: YOSSARIAN LIVES (Heller 11). The phrase became common in college bathroom stalls across the country, symbolic of a counterculture resistance to hawkishness that would indeed live and thrive in the era to follow *Catch-22*'s publication in 1961.

My reading of *Catch-22* will attempt to move Yossarian off center stage, at least partially. My feeling is that, in one sense, it is unnatural to view *Catch-22* as a character-driven novel. All of Heller's characters, even his main one, act erratically

from page to page. Heller's experimentalism includes his ability to force readers to question the consistency of his characters, and to manipulate their expectations of a continuous performance from Yossarian and others. I propose, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, a second reason for deemphasizing Yossarian. My reasoning is that postmodernism is about, among numerous other things, recovering peripheral voices that go un- or under-represented in grand cultural narratives. I offer this reason lightheartedly because, more than anything, it self-servingly fits my reading. However, there is something valid to it.

The cultural narrative, the mythos, surrounding *Catch-22* revolves around Yossarian. To the college student who defiantly places his "YOSSARIAN LIVES" sticker on the bathroom stall, Yossarian is *the* character to resist and subvert the bumbling bureaucracy in the novel. As I hope to demonstrate in the pages to follow, this reliance on Yossarian as a singular model for postmodernism is insufficient. Postmodernism requires, as the *Johns Hopkins Guide* suggests, "a multiplication of voices" to wage war on the seeming totality of grand narratives. Yossarian the cultural phenomenon, who in his time served as a perfectly good example of a character who persists in the face of paradox, has become rather one-dimensional in popular culture today.

To his aid, I would like to bring to the forefront two of *Catch-22's* underrepresented voices, ex-P.F.C. Wintergreen and Orr. As I chart a course through the critics who have, with good intentions and entirely plausible readings, contributed to linear, unidirectional interpretations on the novel, I hope to use the two characters to reassert the language of contingency to the novel: to allow it to

persist in its many exquisite paradoxes. Following a recapitulation of a longstanding critical debate regarding the timeline of *Catch-22*, I intend to use ex-P.F.C. Wintergreen's control over the directionality of the flow of information in the novel to show how literary criticism struggles to account for such reversibility. Next, I will catalogue another group of critics who are unable or unwilling to allow the perceived contradiction posed by *Catch-22*'s final chapters. To their binary debate, I offer the example of Orr as a character who defies the typical interpretation of the novel as a binary struggle between Yossarian and the rest of his universe.

The Chronology of Catch-22 and ex-P.F.C Wintergreen

Close reading reveals that *Catch-22* is constructed quite methodically. Each episode takes many abrupt turns, but in each case, episode links to episode by way of a particular associative memory. The narrative associations verge several times toward describing the gruesome death by anti-aircraft flak of Yossarian's friend Snowden over Avignon. Taken together, the episodes form a sketch of the lives of the fictional 256th Squadron of the U.S. Army Air Forces during the closing stages of World War II. Much of the action takes place on the Italian island Pianosa, with many forays into Rome during various leaves from duty, and some exotic Mediterranean business stops thanks to Milo Minderbinder's international wartime food syndicate.

Piecing together the temporally disjointed chronology of the novel is a task fit for a literary detective. Fascinatingly, the conclusions made concerning Heller's

chronology shift depending on the critical sensibility of the era, and so, predictably, reveal how postmodern critics own preconceptions color their insights.

Jan Solomon published an article that originally appeared in *Critique* in 1967 that argues *Catch-22* employs “two distinct and mutually contradictory chronologies” (79). Solomon attempts to explain this apparent contradiction as proof of Heller’s mastery in wedding absurd content to absurd form. “Yossarian,” the critic explains, “like many other anti-heroes of modern fiction from Leopold Bloom to Moses Herzog, lives in a world dominated not by the chronological but by the psychological” (79). Solomon reads Yossarian as a subject alternating between his own experience and the reality around him in a manner befitting a character of classic modernist literature.

Solomon’s reading is, however, challenged by Doug Gaukroger in a 1970 article in the same journal, which reveals that Solomon inferred too much from one of Heller’s vague chronological indicators. According to Gaukroger, Solomon erroneously assumes that when Corporal Snark introduces Yossarian to Milo Minderbinder and says that Milo “became mess officer while you were in the hospital this last time,” Snark is referring to the particular hospital visit described in the novel’s first chapter (Heller 70). “Nothing in this statement, nor in any statement before or after, would suggest that ‘this last time’ refers to the opening hospital scene,” Gaukroger argues (91). Solomon’s assumption leads him to declare that Snowden’s death over Avignon and his subsequent funeral are impossible chronologically because both must occur after Milo’s syndicate begins to flourish (Gaukroger 92). “This suggests to me either that Heller made a colossal error in his

plotting or that Solomon is guilty of overlooking or misreading a number of events in *Catch-22*," Gaukroger writes (92).

Despite or perhaps because of its datedness, this exchange is instructive when compared to Brian McHale's handling of the same question of chronology. I use McHale throughout my thesis to represent a critic who productively attempts to describe critically the paradoxical nature of postmodernism, but inevitably creates a new taxonomy, which ultimately prevents the persistence of paradox. There is one mention of *Catch-22* in *Postmodernist Fiction*, and it revisits the same debate over Heller's chronology staged twenty years prior by Solomon and Gaukroger:

The presence of the same event at two different points in the sequence leaves the reader hesitating between two alternative reconstructions of the "true" sequence, in one of which event A precedes event B, while in the other event A follows event B.

A familiar example occurs in Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1961). Though it is hard to be certain, given this text's disturbing temporal indeterminacy, it appears that Snowden's death over Avignon, the crucial event in Yossarian's "pilgrim's progress," happens both before and after the Great Big Siege of Bologna (McHale 108-9).

Juxtaposed to the terms of the discussion between the two earlier critics, McHale's explanation demonstrates how literary criticism seeks a clear sea change to distinguish modernism from postmodernism. In the cultural and literary context of the late 1960s, Solomon claims *Catch-22* for modernism by explaining away its contradictory chronology as largely "psychological," a new take on Flaubert's project of matching form and content, and aligning it with *Ulysses* and the throwback Bellow's *Herzog*. A few years later, Gaukroger solidifies his claim about the reconcilability of Heller's timeline by invoking an impossible alternative: that Heller made "a colossal error in his plotting." For him, what is at stake is whether the novel

is a classic modernist text, or rather a modernist text with clumsy errors in plotting. Yet for McHale, writing in the late 1980s, Heller's potentially paradoxical timeline pushes *Catch-22* into postmodernist status. I mean this exactly as written: all that is required for McHale is the *potential* that Snowden's death takes place both before and after the Big Siege of Bologna for him to include it as a "familiar example" of one of his postmodernist poetic devices. For him, Heller is a postmodernist writer, and therefore not capable of making a mistake of this nature. And this makes his attempt to classify certain techniques as objectively postmodernist look over-determined. In order to give my critique some valuable context, I would first like to discuss his overall taxonomy for postmodernist literature in some detail.

Postmodernist Fiction largely consists of McHale carefully laying out his schema of moves from the postmodernist playbook; and despite the aforementioned comment on Snowden's death over Avignon, it would appear that *Catch-22* fails to clearly demonstrate any such moves. In fact, at first glance, it may appear that it is Heller who falls short of McHale's idea of sustaining paradoxes. Properly postmodernist writers, according to McHale, are writers like Beckett, Robbe-Grillet, Fuentes, Nabokov, Coover and Pynchon (11). These writers, unlike Heller, create "zones" in their fiction, for instance. Zones are spaces in which, often through an author's use of juxtaposition, interpolation, superimposition, and misattribution, the fictionalized world of the novel contradictorily coexists with the same space's real world version outside of the text (McHale 45). Guy Davenport creates a zone of the type McHale has in mind in "The Invention of Photography," a short story that describes a city called Toledo, but alternates between describing Toledo, Ohio, and

Toledo, Spain (McHale 46-7). “In the Zone,” the second major part of *Gravity’s Rainbow* that describes the demilitarized and ontologically complex territory in Germany at the end of the war, is credited partially for inspiring McHale’s device. Zones may also bring intertextual worlds into contact: for example, Gilbert Sorrentino’s *Imaginative Quality of Things*, in which he reappropriates Nabokov’s *Lolita* as character in his own narrative (McHale 58).

Pianosa, a real island, though not actually capable of hosting the action described in *Catch-22*, is not a zone in the way McHale describes. Heller addresses the status of Pianosa in a brief note preceding the novel’s first chapter. He writes, “This island of Pianosa lies in the Mediterranean Sea eight miles south of Elba. It is very small and obviously could not accommodate all of the actions described. Like the setting of this novel, the characters, too, are fictitious” (Heller 7). Whereas the zones described by McHale seek to jar the reader with the *both/and* nature of their reality, Heller immediately defuses any paradox produced by Pianosa’s existence both actually in the Mediterranean and fictionally as the site of an Air Force base in *Catch-22*. If, for example, Heller had incorporated aspects of historical fiction, perhaps mentioning actual historical personages, he likely would have violated pre-postmodernist injunctions against contradicting public record and, in doing so, created a zone.

Nor does *Catch-22* demonstrate the “collision of worlds” in the sense in which McHale uses it when describing the “science-fictionalization of postmodernism” that corresponds with postmodernism’s preoccupation with ontological questions (McHale 65). Typically, worlds collide in science-fictionalized

postmodernist fiction when characters or beings from different worlds come into contact with one another: “Here the ontological confrontation occurs between our world and some other world or worlds somehow adjacent or parallel to our own, accessible across some kind of boundary or barrier,” writes McHale (61).

One by one down McHale’s list, it seems no single postmodernist poetic device is found in *Catch-22*. The all-or-none conclusion is no surprise because McHale’s devices share one overarching distinction, a distinction that in fact forms the basis of their creation: they are symptomatic of novels with an ontological dominant. McHale credits Dick Higgins for inspiration in formulating his *ontological/epistemological* distinction. Higgins had posited a similar formula in *Dialectic of Centuries*:

The Cognitive Questions (asked by most artists of the 20th century, Platonic or Aristotelian, till around 1958): “How can I interpret this world of which I am a part? And what am I in it?” The Postcognitive Questions (asked by most artists since then): “Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?” (qtd. in McHale 1).

According to McHale’s descriptions, *Catch-22* has an epistemological dominant, a trait that aligns it with modernist fiction for McHale. The questions raised by *Catch-22*, as I have briefly catalogued, remain largely cognitive, epistemological questions. Rather fittingly, as Heller was writing it around the year Higgins chooses as watershed, *Catch-22* places Yossarian at the limits of the Cognitive Questions, frustratingly unable to escape his environs or converse with a character who could help him break into postcognitive questions. He knows precisely how to interpret the world of which he is a part, and does so based primarily on his own survival. To

Higgins' formulation, McHale adds several typical epistemological questions, which he calls "typical modernist questions": "What is there to be known?; Who knows it?; How do they know it, and with what degree of certainty?; How is knowledge transmitted from one knower to another, and with what degree of reliability?...And so on" (9).

Again, *Catch-22* aligns itself with the concerns of modernism, according to McHale's taxonomy. As opposed to the ontological crises precipitated by contact with "other" worlds, Yossarian's frustration develops because the dozens of characters in *Catch-22* exist uncomfortably in one immanent world. Nadel expresses this relationship adroitly:

The rhetoric of *Catch-22* does not allow for the breakdown, location, or relocation of the subject, because normative language does not correlate to an objective reality but rather shows that objective reality is created by the sharing of language. Under such circumstances, insanity is not a personal failure to conform to objective norms but to the demands of an interpretive community (168).

Yossarian knows exactly what world he is a part of, and this knowledge coupled with knowledge of the ignorance of those dictating "the demands of [the] interpretive community" forms the basis of his frustration—which the rest of his interpretive community views as insanity. The reader shares this knowledge with Yossarian, and so both reader and Yossarian are exasperated during the novel's first exchange between him and Clevinger, when Clevinger accuses Yossarian of being crazy for "calmly" stating that men on both sides of the battle lines are trying to kill him (Heller 25). I posit that, in adopting McHale's taxonomy, the case that *Catch-22*'s

dominant is epistemological is clear; however, must such an assertion disqualify it as postmodern?

Here we find the teleological tendency inherent to literary criticism; McHale, via Higgins, wants to graph the shift between modernist and postmodernist inquiries on a linear and progressive trajectory. Yet by asserting that ontological questions overtake epistemological ones in postmodernism, McHale, willingly or otherwise, implies that ontological concerns surpass their brethren in relative profundity. And in doing so, he may be inadvertently selling epistemological concerns short. *Catch-22* may be a novel with an epistemological dominant, yet, as I hope to demonstrate, plenty of space remains within it for the project of postmodernism.

To elaborate upon this, I turn to the responses *Catch-22* provides to McHale's epistemological concerns.³ In what ways does Heller's novel accomplish postmodern tasks while remaining in the epistemological realm? To answer this question, one naturally searches for the sources of knowledge and information in *Catch-22*: who circulates it, and what information is reliable. One source turned up by such a search is ex-P.F.C. Wintergreen. Whether it is the sprawling C.I.D. investigation of "Washington Irving" or the cryptic "T.S. Eliot" message, information in the world of *Catch-22* is subject to the whims of ex-P.F.C. Wintergreen. Yossarian fully understands his power. "Wintergreen is probably the most influential man in the whole theater of operations," Yossarian tells the chaplain, matter-of-factly

³ To re-quote McHale: "What is there to be known?; Who knows it?; How do they know it, and with what degree of certainty?; How is knowledge transmitted from one knower to another, and with what degree of reliability?...And so on" (9).

(Heller 312). As farfetched as it may seem, Yossarian's statement has support; from his "mail-sorting cubicle at Twenty-seventh Air Force Headquarters," Wintergreen has the ability to add the last word to whatever communications come across his desk: he can throw things away, create nonsensical messages, or reverse the order of transmissions. This ability gives him tremendous power, all of which is on display when he, a lowly *ex-private* first-class, hilariously critiques the prose of Colonel Cargill's memoranda as "too prolix" (Heller 46-7). But in the process of tracking down the information blocked and disseminated by Wintergreen, what is noteworthy is that ultimately nothing substantial to detect or deduce existed in the first place. The mysterious "T.S. Eliot" phone call was simply Wintergreen's retort to a challenge levied by Cargill in one of his memos to "name one poet who makes money"; the "Washington Irving" scandal began with a bored Yossarian trying to add variety to the monotony of censoring letters in an Army hospital (Heller 45, 16). Most of all, what I am attempting to establish here is the ample space for subversion and play Heller explores without exhausting any limitations inherent to the epistemological realm of inquiry. In stark contrast to the "military efficiency" one might expect based on grand narratives of American power, the communications in *Catch-22* are reversible, disposable, and trivial.

Harkening back to McHale's introduction of the function of the ontological dominant of postmodernist fiction, I see where he perhaps imposes false limitations on the capabilities of the epistemological dominant. After explaining that though he certainly understands that epistemological and ontological questions are inextricably bound to one another, McHale attempts to make the case that, because

discourse is linear, either one or the other set of questions must be raised first, and that set is the dominant:

Inevitably, since discourse, even a philosopher's discourse, is linear and temporal, ...one cannot say two things at the same time. Literary discourse, in effect, only specifies which set of questions ought to be asked first of a particular text, and delays the asking of the second set of questions, slowing down the process by which epistemological questions entail ontological questions and vice versa (11).

This statement is crucial to my understanding of how McHale's taxonomy attempts the imposition of a linearity upon *Catch-22* that the novel, and specifically Wintergreen's role in the novel, resists. Can one really not say two things at once? The project of postmodernism, to employ a multiplication of voices in disrupting univocal, monolithic grand narratives, begs to differ. When ex-P.F.C. Wintergreen picks up the phone to respond to Cargill's slight towards poets, his simple invocation of T.S. Eliot says many things at once: it responds to a question, it hints at Cargill's ignorance to his own role in the dialogue, and because of this ignorance, it is also a threatening non sequitur in the minds of Cargill and General Peckem.

McHale admits that the relationship between ontological and epistemological questions "is not linear and unidirectional, but bidirectional and reversible," yet maintains that, due to the nature of literary discourse, and as formulated by the author, text dictates the order of concerns for the reader (11). By contrast, the difference between how Gaukroger interprets Snowden's death in the chronology of *Catch-22* in 1970 and how McHale interprets it in 1987 shows that, at least in some cases, ultimately *the reader* determines the order of concerns that take shape in and guide interpretation. This is a lesson that McHale could have learned from ex-P.F.C.

Wintergreen and really the entire novel, because the restraints McHale places on literary discourse, though certainly rational, are related to the unidirectional relationship of cause to effect that *Catch-22* mocks relentlessly. Alan Nadel writes:

The absence of a predetermined direction to that flow makes any concept of causality—and hence culpability—impossible.... The vital flow in the novel...is language. Thus ex-Pfc. Wintergreen runs the army because, having access to a switchboard and a mimeograph machine, he not only controls but generates, redirects, and critiques language (177).

Wintergreen's influence over Army communications shows that the complex network of text, critic, and reader combine to dictate what's important about that text, and this relationship is fluid and volatile.

Putting Nadel's reading into opposition with the restrictive premise of McHale's schema provides an opportunity to connect back to previous reflections on the nature of the definition of postmodernist literature. McHale focuses primarily on what postmodernism does that is new and neglects how it extends previous projects, limiting the inclusiveness of his definition. My insistence on postmodernism's debt to past eras is not original or undeveloped by others. In their study of the role of memory in postwar literature, Peter Middleton and Tim Woods offer a brief interpretation of French philosopher Paul Ricoeur's influential *Time and Narrative*. "One implication of Ricoeur's argument," they write, "is that postmodernist fiction is a continuation of modernism and realism by other means" (69). In the case of *Catch-22*, it is apparent that the other means are not necessarily, as we would probably assume reading Middleton and Woods' comment, the work of the author, but may also include the work of the critic.

The task of affirming a novel's categorization as postmodern is clearly rife with pitfalls; any set of criteria guiding such a task can ultimately be proven to consist of deconstructable binaries selected according to the critic's own expectations. McHale's approach is reasonable and productive, but must be read with the understanding that no approach can be considered definitive; to be definitive would be to run counter to the larger spirit of postmodernism. Therefore, let us continue to open spaces in the discourse on postmodernism that are inevitably closed due to the nature of criticism. Here, the usefulness of Lyotard's most general proclamation of postmodernism becomes apparent. At the conclusion of his essay "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?," Lyotard writes, "Let us wage a war on totality" (46).

The Perceived Incongruence of Catch-22's Ending and Orr

Stepping back from the detailed schematizations made by McHale, it seems that the broadest definitions of postmodernism should be applied to literature, as such broad definitions maintain the elasticity to allow for paradox. With that said, *Catch-22* should qualify as postmodern if it subverts the World War II and Cold War-era grand narratives of American righteousness, competence, and power. How have some rated the novel in terms of subverting American grand narratives?

This question requires a shift toward the political. As we move from the literary to the political, the critique of *Catch-22* by Norman Podhoretz can serve as a useful, if unlikely, starting point. Podhoretz is of course not primarily a literary critic, but his interest in *Catch-22* as a cultural touchstone of the Sixties combined

with his lack of preoccupation with postmodernism creates an interesting perspective from which literature is seen primarily for its political functions. The former editor of *Commentary* and author of *The Bloody Crossroads: Where Literature and Politics Meet*, Podhoretz offered a retrospective on *Catch-22* on the occasion of the novel's 40th anniversary in 2000, specifically discussing to what extent the novel's reputation for subversion is deserved. As a man who actively participated in the Cold War "good versus evil" grand narrative and recently advocated the invasion of Iran, Podhoretz's transparent neo-conservative political outlook makes him a credible, if reluctant source in reporting how subversive *Catch-22* actually was.

Podhoretz writes that Heller had "defamed World War II" with a novel that "ridicules war and the military" relentlessly, a novel "written under the aegis of the idea that survival is the overriding value and that all else is pretense, lying, cant, and hypocrisy" (34, 32, 35). Podhoretz independently supports Fussell's assertion that the pro-war spirit survived the war and remained a factor at the time of *Catch-22*'s publishing, resulting in plenty of reluctance among the reading public to accept Heller's irreverence:

This was to be expected. In 1961, there were very few people around who took a negative view of the war against Hitler and Nazism; or to state it more strongly, practically everyone thought it had been a just and necessary war and that we as a nation had every reason to be proud of our part in it (Podhoretz 33).

It makes sense that few were eager to applaud the novel for subverting the very narrative that sustained their own political-historical reality. Podhoretz quotes the novelist E.L. Doctorow, who adds, "When *Catch-22* came out, people were saying, 'World War II wasn't like this.' But when we got tangled up in Vietnam, it became a

sort of text for the consciousness of that time” (37). This particular convergence of opinion between Podhoretz and a man he does “not often agree with,” Doctorow, goes a long way towards showing that *Catch-22* demonstrated avant-garde characteristics. György Lucács’s definition of avant-garde corresponds with Doctorow’s description of *Catch-22*’s future anteriority (Podhoretz 37). Lucács wrote.

Whether a writer really belongs to the ranks of the avant-garde is something that only history can reveal, for only after the passage of time will it become apparent whether he has perceived significant qualities, trends, and the social functions of individual types, and has given them effective form (qtd. in *Postmodernism* 17).

So far, the novel’s ability to undermine grand narratives is well intact. Some reservations about the subversiveness of the novel’s actual message persist, though, and many such reservations involve the way Heller chooses to end *Catch-22*.

After reluctantly praising the novel, Podhoretz lobs a charge of ethical timidity at *Catch-22*. He claims that Heller “simply did not have the full courage of his own convictions,” something Heller proves by introducing a sense of honor in Yossarian late in the novel. Particularly galling to Podhoretz is Yossarian’s refusal to consent to his own discharge from the Army (Podhoretz 35).

The whole novel is trivialized. Its remorselessly uncompromising picture of the world...now becomes little more than the story of a mismanaged outfit and an attack on the people who (as Yossarian so incongruously puts it with a rhetoric not his own) always cash in “on every decent impulse and human tragedy” (35).

Others join Podhoretz in critique of the novel’s ending, though for different reasons. In the essay “*Catch-22: The Making of a Novel*,” Richard Lehan and Jerry Patch claim that the ending’s “abrupt shift in gears” is the result of Simon & Schuster’s pressure

on an author unsure how to end the fine mess he had created (43). They quote a review from 1962 that also picks up on the incongruence of the ending: “For the last 30-40 pages Heller seems abruptly to have been persuaded that even a novel as original as his would be better for some sort of a plot, preferably in chronological order” (Wincelberg qtd. in Lehan and Patch 43). Lehan and Patch leave the last word on the ending to Heller’s childhood friend, Daniel Rosoff. Rosoff “maintains that Heller could not have written a different ending, could not have concluded his novel on note of helplessness” because Heller was “an ultra-liberal” (qtd. in Lehan and Patch 44). So Rosoff finds *Catch-22*’s ethical nucleus precisely at the moment Podhoretz reads a betrayal of the novel’s erstwhile avowed ethical stance, while Lehan and Patch wonder if external pressure to finish the novel affected Heller’s final flourish more than any ethical concerns. All critics in this particular discussion agree that, to some extent, the last section of the novel marks a major shift in tone and narrative. Ultimately, the critiques of the ending all share the ungenerous implication that Heller somehow sacrificed his artistic vision for some ulterior motive. The critics scramble to denounce or praise the novel for this perceived incongruence. Yet all their attention to the novel’s last section is focused solely on Yossarian’s actions. After recounting the problematic final image of Yossarian, I hope to demonstrate how considering the actions of a character like Orr can help to avoid another binary critical argument.

The change in tone in the novel’s final chapters *is* striking and does deserve close attention. Although he does not use the term, what Podhoretz begrudgingly admires about the bulk of *Catch-22* is precisely its postmodern conviction: it

ridicules cultural narratives of morality that Americans have complacently come to accept. What he disdains of the novel's final act is Heller's recouping of hope and the lip service paid to idealism he sees overcome Yossarian's character. One helpful way to understand how this finale contrasts with the rest of the novel is in terms of transcendence and immanence: the transcendence of the novel's denouement marks its contrast from the immanence of the preceding 400 pages for both admirers and detractors of *Catch-22's* ending. In the final chapter, Yossarian appears to be on the verge of escape, on the verge of transcendence. But until the last chapter, as I discuss above, it is Yossarian's immanence that seems thematic to the novel. After laying out textual evidence of the shift from immanence to transcendence, I will attempt to show how this particular critical discussion over *Catch-22* parallels a larger argument that associates transcendence with modernism and immanence with postmodernism. Again my concern will be with opening up contradictory possibilities in a binary critical argument; Orr represents a way to understand the possibility for coexistence between immanence and transcendence.

First, I offer a thorough description of the theme of immanence in the first bulk of the novel. Yossarian bemoans being stuck in the Air Force, subject to the whims of Colonel Cathcart, who raises the number of missions every time his men threaten to exceed the current limit. Yossarian's alleged insanity, as Alan Nadel argues, also indicates his immanence: he desperately wants to find someone with authority who speaks his language of survival. Insanity is revealed by Heller to be simply a function of relative discourses rather than an insane person's failure to grasp any sort of objective reality of sane perspective. Several layers of immanence

contribute to Yossarian's plight and they ultimately combine to convince Yossarian that no one else can be made to see things the way he does—even his closest confidant and partner in crime, Dunbar, is eventually “disappeared” (Heller 378).

Yossarian's immanence is also Heller's, as the novel frequently reminds readers. Language, as structuralism tells us, is also “its own environment,” and in *Catch-22*, Heller constantly plays with the implications of his own immanence as an author. In fact, if there are “zones” present in *Catch-22* in the spirit of McHale's usage of the term, they occur here at the intersection of Heller's and his characters' immanences. Author is inscribed within language and character is inscribed within that language. Heller brings into contact the worlds of the third-person narrator and the characters in ways typically forbidden, with clichés from the narrator actually affecting characters' actions and, conversely, character dialogue that affects the narration. For example, that Yossarian tears up Luciana's phone number immediately after she walks away is not surprising, but what jars is that Heller has Luciana herself *tell* Yossarian to tear up her number right away (173). Here, a cliché of hyper-masculinity that usually requires a naïve girl is actually suggested by that very girl. Another subtle instance occurs when the narrator describes how the death of Major Duluth, a minor character largely kept off-stage by Heller, affects the base. “It's just not the same with you as it was with Major Duluth,” Milo tells Major Major. And, the narrator dutifully adds, “And it just wasn't the same” (100). “It's just not the same” is a cliché that requires the reader to look past its inherent understatement; naturally, after any event, action, or passage of time, “things” are no longer the same as before, but here Heller has his narrator lift the phrase from a character, a reversal

of the typical relationship in which the narrator transcends the characters. A third example, part of the narrator's introduction to the reader of Chief White Halfoat, demonstrates the extent to which we are bound by language, our own bodies, and our mortality:

Chief White Halfoat went on to claim that he had never heard from his parents again. That didn't bother him too much, though, for he had only their word for it that they were his parents, and since they had lied to him about so many other things, they could just as well have been lying to him about that too (54).

Ultimately, Chief Halfoat's skepticism stands in for any inability to acquire transcendent proof, whether the biological inability for a male to be certain of paternity or the insufficient proof available for us to know that anything exists outside of our minds. This is the uncompromising picture of the world that Podhoretz and so many others admire.

Yet, such complex allusions to and demonstrations of immanence in character and language itself are disrupted by a profound moment of transcendence, or at least hope for transcendence, in "Yossarian," the novel's final chapter. Directly prior to this moment, Major Danby and Yossarian have come to a sobering conclusion in discussion of Colonel Cathcart's poison-pill offer to let Yossarian return stateside. Says Yossarian:

"Then there is no hope for us, is there?"
 "No hope."
 "No hope at all, is there?"
 "No, no hope at all," Major Danby conceded (Heller 458).

But moments later, the chaplain brings news that Orr has made it safely to Sweden, news that gives Yossarian his most genuine hope of escaping the bonds of Catch-22.

“Danby, Orr planned it that way. Don’t you understand—he planned it that way from the beginning. He even practiced getting shot down,” Yossarian explains (460).

“There is hope, after all” (459). Potentially, much is at stake with this plot twist. For example, *Catch-22* open itself to criticism, like Podhoretz’s, that indicates a compromise of its brutal internal logic. How can this bit of hope appear out of the morass?

Similarly, in the larger conversation surrounding the defining characteristics of postmodernism, immanence and transcendence are pitted against one another. For Ihab Hassan, immanence is a concept key to postmodernism, as opposed to the transcendence sought by modernism. Hassan describes immanence as “the capacity of the mind to generalize itself in symbols, intervene more and more into nature, act upon itself through its own abstractions and so become, increasingly, immediately, its own environment” (153). Hassan surely understands that his *transcendence/immanence* binary is one that can be deconstructed; nevertheless it does contribute to a view of postmodernism as good for nothing but nihilism. But this is just half of the story; postmodernism can create, not just erase. For most of *Catch-22*, Yossarian’s frustrated immanence fits the oversimplified stereotype of postmodernism, that “remorselessly uncompromising” picture of the world that Podhoretz admires. The only way to act in the face of the world’s insanity is to be consistently stymied and pissed off, Yossarian’s actions seem to suggest. Yet the possibility for transcendence has coincided with immanence on Pianosa all along, it is revealed in the novel’s final chapter. Orr offers another way to react to grand cultural narratives once they have become powerful to the point of ridiculousness.

Orr's escape, along with Yossarian's desire to follow his lead, refigures Orr as a goofy, but shrewd character who all along has had transcendent abilities and aspirations. Orr, whose name takes on punning significance after his procurement of "a little blue oar about the size of a Dixie-cup spoon" on one of his practice crashes, had given Yossarian clues to his escape plan all along (319). When Orr first appears in the third chapter of *Catch-22*, he proves to be a character who frustrates Yossarian. While Yossarian frustrates his unquestioningly patriotic fellow soldiers by pointing out the absurdities of war, Orr frustrates Yossarian by speaking nonsense. In this third chapter, Yossarian asks Orr why he used to place crab apples in his cheeks when he was young. This precipitates a circular conversation that at one point compels Yossarian to exclaim, "Why, you evil-eyed, mechanically-aptituded, disaffiliated son of a bitch, did you walk around with *anything* in your cheeks?" (32). The two have a similar running conversation throughout the novel about why a Roman prostitute had been moved to slam him on the head repeatedly with her shoe. Later on, Orr uses the frustration he has caused Yossarian to encourage Yossarian to fly with him on his escape mission:

"You really ought to fly with me, you know.... Yes, sir—if you had any brains, you know what you'd do? You'd go right to Piltchard and Wren and tell them you want to fly all your missions with me."

Yossarian leaned forward and peered closely into Orr's inscrutable mask of contradictory emotions. "Are you trying to tell me something?"

"Tee-hee-hee-hee," Orr responded. "I'm trying to tell you why that big girl with the shoe was hitting me on the head that day. But you just won't let me."

"Tell me."

"Will you fly with me?" (Heller 326).

On his next mission without Yossarian, Orr's plane was knocked into the water. The next mention of Orr is the news he may have escaped to Sweden.

That Yossarian calls Orr "disaffiliated" takes on added significance when Orr's role in the discourse of *Catch-22* is examined for postmodern significance. Orr's subversion of the grand narrative—in this case that of the patriotic soldier—is more effective than Yossarian's because he carries it out on his own terms, in a language all his own. Critics of the *Catch-22*'s ending tend to hone in on its conventionality after so many pages of unconventional absurdity. Yossarian's attempts to win his release from the Army through dialogue seem conventional when compared to Orr's scheming. The possibilities for subversion provided by the novel should be opened to include the actions of Orr and other minor characters. Orr is the "supraman" in the world of *Catch-22*, a name with which Yossarian cryptically refers to himself early in the novel (29). While Yossarian remains deadlocked against the rest of *Catch-22*'s universe, Orr's sneaky escape indicates the untapped potential for subversion going on beneath the readers' nose—and beneath the readers' tendencies to only seek the message of *Catch-22* in the actions of Yossarian.

Although I see strong glimpses early in the novel that make the entire work cohere, why does the novel need to cohere anyway? The final chapter of *Catch-22* does not correspond to the expectations of many critics, so they then assume that he lost his way. Why don't more readers generously suggest that Heller intended Yossarian's lapse into naivety to heartbreakingly demonstrate that every human is prone to hope for transcendent, stable meaning even with the full knowledge that

no such meaning exists? In this early document of American postmodernism, it is assumed that negativity must reign. Immanence must be confirmed, lamented, and satirized; the potential for ethical action is limited to Yossarian's model. Yet there is no reason to thus limit the capabilities of postmodern literature. Just like other binaries, pessimism and optimism are intertwined in postmodernism. As I will discuss in my reading of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, this duality is accepted in Kurt Vonnegut's writing, but here is decried in Heller's.

Slaughterhouse-Five

In *Catch-22*, the reader skips forward and backward in time as the effaced narrator uses cues from one episode to introduce the next associated episode. In Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Billy Pilgrim becomes unmoored in time, traveling at random through episodes in his life that range from his unexciting existence in upstate New York where he lives out middle age as an optometrist, to his experience as a prisoner of war in Germany where he witnesses the destruction of Dresden, and to his time spent on the planet Tralfamadore where he lives in an exhibit with a beautiful female human movie star, subject to curiosities of aliens who marvel at the distinctly human tendency to seek explanation for all events. The novel begins with the musings of a narrator who can be considered Vonnegut himself. In this first chapter, Vonnegut apologizes for the "failure" of a book to follow, and explains how the tragedy of Dresden both defies explanation and requires a human response (Vonnegut 22). The bombing of Dresden is the kernel of trauma that underlies the entire novel, similar to Snowden's death over Avignon in *Catch-22*.

The form of *Slaughterhouse-Five* allows humanity's relationship to tragedy to be expressed in a manner much more poignant than the science fiction overtones of the novel let on. As his narrator puts it, something "intelligently" said about the Dresden massacre could not possibly do it justice. To demonstrate, Vonnegut imports excerpts from the forward to David Irving's historical account *The*

Destruction of Dresden. Of the Dresden bombings, United States Air Force Lieutenant General Ira C. Eaker writes:

I deeply regret that British and U.S. bombers killed 135,000 people in the attack on Dresden, but I remember who started the last war and I regret the loss of more than 5,000,000 Allied lives in the necessary effort to completely defeat and utterly destroy Nazism (Vonnegut 187).

Vonnegut recognizes that historical reports, like the one the above comment prefaces, are in the business of supplying explanations for the events of war. Explanations tend, as in Lt. Gen. Eaker's comments, to assess blame and to relativize tragedy. For Vonnegut and Billy Pilgrim, who experienced the destruction in Dresden from the ground, there is no place for such explanations in remembering the tragedy. To an even greater extent than Vonnegut could possibly have imagined in 1969, the use of a David Irving book emphasizes the dubiousness of the "real" events as described by history: the once respected, if controversial, Irving recently served a jail term in Austria for Holocaust denial.

In this chapter on *Slaughterhouse-Five*, I hope to demonstrate two key elements that relate the critical discussion on the novel to the assertions on the nature of literary criticism in postmodernity. First, I will introduce a critical discussion regarding the imagination of Billy Pilgrim to demonstrate how teleological expectations tend to establish a linear narrative that overemphasizes postmodernism's break from modernism. This will parallel the previous discussion over the timeline of the Avignon incident of *Catch-22*, demonstrating how narrow, technical approaches to defining postmodernism reveal a natural critical tendency towards a teleological literary-historical tradition more than anything

fundamentally new in postmodernist literature. Second, I will turn the attention directly to the novel to show how *Slaughterhouse-Five*, like *Catch-22*, particularly resists any readings of its postmodern characteristics that impose linearity upon it. In other words, like *Catch-22*, *Slaughterhouse-Five* contains ample strategies for overturning negative stereotypes of postmodern ethics—that postmodern ethics must be nihilistic, relativistic, impotent, complacent, and lacking conviction.

Billy Pilgrim's Imagination and the Critical Tendency Towards Teleology

Many critics of the novel argue that the supernatural experiences of Billy Pilgrim can and should be explained away as psychological fantasies, an interpretation that would reassert the epistemological dominant of the novel. Donald E. Morse provides a round up of critics who consider Billy Pilgrim's experiences to be the work of an imagination seeking escape from traumas sustained in Dresden, rather than actual paranormal encounters (89). Tony Tanner describes Billy Pilgrim as "an innocent, sensitive man who encounters so much death and so much evidence of hostility to the human individual while he is in the army that he takes refuge in an intense fantasy life" (195). Wayne McGinnis asserts that the Trafalmadorians are "mythical creatures who live on a distant planet in Billy Pilgrim's mind" (115). William Godshalk refers to Billy as *Slaughterhouse-Five's* "mad protagonist" (qtd. in Morse 105). Russell Blackford is taken to task by Morse for tracing Billy Pilgrim's moment of becoming "unstuck in time" to brain damage from a rather minor incident in which Pilgrim is banged against a tree by Roland Weary (Vonnegut 23, Morse 89). To these readers, explains Morse disdainfully,

Slaughterhouse-Five is “a realistic novel with a hero who fantasizes” (89). They miss the point; the proper reading, according to Morse, is to accept Billy’s adventures literally:

Billy does not hallucinate; instead, as Vonnegut tells us repeatedly, he simply, if fantastically, comes “unstuck in time” and is, therefore, able to move in time forward as well as backward. As a result, Billy enjoys the nonhuman consolation of seeing time and events as God sees them...that is, all at once.... Similarly, Billy’s ability to escape suffering by viewing only those good moments in his life where “nothing hurt” becomes appropriate if—ultimately—self-defeating for this utterly passive victim of other people and events (89).

However, Morse’s reading is problematic, too. He is right to reference the genre of the fantastic in relation to *Slaughterhouse-Five*, but wrong to assert with such certainty that Billy’s time traveling should be considered an unchallenged fact for readers. Morse’s reference to “Billy’s ability to escape” is a clear indication that he has overstated his case. If Morse advocates taking the narrator’s description of Billy Pilgrim’s time-travel more literally, we should certainly pay heed when told that “Billy is spastic in time, has no control over where he is going next, and the trips aren’t necessarily fun” (Vonnegut 23). To further bolster this point, Albert Cacicedo points out that Pilgrim’s first travel in time takes him back to a terrifying incident when his father was teaching him how to swim: “It was like an execution,” Billy says (Cacicedo 363, Vonnegut 43-4). Of course it is possible that, in the world of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Billy actually did visit the planet Tralfamadore; however, the possibility also remains that Billy’s problem is psychological. In fact, Billy’s daughter Barbara refuses to believe her father. After he writes a letter to the local newspaper explaining the lessons about time and destiny he learned from the Tralfamadorians,

for example, Barbara confronts him: “It’s all just crazy. None of it is true!” to which Billy replies, “It’s all true” (Vonnegut 29).

It is the simultaneity of the possibilities that Barbara or Billy may be correct that makes Billy’s Tralfamadorian experiences part of the literature of the fantastic. Those readers that take either Billy’s or Barbara’s word over the other do so with insufficient evidence—fantastic literature cultivates this balance. As McHale notices, this very hesitation “between natural and supernatural explanations” is what characterizes the fantastic. Kafka’s “Metamorphosis” is like *Finnegan’s Wake* when it comes to critical discussion of the fantastic: all theories must be tested against it. For Morse, who argues vehemently for the supernatural explanation of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, a critic suggesting that Billy Pilgrim’s trips to Tralfamadore are fantasy “might as well suggest that Gregor Samsa only hallucinates being a cockroach in “The Metamorphosis” (89). Tvetan Todorov, unable to incorporate Kafka’s story into his account of the fantastic as hesitation between uncanny and marvelous explanations, concludes, “Kafka’s text heralds the disappearance of the fantastic in twentieth-century literature...a consequence of the disappearance of representation in contemporary writing” (McHale 74).

In order to recover the fantastic for postmodernism, McHale must complete three important steps. First, he must explain how the fantastic can survive the “unfantastic tone of banality” that gives Kafka’s story its anomalous aspect, and signals the end of the fantastic for Todorov. Although there are no characters in “The Metamorphosis” who hesitate to accept the supernatural situation of Gregor Samsa, McHale argues that “it is the reader himself or herself” who does the

hesitating (75). McHale is convincing in making the case that the banality of “The Metamorphosis” actually multiplies the effect of the fantastic in the story. It was Albert Camus who said of Kafka, “We shall never be sufficiently amazed about this lack of amazement” (qtd. in McHale 76).

Secondly, McHale must first refute Todorov’s charge that the fantastic ceased to exist in the latter 20th century because recent writers have exhibited a lack of interest in representing the real. To do so, he argues, “In the context of postmodernism the fantastic has been co-opted as one of a number of strategies of an ontological poetics that pluralizes the ‘real’ and thus problematizes representation” (75). In other words, representation of the real persists beyond Kafka, yet this representation is of an abstracted real that in no longer stands in contrast with the supernatural.

But a third step remains for McHale in recovering the fantastic for postmodernism; up to this juncture, McHale has only argued for the persistence of Todorov’s poetics of the fantastic beyond “The Metamorphosis” and throughout the 20th century; Todorov’s structure is an epistemological one, which doesn’t align it with McHale’s insistence on the ontological dominant of the postmodern. For Todorov, “a text belongs in the fantastic proper only as long as it hesitates between natural and supernatural explanations, between the uncanny and the marvelous” (McHale 74). As demonstrated by the competing insistencies of Billy Pilgrim and daughter Barbara, and the opposing viewpoints of David Morse and those psychological realists he refutes, such hesitation exists throughout *Slaughterhouse-Five*. McHale admits that, in the pre-20th century fantastic that formed Todorov’s

study, this hesitation is rightly considered by Todorov as an epistemological one. McHale provides several examples of novels that retain hesitation all the way through, like Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* and Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, in which Oedipa Maas considers the existence of the other "world," the Tristero conspiracy, but in which, ultimately, "one hesitates between the epistemological and the ontological lines of explanation without resolving the hesitation" (24). Because *Lot 49* does not break through to an embrace of the ontological explanation, Pynchon has not "broken through here to a mode of fiction beyond modernism and its epistemological premises" (McHale 24).

Here McHale runs into a problem with the internal consistency of his poetics. On one hand, he has claimed that the hesitation between epistemological and ontological explanations in a novel that incorporates the fantastic leaves it short of embracing the ontological, post-cognitive questions that characterize the postmodern novel. However, on the other hand, he claims for postmodernism all fantastic novels when he argues that, "in the years since 'Metamorphosis,' this epistemological structure has tended to evaporate, leaving behind it the ontological deep structure of the fantastic still intact" (75-6). While I find McHale's distinction quite useful, the ambiguity of it again reinforces the idea that it is, foremost, the critic who reads postmodernism into the novel, and not the novel that leaves the critic with no choice but to declare it postmodern. For example, debate over the governess's sanity in *The Turn of the Screw* persists today, similar to the debate over Billy Pilgrim. Is it then true to say that the epistemological structure was any less or more evaporated in 1969 or 1898?

I do not think so: for all of its incorporation of science fiction, the fantastic, and historical fiction, the three genres McHale sees as most commonly allied with postmodernist fiction, *Slaughterhouse-Five* is at its most emphatic when confronting epistemological questions. The ontological question, the question of whether the Tralfamadorians exist outside of Billy Pilgrim's head, is subordinate to the implications that Tralfamadorian insights and opinions have on the human concepts of time, war, and narrative. In one telling scene, a Tralfamadorian explains to Billy that the end of the universe will be precipitated by a Tralfamadorian test pilot who mistakenly hits a wrong button. Yet, to Billy's chagrin, the Tralfamadorians do not dare try to intervene to prevent this disaster. "He has *always* pressed it, and he always *will*. We *always* let him, and we always *will* let him. The *moment* is structured that way," Billy's guide explains (Vonnegut 117). Upon reading this, I am willing to wager that most reflect—and believe Vonnegut intends them to reflect—on the implications of determinism on this earth, and not on the implications of another planet on which time is structured in this way. The supernatural serves allegorically the cognitive question McHale offers via Dick Higgins: "How can I interpret this world of which I am a part?" (McHale 1).

Postmodernism's Capacity for Outrage and Billy Pilgrim's Complacency

Taken supernaturally or psychologically, the travels of Billy Pilgrim are clearly a metaphor for the narrator's own struggles to confront squarely his memory of the Dresden bombing. He sets the stage in the first chapter of the novel by explaining the incredible efforts it took just to get to the point of writing about his

experience in Dresden. He refers to “how useless the Dresden part of my memory has been,” and how, looking back on the resulting novel, he finds it “so short and jumbled and jangled...because there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre” (Vonnegut 2, 19). This sentiment supplies one of the central paradoxes to *Slaughterhouse-Five*, a sentiment that, I hope to argue, is central to Vonnegut’s message in the personal framing narrative surrounding the novel: those people who properly respect the value of human life and who are properly horrified by warfare—in short, those who understand that “there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre”—cede control of public discourse to those ideologues who have no sense of impropriety while establishing simplified grand narratives over the backdrop of war. We must not make violent history into narrative for fear of supplying it with reasonable causes. At the same time, we must make violent history into narrative, or someone else will do it disingenuously. Conviction speaks louder than doubt, Vonnegut laments. In this regard, Vonnegut’s attempt to make sense of a massacre is a success precisely *because* he knows it is a failure; when narratives of war are spoken in tones of certainty they become grand narratives. *Slaughterhouse-Five* is Vonnegut’s exhortation to respond to this paradox with anger and action, rather than complacency and inaction. Yet many critics condone Billy Pilgrim’s escapism, and include it as evidence of *Slaughterhouse-Five*’s postmodern sensibility; in this section, I hope to open more possibilities by expanding the subtle rift between narrator and protagonist.

One reason a critic might take this unduly limited view of postmodernism in *Slaughterhouse-Five* is the implied parallel between postmodernism and

Tralfamadorian art and philosophy. The Tralfamadorians seem to subscribe to a version of postmodernism. For example, Tralfamadorian novels are similar to postmodern novels. Tralfamadorian novels, Billy is told, are “clumps of symbols” between which “there isn’t any particular relationship, except that the author has chosen them carefully, so that, when seen all at once, they produce an image of life that is beautiful and surprising and deep” (88). *Slaughterhouse-Five* presents Billy Pilgrim’s life in a similarly erratic manner. And because Billy is able to reach a state of personal satisfaction by succumbing to Tralfamadorian quietism, *Slaughterhouse-Five* must condone his escapism, or so the logic goes.

However, Vonnegut’s commentary on postmodernism in *Slaughterhouse-Five* is much more complex. In the following pages, I will, as I did with *Catch-22*, explore how the critical discussion surrounding Vonnegut’s novel parallels discussion of postmodernism. My main objective in this section is to establish how, despite his naïve and complacent protagonist, Vonnegut explores the perils of postmodernism. My analysis of the novel will depend heavily on an extremely critical reading of Vonnegut’s protagonist Billy Pilgrim. I contend that, in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Billy represents the stereotypical neutered form of ethics that are often attributed to postmodernism. Far from combating grand narratives of war, Billy’s escapism actually complements them. With this in mind, I will explore a specific critical defense of Billy’s actions that involves Billy’s relationship with religious imagery and texts to show how textual interpretations are prone to being manipulated.

Before examining Billy’s Christ-like humility, it is necessary to first question the relationship between two seeming opposites in *Slaughterhouse-Five*: the

juxtaposition between Billy and Professor Bertram Copeland Rumfoord. The two find themselves paired together in a hospital room in Vermont, Billy after a plane crash and Rumfoord after a skiing accident. Rumfoord is a lauded professor, “one of the great competitive sailors of all time,” and the author of a book about “sex and strenuous athletics for men over sixty-five” (Vonnegut 184). He views Billy with contempt, thinking him a pathetically weak man. However, I contend that their placement in the text, side-by-side in a hospital and with differing perspectives on the Dresden bombing—Rumfoord is working on a one volume history of the Army Air Force in World War Two, Billy was a prisoner of war there—is actually a false opposition. The stakes of assuming Rumfoord and Billy to be opposed, combined with the assumption that Billy’s outlook is in some way typically postmodern is a recipe for viewing postmodernism as impotent and harmful. In order to explain my contention, I will first elaborate on how the relationship between each man and the grand narratives that postmodernism seeks to counter.

Rumfoord, Harvard history professor, athlete at 70 years old, and husband to a beautiful 23-year-old wife (his fifth), is a man who finds himself on the right side of the grand cultural narrative following World War II. His tremendous sense of self-worth and his societal status are made possible by his complicity with mainstream views concerning American righteousness in the war. Still skiing, and with “the body and mind of man” half his age, Rumfoord represents the ease with which someone *without* a postmodern sensibility can exist in postwar times (Vonnegut 184). Rumfoord is the type of person who will write triumphant, uncontested war histories if Vonnegut’s narrator cannot conquer his doubt and offer his own version.

The Rumfoords of the world dominate public discourse and attitudes about the war. Vonnegut's descriptions include hints that imply Rumfoord's ethical framework, and it is a system that places American righteousness and social Darwinism at the center. Lying on his hospital bed in Vermont, Billy is not even a worthy human being in Rumfoord's estimation. "Look at him!" exclaims Rumfoord sneeringly. "That's life according to the medical profession. Isn't life wonderful?" (Vonnegut 190). Rumfoord devalues the worth of certain lives as he sees fit—the better to provide justifications for such massacres as Dresden, which he describes as a "howling success" (Vonnegut 191). Rumfoord is despised by the workers at the hospital, to whom he repeatedly indicates, says the narrator, "in one way or another, that people who were weak deserved to die" (Vonnegut 193). He criticizes Billy Pilgrim, saying, "I could carve a better man out of a banana" (Vonnegut 184).

Compared to the detestable Rumfoord, Billy does seem to occupy sympathetic territory. The message from Tralfamadore that he tries to spread to Earthlings includes ignoring the awful times and concentrating on the good ones, a pleasant-enough sounding outlook (Vonnegut 117). Also, Christian imagery shrouds the harmfulness of Billy's escapist ethics. At times, Billy speaks in profoundly cryptic terms that resemble Jesus's speeches. "It is time for you to go home to your wives and children, and it is time for me to be dead for a little while—and then live again," Billy tells a crowd assembled in Chicago at the hour of his death (Vonnegut 142-3). When some members of the crowd become alarmed at Billy's prophecy of his own death, he rebukes them again with Christ-like rhetoric: "If you protest, if you think that death is a terrible thing, then you have not understood a thing I've said" (142).

Later the narrator compares Billy to the baby Jesus for their similar restraint from crying (197). Yet, as I will argue, the allusions to Christianity merely serve to demonstrate how terribly grand narratives can manipulate their followers.

Regarding these messianic allusions, one critic takes the bait from Vonnegut, writing,

Unlike the Tralfamadorians, Billy has a hard-won, time-bound, memorial sense of the horrors of life from which human beings cannot escape and in response to which they need tidings of comfort and joy. Billy's message, in other words, is as "quietistic" as the New Testament (Cacicedo 365).

Here Albert Cacicedo makes two related dubious readings that abound in criticism of *Slaughterhouse-Five* to arrive at his problematic endorsement of the Christian outlook he feels is erroneously called quietism. First, he confuses the novel's narrator and protagonist. Ironically, it is the modernist technique of the limited, unreliable narrator that causes this confusion—another reminder that modernism's confluence with postmodernism is often overlooked. It is the narrator, not Billy, who possesses a "hard-won, time-bound, memorial sense of the horrors of life." Compare the lessons that the two men have learned concerning war post-Dresden. The narrator says, "I have told my sons that they are not under any circumstances to take part in massacres, and that the news of massacres of enemies is not to fill them with satisfaction or glee" (Vonnegut 19). On the other hand, Billy becomes unstuck in time and experiences a Lions Club meeting in which a Marine speaks in favor of "bombing North Vietnam into the Stone Age" (60). Vonnegut writes, "Billy was not moved to protest the bombing of North Vietnam, did not shudder about the hideous

things he himself had seen bombing do” (60). In general, Billy’s reaction to the horrors of life is a sustained withdrawal.

A second imprecision present in Cacicedo’s argument is his conflation of the New Testament with the dominant interpretation(s) of the New Testament. As I have endeavored to demonstrate with recapitulations of the critical discussions surrounding both the timeline of *Catch-22* and the sanity of Billy Pilgrim, a text’s practical influence is dictated by its most widely recognized interpretation. Cacicedo tellingly invokes the *name* itself of the New Testament to vindicate Billy’s quietism (“Billy’s methods are as quietistic as the New Testament”). Since interpretations are fluid and susceptible to manipulation, the most insidious interpretations are those cloaked within the stability of a good name.

Such is often the case with the New Testament, as demonstrated by Vonnegut himself in his discussion of the fictitious novel by Kilgore Trout *The Gospel in Outer Space*. In the novel, a visitor from outer space comes to Earth and makes a critical examination of Christianity “to learn, if he could, why Christians found it so easy to be cruel” (Vonnegut 108). What this academic alien finds is that though the *intent* of the Gospels was to teach mercy, in practice they have been used to teach Christians that “before you kill somebody, make absolutely sure he isn’t well connected” (Vonnegut 109). Of course, Jesus was very well connected, and:

Readers understood that, so, when it came to the crucifixion, they naturally thought... : *Oh boy—they sure picked the wrong guy to lynch that time!* And that thought had a brother: “*There are right people to lynch.*” Who? People not well connected. So it goes (109, emphasis Vonnegut’s).

Trout, through this science-fiction parable, recognizes that ethical narratives are controlled by those with the power to mobilize them in service of their own agenda. Trout's parable also points out that, whether or not the misinterpretation is promoted intentionally, those who follow manipulated messages can indeed act malignantly. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the bullies who set the agenda and the complacent citizens who do not push back team up together to conduct the Vietnam War and justify World War II, just like the Marine and Billy team up together to hawk U.S.-sanctioned destruction at the Lions Club reception. The consequences of allowing Billy as a model character from an ethical standpoint are immense; in fact, they are too great to accept: Billy represents the opposite and equally undesirable extreme from those like Rumfoord who strive to logically explain massacres. What Vonnegut hints at, but Cacicedo and many others fail to recognize, is that the two opposites are, in effect, partners.

Upon a closer review and despite the parallels to Christ-like behavior, Billy's quietism cannot be the ideal model for ethical behavior offered by *Slaughterhouse-Five*. First, evidence of Billy's own misunderstanding of Christianity becomes apparent when he muses on Genesis:

Lying on the black ice there, Billy stared into the patina of the corporal's boots, saw Adam and Eve in the golden depths. They were naked. They were so innocent, so vulnerable, so eager to behave decently. Billy Pilgrim loved them (Vonnegut 53).

Billy's fantasy of Edenic innocence is formulated to relieve him of the responsibility to judge Adam and Eve. With this revised founding myth, Billy may take comfort in his own lifelong inaction; his passivity is made possible because, in his mind, fellow

humans are “so innocent, so vulnerable, so eager to behave decently.” On this, the other end of the spectrum from Rumfoord, Billy is joined by the narrator’s professors in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Chicago, who preached that “there was absolutely no difference between anybody” and that “nobody was ridiculous or bad or disgusting” (Vonnegut 8). Such relativistic teaching creates the passivity that complements and enables the aggression of the world’s Rumfoords.

These passive narratives are the hidden underside of the grand cultural narratives that lionize and sexualize war. Consider the Tralfamadorian attitude towards death, explained by Billy in the draft of his second letter to the Ilium *New*

Leader:

When a Tralfamadorian sees a corpse, all he thinks is that the dead person is in 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” (Vonnegut 27).

This Tralfamadorian thought also has a brother: even massive amounts of unnecessary deaths are shrug-worthy. That readers might recognize their own lives in the mundane passivity of Billy makes Vonnegut’s subtle criticism of his actions and inactions all the more poignant. That we do not all have an *explicit* philosophy to soften our encounters with death is irrelevant; the point is that when we respond to death with a shrug or by turning away from it, the effect is the same as if we had literally told ourselves such comforting lies.

Billy is wasting his life as a passenger of his own body. His mother embarrasses him “...because she had gone to so much trouble to give him life, and to keep that life going, and Billy didn’t really like life at all” (Vonnegut 102). He observes himself giving a rousing speech at the Lions Club—surprising himself with his eloquence and commanding voice, attributable to public speaking classes (Vonnegut 50). Just like most of the other words he uses throughout his life, these are completely devoid of meaning. Billy goes through the motions. The philosophies he adopts from Tralfamadore allow for greater ease in his life; they allow for dumb, distracted, and detached comfort, just like the Magic Fingers that massage him as he lies in bed. As an optometrist, he adjusts other people’s vision to likewise make their lives easier. At home and in his office, Vonnegut dutifully describes the blinds and drapes that doubly shield Billy from the outside world at all times (56, 62).

What is most disturbing is precisely that Billy is not an actively evil man, yet his adopted Tralfamadorian quietism prevents him from providing any resistance to successful, influential people like Rumfoord, who help justify massacres like Dresden that should be best left unjustified. In effect, Billy accepts and excuses the bombing of Dresden. The narrator’s consistent use of the Pilgrim-esque phrase “So it goes” whenever death is referenced in the novel reaches its logical and horrifying apex when the Dresden massacre is described: “It was the next night that about one hundred and thirty thousand people in Dresden would die. So it goes” (Vonnegut 165). Billy’s attitude represents the quintessential fear many have of postmodernism: once authority and meaning is cast-off, what is to prevent humans from adopting new philosophies like Billy’s that allow us to hide from everything

difficult and ugly in our lives?

Vonnegut's last great hope is for a human impulse toward compassion. The narrator turns to the Old Testament for such a beacon of hope. He describes flipping through a Gideon Bible in a motel room and reading about the aftermath of the destruction at Sodom and Gomorrah. Though Lot's wife was told not to look back on the destruction, Vonnegut writes, "she *did* look back, and I love her for that, because it was so human" (22).

The absence of authority for establishing meaning does not mean that the postmodern writer can bury his head in the sand like Billy, or remain stymied like Yossarian through most of *Catch-22*. In fact, through my reading of *Billy Pilgrim*, Vonnegut suggests that the onus on the postmodern writer to make human life meaningful is greater now than ever. What makes the narrator's (and Vonnegut's) ethical position in *Slaughterhouse-Five* postmodern is not that he places importance on opposing violent cultural war narratives, or simply that he believes there is not such thing as *a priori* meaning, but that he knows in the postmodern world there is no basis for ethics, yet persists in combating harmful ethical stances anyway.

Through interviews and essays we know that Vonnegut was a vocal proponent of postmodern humanism. The idea behind postmodernist humanism is that the postmodern condition, in which we find ourselves without an authoritative basis on which to build an ethics, can be viewed as an opportunity to restore dignity to the human subject. "I beg you," Vonnegut pleaded to the 1970 graduates of Bennington College:

...to believe in the most ridiculous superstition of them all: that humanity is at the center of the universe, the fulfiller or frustrator of the grandest dreams of God Almighty. If you can believe that, and make others believe it, then there might be hope for us. Human beings might stop treating each other like garbage, might begin to treasure and protect each other instead (qtd. in Davis 33).

Certainly these ethics qualify as properly postmodern for their self-recognition of fictivity. As Todd Davis notes, postmodern humanism is nothing more than “a comforting lie, one more constructed narrative in the infinite range of narratives” (33). This stands in contrast to the comforting lies of Tralfamadorian determinism that Billy believes, because those lies insist on a fixed center of authority that supercedes human life: four-dimensional Tralfamadorian time. To Vonnegut, this is an unacceptable ethical center. If we have to make up a basis for ethics, Vonnegut says, let us found our ethics on the idea that humanity is sacred. Those who stray from this ideal, actively like Rumfoord or passively like Billy, forfeit their right to claim protection under the umbrella for humanity. Contrary to Vonnegut’s professors at the University of Chicago, there do exist people who are “bad or ridiculous or disgusting”: they are the people who abuse the precept of Vonnegut’s postmodern humanism.

Conclusion

Most of the preceding claims stem from a straightforward premise: postmodernism is not just a decentering project that “wipes the slate clean.” The effacing and decentering aspect of the project of postmodernism must be accompanied by new possibilities for human existence; we should not be satisfied with a set of ethics that allows us to act like Billy Pilgrim, but rather embark on a new project that fills in this blank slate with new meaning, like Vonnegut’s postmodernist humanism. Throughout this project, of course, we must keep in mind that we are persisting despite a frightening (and exhilarating) premise: there is no authoritative source for meaning underneath.

As readers and critics, when we perform the process of interpretation we naturally tend to impose linearity on a text. We tend to close *both/and* ambiguities by choosing *either/or* answers. In order to counter this natural process, I suggest we remain vigilant about revisiting texts and generously seeking potentialities closed off by years of critical discourse. In my thesis, it has been the negative, limiting stereotypes of postmodern complacency and relativism that I have sought to pinpoint and deflate. These stereotypes often persist as a result of a limited view of the postmodern novel that values formal innovation as its most important characteristic. Yet this view, which naturally coexists with neglect to recognize the postmodern novel as also a persistence of past projects, actually contributes postmodern impotence. A complementary approach, one that accommodates both new and old into the postmodern novel, reveals that *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse-*

Five carry on the old project of resisting grand narratives in new and exciting ways. Tellingly, the approaches that confine *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* rely too heavily on the novels' protagonists in assessing their potential for subversion of grand cultural narratives. Only an approach that admits and considers the multiplicity of voices and possibilities in a postmodern text can appreciate the productive capabilities of postmodernist literature.

Postmodern literature resists grand narratives, and highlights a multiplicity of voices. These, the broad definitions of postmodernism introduced early in my thesis have proven to be the most useful definitions. In a sense, they are meta-definitions: definitions based off other, more specific definitions. The more specific we get in defining postmodernism, the more we run the risk of diminishing paradoxes to binary relationships. For example, McHale's assertion of the ontological dominant in postmodern literature leads him to make a series of *either/or* decisions that support his case, but limit the potential of the texts he examines. While it is still necessary and fruitful to get more specific, such endeavors also create the need to rescue paradoxes.

Of course, the vagueness found in broad definitions of postmodernism like Lyotard's shows postmodernism to be an artificial concept constructed and applied by critics of our era. Such critics, bound to their historical period, are the ones who attempt control over how and in what order a literary work is completed, not the text as dictated by the author. So many of the elements claimed by postmodernism can be used to describe *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*. For example, from Hassan's list alone, the novels demonstrate Play, Deconstruction, Anti-narrative,

Irony, and Misreading (Hassan 152). Such elements, however, frustrate because they are all easily located in modernist literature, too—I am thinking here of the playfulness of *Finnegan's Wake*, the misreadings of *The Good Soldier's* narrator, and the anti-narratives of Virginia Woolf. Ultimately, such descriptions that would once and for all describe postmodernism as opposed to modernism are not possible, because what has changed is largely the way critical readers interpret literature. Broad definitions can accommodate and incorporate other definitions in a way that, for example, McHale's poetic approach or Habermas's insistence on the incompleteness of the Enlightenment project cannot. The useful, all-encompassing definitions are like Heller's *Catch-22* in that way. As an old Italian woman on the streets of Rome tells Yossarian, "Catch-22 says they have the right to do anything we can't stop them from doing" (Heller 417). Postmodernism, too, has reserved for itself the right to include anything we can't stop it from including.

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