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***HISTORY HELPLESSLY REVISITED:
KURT VONNEGUT'S FICTIONAL "TIMEQUAKE"***¹

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Abstract: *If we extend Zygmunt Bauman's assumption that death is the absolute other of being, standing beyond the reach of human communication, then temporality, too, appears as an other, which can never be caught "red-handed" in its actions. Therefore it may rather be defined through what it is not, as St. Augustine realized, and we never pass by it in an indifferent mood. The cultural topos of traveling back in time is one of the modern forms of deconstructing obsessive temporality. Kurt Vonnegut's last but one book, Timequake, belongs to this sub-genre (whose classic remains Twain's A Connecticut Yankee...); here intentionality and especially agency, present in many other similar fictions, are utterly absent, as the frame story presents a case of forcibly-induced, helpless anamnesis: only the déjà-vu variant of the multiverse is granted existence. In Vonnegut's metafiction imaginary events intertwine with the author-narrator's personal, social and ideological reflections, in which the critique of the current Western society is reinforced by the idealist vision of a faultless communist world. Setting out from Karl Popper's statements about the perilous attraction of Utopianism, I emphasize at the end of this paper the alternation between uchronia and utopia in Vonnegut's thought.*

In one of his many admirable socio-philosophical studies, Zygmunt Bauman, writing about people's knowledge of their own mortality, has argued that death is the absolute *other* of being, an other that cannot be imagined as such and "hovers beyond the reach of communication". It is never perceived, for perception needs an object to grasp, while death, far from being an object, is but absolute nothingness (Cf. Bauman 2).

Yet, death is primarily the end of *something*, i.e. of the psychological time which underlies our life, and consequently we can presume to say that time, too, is an other for human beings, who stand in awe before it: they realize it cannot be perceived as such either, and can be known only by proxy. Indeed, we never properly see ourselves aging, we can only realize we *have aged*: the consequence can be seen, the process is not being perceived, as time as such can never be caught "red-handed", as it were. Like the abstract frame of a pure archetype, it can only be suggested or re-presented, as for instance by the sand flow in an hourglass, the regular cuckoo call of old clocks, or the watch ticking. And like any *other*, it can rather be defined through what it is not, as St. Augustine realized, when arguing that "...if I wish to explain it to one that asketh, I know not: yet I say boldly that I know, that if nothing passed away, time past were not; and if nothing were coming, a time to come were not; and if nothing were, time present were not." (St. Augustine 11.14.17).

An other is always a concern, we never pass by it in an indifferent mood; the sense of transitoriness is no exception and people have constantly attempted to cope with it, to reason it out. The modern age in particular has figured out several ways of diminishing the impact of temporality upon people's actions and behavior: paraphrasing Bauman's conception of the modern ways of fighting

¹ A version of this paper was presented as a plenary speech at the International Conference of the English Department, University of Bucharest, in June 2009 (editors' note).

mortality, we may speak about the deconstruction of both temporality and eternity. The theme of time travel, in its various forms and interpretations, a literary and artistic topos, has been instrumental in these deconstructive attempts. Moreover, the very idea of time traveling reinforces the notion that time can be more easily defined in spatial terms, which are handier to humans than temporal ones.

Time travel is one of the major obsessions of Kurt Vonnegut (formerly Jr.), the American novelist who closed his account with subjective time in 2007, not before writing one "last" book about it - the pseudo-novel entitled *Timequake* (1997).²

This is one of the pieces of fiction dealing with a trip *back* in time, a sub-genre that is less frequent in literature, except for recent science fiction; if trips forward supply authors with plenty of opportunities to explore the chances and the capabilities of a given society, time travels in the opposite direction usually represent introspective analyses of a culture's origins and motives. Backwards or forwards, time travels are seemingly impossible from a physical perspective: it would be necessary for the vehicle to exceed the speed of light, which cannot be done as in that case its mass would become infinite.

Actually, there is a lot of physical and metaphysical controversy roused by the concept of time travel. In 2005, *The Monist, An International Quarterly Journal of General Philosophical Inquiry* held a comprehensive debate on the topic, in which various scholars and scientists emphasized the apparent paradoxes and aporias and their possible solutions. According to Achille Varzi, the first question is whether time travel would be compatible with presentism, as in a presentist world there would be no place for the traveler to go to. Neither does an endurantist world look able to accommodate the time traveler, as in such a world objects and persons should last in time by being entirely present in each moment of their existence. A trip to the past or to the future also contradicts the concept of chronological monism, as the traveler's personal clock would need to jump ahead or backwards as compared with external time. Time travel will certainly involve reverse causation, and ex nihilo proceedings, such as a person creating himself/ herself or an object generating its own existence. As Varzi points out, there are also issues of identity, of moral responsibility, and of semantics (e.g. we would need new tenses and pronouns, such as I-now, I-past, I-future); the proposed solutions have been met with lots of counter-arguments (Cf. 325 passim).

Fictional narratives go beyond such paradoxes and logical questionings and in this respect they differ from historical narratives, whose truth-claim is stronger. However, Vonnegut hints at several of these controversial issues in his pseudo-science fictions, including *Timequake*.

Arguably, a sort of traveling backwards in time might be found in such narratives as Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* or in Luigi Pirandello's play *Henry IV*, but in such cases we cannot talk about the personages' really *physical* movement.

(An American physicist, Jack Sarfatti, even interprets Michelangelo's painting *The Creation of Adam*, in the Sistine Chapel, as a representation of God creating the universe backward in time: he "reaches back to Eden from the future to Adam's outstretched hand" -1.)

The classic of the backward time travel sub-genre is Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, the story of a modern American's awakening in a 6th century English society after he has received a blow in the head; in that new world he is able to cause things to happen, to impose some of his 19th century norms, hence to change the course of history.³

² In spite of his suggestion that with *Timequake* he would put an end to his literary career, Vonnegut published one more book, in 1999 - *God Bless You, Dr. Kevorkian*.

³ Peter Vranas distinguishes between affecting the past and changing it: in the former case there are no consequences for the future developments, unlike in the latter situation (370 passim). The distinction can be found also in Ray Bradbury's "A Sound of Thunder", about some present-day adventurers who go back in time to hunt prehistoric beasts, but are forbidden to alter the past in any way. However, the case is treated rather inconsequentially in the story.

A question arises here: why was this topic approached so late in the history of literature and why did it occur in American letters? Bud Foote, a literary historian and science fiction critic, claims that a specific feature of Americans is their "perception of time past and time future as embodied in geographical location" (64): this may explain why the protagonist's travel to the past as more than a mere observer appeared first as a topic in American fiction. Foote's argument that most Americans were more or less Europeanized by language and by education and that for them "the past is Europe" (64) holds good for the 19th century (not anymore for the present). He adds that the relationship between America and Europe is like the one between child and parent, also between the present and the past: all this might account for the genesis of "the Yankee in King Arthur's court" topic in 19th century *American* literature (cf. 172).

In *Timequake*, Kurt Vonnegut acknowledges the originality of his predecessor, "the funniest American of his time" (1), by inserting the summary of an ironically anachronistic story which is set in Camelot, in King Arthur's time: through a spell, Merlin, the Court Magician, equips the Knights of the Round Table with 20th century Thompson submachine guns and drums of .45-caliber dumdums; afterwards the gallant and pure-hearted Sir Galahad, while training, shoots a bullet into the Holy Grail and "makes a Swiss cheese" of Queen Guinevere (xiii).

Mark Twain's book is the starting point of a series of fictional works dealing with trips to older times, among which T. H. White's rewriting of the Merlin legend, *The Once and Future King* (1958), in which the Arthurian age's wizard lives time backwards, from old age to youth, or Michael Crichton's science fiction *Timeline* (1999), which involves principles of quantum physics. The topic seems to have been particularly attractive to film directors and screenwriters: the most outstanding example is the 1980 cult film *Somewhere in Time*⁴ (adapted from a science fiction novel by Richard Matheson), picturing a self-induced trip back to seven decades ago, during which young playwright Richard Collier attempts to find his then lover, a renowned actress whom he has now seen again in a photograph. Intentional travel back in time is often fictionally planned to prevent something from happening, and thus to provide alternate histories: Stephen Fry's 1997 science fiction *Making History* sends its protagonist backwards to prevent the birth of Adolf Hitler, Peter Delacorte's hero in *Time on My Hands* (2000) goes back to block Ronald Reagan's access to the U. S. presidency, while in the 2006 film *Déjà Vu* an American agent sends a note to his past self so that he may enable the latter to prevent a terrorist attack on a ferry sailing off New Orleans.

In Kurt Vonnegut's piece of fiction there is no element of in-plot intentionality: all the events recounted in the frame story are the consequence of a "timequake", a "sudden glitch in the space-time continuum" (1998: xii), which sends everybody back from February 13th, 2001, to February 17th, 1991.

Kilgore Trout, Vonnegut's alter ego, who appears as a main character in this fiction as well,⁵ ironically explains the timequake as caused by the Universe suffering "a crisis in self-confidence" and asking itself why it should go on expanding indefinitely: maybe the Universe, viewed here by Trout as an irresolute, weak-hearted being, said to itself that it "should have a family reunion back where it all began, and then make a great big BANG again" (55). In a pretended modest tone, Trout admits he cannot say why all of a sudden the Universe gave up the rerun and resumed expansion: he is unqualified to comment on religious matters.

Although the event gives people an unexpected ten-year bonus, there is no chance for anyone to tamper with the past, to change anything in the slightest way during the time warp. All the mistakes and blunders people initially made, all their follies have to be re-experienced word by word, gesture by gesture, though they might be helplessly aware of having done everything twice. It is a kind of forcibly-induced, helpless anamnesis to which everybody is subjected by this global event.

⁴ Directed by Jeannot Szwarc, starring Christopher Reeve, Jane Seymour and Christopher Plummer.

⁵ "Science fiction writer" Kilgore Trout appears in several novels by Vonnegut, acting either as a principal character (*Breakfast of Champions*, and others) or as a secondary figure (in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, and *Slaughterhouse-Five*).

To use Ricoeur's distinction, here even "the time of the world" is involved, not only the phenomenological "time of the soul" (17), as in Proust's or Pirandello's narratives. The latter is actually experienced on two tiers concurrently, as people are aware they are living now what they already lived before.

In his peculiarly jocular tone, emphasizing "life's little ironies",⁶ the author-narrator retells the story of Monica Pepper, a friend of his, who causes her husband to remain paralyzed from the waist down, as she accidentally lands on top of him in a swimming pool. After the timequake event, he will be fit again and then she will dive on him a second time. Another man, an architect disappointed with his professional condition, will successfully commit suicide twice. A guard at the American Academy of Arts and Letters will be twice accused of, and convicted for, the rape and murder of a ten-year-old girl of Chinese-Italian-American parentage. During the rerun he knows that in seven years he will be exonerated by the DNA tests of dried ejaculate material, but can do nothing to speed up his acquittal; he also knows that the District Attorney who has charged him unjustly will be found on the bottom of a lake, wearing cement overshoes, and still that he himself will go on TV talk shows to say how prison has given him the chance to find Jesus.

So, out of the several variants of backwards time travel Kurt Vonnegut has chosen that one in which people are incapacitated for new actions and cannot tamper with the already experienced events: his philosophy implies a *ne varietur* version of temporality and rules out the possibility of related ontological paradoxes. (I have in mind the self-contradictory situation in which the time traveler may do something to prevent his own birth, for instance the "killing the granny as a baby" solution, or the similar situation in which an object or some information is carried from the future to the past, does not alter in time and consequently its origin cannot be established.⁷) Vonnegut prefers to grant existence only to the "déjà vu" version of the multiverse⁸ that is theoretically implied in any travel to the past. (In accordance with one variant of quantum physics, when a quantum element faces a choice, the world divides so that any possibility can occur; consequently there is an infinite number of copies of the universe - cf. Kulkarni 1. This theory makes it possible to resolve one of the time travel paradoxes: any trip to the past is regarded as a quantum event that generates one more bifurcation of the universe.)

In Vonnegut's book, during the time loop people are kind of "player pianos", whose music follows a prerecorded track. Their free will is abolished: they can only do "exactly what they'd done during a past decade, for good or ill, a second time" (Vonnegut xii). Indeed, from a logical point of view, time travel is incompatible with the existence of the travelers' free will, and their actions are fully constrained, as the past is fixed (cf. Varzi 1).

It is as if they were actors in stage plays, which, according to Vonnegut, are but "artificial timequakes." Inventing the theatre, earthlings invented timequakes before they knew there were such things in Nature. Theatre actors are aware about what they are going to say and do, from the beginning to the end of the play. Yet, they behave "as though the future were a mystery" for them (1998: 20).

When the rerun has come to an end, there is pandemonium everywhere as people have been "on automatic pilot" for ten full years: they do not know anymore how decisions are made, how they should use their free will. The driver of a fire truck does not realize that suddenly it is up to *him* to steer the vehicle, so he smacks Monica's disabled husband. Kilgore Trout is not able to write the ending of his story until free will kicks in again, although for the ten-year lapse he continuously remembered it. (Later he writes another story, "My Ten Years on Automatic Pilot", right about this temporal accident.) Aging Trout, the cynical and careless tramp writer, becomes a world-acclaimed hero after the rerun, when he

⁶ The title of an 1894 collection of tales by Thomas Hardy.

⁷ For instance, in *Somewhere in Time*, the pocket watch that Richard Collier receives in the 1970's from his 1912 lover; going back into the past he offers it to her.

⁸ A term created by William James (in *The Will to Believe*, 1895), which nowadays refers to the possibility of parallel universes existing at the same time and making up the whole of reality.

heroically saves people from the chaos caused by the generalized syndrome named PTA, that is "Post Timequake Apathy" (Vonnegut's ironic hint at the often invoked PTSD, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder).

However, Vonnegut's discourse is at its best when the author indulges in satirical, pungent remarks, in anti-climactic endings and unexpected leaps of the narrative; less convincing are those passages where the story turns mellow and an unconventional, sarcastic man like Kilgore Trout is made to utter soothingly humanistic mantras such as "You were sick, now you're better, there's work to be done". For a global, apocalyptic event like the timequake, in the absence of a transcendental intervention, such a mild, even if well-meaning approach is less than appropriate.

Anyhow, to do justice to Vonnegut's late piece of work, I have to emphasize the logical strength of his time-travel version, in which free will is entirely annulled and people are reduced to disempowered puppets, devoid of agency and initiative.

The way in which Vonnegut handles temporality in this fiction is slightly different from the view of time in *Slaughterhouse-Five*: if in *Timequake* there is a single "spasm" of time, sending people ten years back, in the previous novel, time, as perceived by the inhabitants of the planet Tralfamadore and by the protagonist, Billy Pilgrim, has a four-dimensional nature: past, present and future moments exist simultaneously and those beings can focus randomly and discontinuously on one moment of their life or another. Thus Pilgrim finds himself, in turn, in the post-war reality, during the Dresden bombardment, in the moment of his death or during his stay on the alien planet, all in a non-linear succession. Moreover, Tralfamadoreans can even re-live their death and regard it, like any other instant, from a temporal vantage point.

This form of temporality is similar to the anthropological notion of "Great Time" to be found in Native Australians' culture: it defines a spacetime where events do not occur one after another, but all at once: it is there that the shaman goes in his mystic trances to communicate with the spirit world; also, the ancestors and the not-yet-born have a dwelling over there (cf. Foote 18).

Conversely, in *Timequake* there is re-experiencing of past events, but only once, and forcefully, not owing to one's will to concentrate on certain moments. So, the people in Vonnegut's later piece of fiction are a lot less free in their movements: once the author's own "time capital" has become thinner, his vision on life is turning sourer, despite the playfulness of his tone.

In both writings there is a lot of skepticism about the reality of free will: in *Slaughterhouse...* Tralfamadoreans cannot alter anything in their pre-ordained lives, they can only exert their power over what they are thinking about; similarly, Pilgrim seems to be absolved of acting and cannot change the course of events. "Earthlings are great explainers," says a Tralfamadorean. "Only on Earth is there any talk of free will" (Vonnegut 1991: 85-86).

Little can Kilgore Trout do in *Timequake*, despite his heroic efforts, to alleviate Vonnegut's notion that human beings live in a rigidly deterministic world, in which they have hardly any control over their lives and over history.

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Apart from the temporal loop frame story, pervaded by a somber life view, Vonnegut's 1997 piece of fiction has a rather loose structure, which includes autobiographical anecdotes, sulky thoughts on human life or contemporary history, jokes and fictional stories. The author's method is exposed in the Prologue: when realizing he had to stop trying to finish an unworkable novel, he filleted that ungrateful "big fish" (similar to the old fisherman's marlin in Hemingway's story), threw the rest away, and thus *Timequake One* turned into *Timequake Two* (the present piece), a "stew made from [the best parts of the former] mixed with thoughts and experiences during the past seven months or so" (1997: xii).

As an author-narrator, Vonnegut, who intrudes himself into this piece of metafiction, is more concerned in his reflections, memories and digressions with pressing socio-political matters and with the tragedies in his family, while Kilgore Trout is introduced as the author of a good many stories which

fictionally muse on mass destruction, dehumanizing technology, the insanity of war, or the devaluation of art and literacy.

In several of them history is retold, unlike in the frame story, in the form of an altered or purely imaginary version of it. Trout's story "No Laughing Matter" is an *uchronie*⁹ in which the point of divergence from real historical events occurs when the U.S. leadership decides to drop the third atom bomb upon Japan, after Hiroshima and Nagasaki have already been flattened. With the characteristic dry humor of Vonnegut's discourse, this little narrative retells how the bomber *Joy's Pride*, named after the pilot's mother (just like *Enola Gay*),¹⁰ is bound for Yokohama, flying with a "purple motherfucker slung underneath it" with the mission of killing a couple of million "little yellow bastards" (8-9). World War II is now over, and there remains only some paperwork to be done, so the operation seems to be just "show biz". As the pilot senses that his mother would *not* be very happy to hear about his deed, he makes a U-turn up in the sky and lands back on the airfield on the Pacific island of Banalulu, where he is soon court-martialled. When the audience is convulsed with laughter at the situation depicted by the prosecutor, the chief judge gets enraged and declares that this is "no laughing matter". The counterfactual history suddenly comes to an end when a huge crack that opens in the ocean swallows "Banalulu, court-martial, unused atom bomb and all" (10). Thus the temporal rerun, going along a modified track, ends both catastrophically and comically.

As a matter of fact, the same sarcastic overtone can be found in Vonnegut's remarks about the late Russian physicist Andrei Sakharov, which are characterized by a similar disapproval of the atom bombs' use. Though Sakharov was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for demanding, later in his career, a ban on the testing of nuclear weapons, and though he became an opponent of the Russian government, the American novelist cannot forget his contribution to perfecting the hydrogen bomb. He imagines Sakharov coming back home and having this preposterous talk with his wife, who was a pediatrician:

"Anything interesting happen at work, Honeybunch?"

"Yes. My bomb is going to work just great. And how are you doing with that kid with chicken pox?" (5)

In a brief remark Vonnegut is also sarcastic about his own *alma mater*, the University of Chicago, where the first chain reaction of uranium on earth towards manufacturing an atom bomb was realized as early as 1942. In Trout's story, "The Sisters B-36", technology, embodied in one of the three girls on a remote planet, destroys literature, the arts, and turns the Booboolings into a race of merciless creatures, who are entirely devoid of imagination.

"Kilgore Trout" takes one more trip back into history, using the same jeering tone, in "The Bunker Bingo Party", a narrative about Hitler's last moments together with his aides and their families: the insane party, rattled by the bombs pounding the roof of their bunker, begin to play bingo and are instructed by Goebbels's children on the rules of the game. The *Führer* amazingly wins and, crying BINGO, is convinced this is a sign of the miracle that will save his country from defeat. His zany joy lasts, however, just a minute and when the next bomb falls upon them he puts the pistol to his head and utters the Vonnegutean phrase "I never asked to be born in the first place" (71). (The idea is also mentioned at the end of *Timequake*, and referred to as an "extenuating circumstance to be mentioned on Judgment Day" - 218.)

Interestingly though, if Nazism and the events connected with it are mocked and abhorred by Vonnegut, its rival brother, Communism, benefits by quite a different treatment in *Timequake*. The ideological trip to the past takes the author back to the 1930's, when Communism, according to the author, was seen by "the children of the Great Depression" as a "possibly reasonable alternative to the Wall Street

⁹ *Uchronie* is the French term for "alternate history", a sub-genre of science fiction.

¹⁰ The plane that carried the atom bomb to be dropped on Hiroshima. It was named after the pilot's mother.

crashshoot" (166), although Stalin's mass crimes (deportations, executions, forced collectivization-induced famine) were in full swing just at that time and were not unbeknownst everywhere else. Vonnegut himself suggests he is aware of this reality, euphemistically calling them "cruelties and stupidities" (166). His assertions are quite justified when he deplores the wrongs of the contemporary Western society including the declining role of art, the alienation and dehumanization caused by a technology that has run amuck, the scientists' indifference, the cruelty of war, people's apathy, social inequality, or the billionaires' hegemony, but his pro-communist position is hard to comprehend because of the confusion characterizing it. Among other things, he mentions, for instance, that the Soviet rulers called themselves Communists "just as Hitler called himself, hey presto, a Christian" (166), though the latter's problematic and even antagonistic relationship with the church and Christian religion in general is well-known.

With a kind of sad humor, Vonnegut deplores the fact that "Communism" has become a taboo term just like the four-letter word f...

He mentions nothing about the utopian, dangerous nature of that ideology. Reading his sorrowful observations one remembers Karl Popper's words about tyranny and utopia (which is "an evolutionist metaphysics, a hysterical philosophy of history"): "Utopianism is the result of a wrong kind of rationalism". Despite its "attractive" nature, it is actually pernicious, self-defeating and leading to violence (Popper 358). There is no tolerance between different Utopian religions: the Utopianist must win over or else crush his competitors (359-60). Popper insists that "No generation must be sacrificed for the sake of future generations, for the sake of an ideal of happiness that may never be realized" (361). His solution to social wrongs is one that Vonnegut, the humanist, would certainly espouse: people should work for the elimination of *concrete* evils, for instance getting rid of poverty by direct means, such as ensuring a minimum income for everyone. Yet, Popper and the American novelist are far apart when it comes to the next idea, namely that we should not attempt to establish happiness by political means.

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As a matter of fact, in *Timequake* Vonnegut's mood oscillates between a deeply misanthropic, Swiftian view, and an optimistic outlook on people's future.

On the one hand he thinks up a story about an assembly of the chemical elements on the planet Tralfamadore in protest against being incorporated into the bodies of "big, sloppy, stinky organisms as cruel and stupid as human beings" (43). Carbon, "although an embarrassed veteran of countless massacres throughout history", provides an example of extreme violence from 15th century England - a man accused of treason whose body was submitted to unspeakable torture. Nitrogen deplores its "involuntary servitude" as parts of the German people involved in the death camp activities during World War II. Other elements supply details about the Roman Games, the Spanish Inquisition and black African slavery.

The chemical elements make a pledge to destroy the human race by creating new powerful antibiotics that in turn will create resistant micro-organisms; thus all chemical elements will stay free from sin again.

Besides, it is Vonnegut's underlying conviction and fear that people are actually devoid of free will, a notion that permeates much of his fiction.

On the other hand the author gives a lot of credit to Trout's redeeming formula about people's being cured of the previous sickness and about the work that is to be done by everyone, supposedly in an ideal, egalitarian society. The *uchronia* in the frame story vies with the *utopian* outlook in some of the author-narrator's political reflections.

And yet, after closing the book the reader senses that the deep truth lies hidden *there*, in the ten-year time travel that reveals the generalized state of paralysis in thought and acting, the automatic pilot kind of life that contemporary people are leading, in a teletechnoglobal world.

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