CHAPTER 7

Apocalypse in the Optative Mood: *Galápagos*, or, Starting Over

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The epigraph to Vonnegut's *Galápagos* (1985) also reveals the novel's overall theme, and it marks a subtle shift in the career of one of America's greatest cynics. "In spite of everything, I still believe people are really good at heart." (That the line comes from Anne Frank's diary makes it all the more powerful, because we know exactly what the "everything" refers to.) *Galápagos* shares with Vonnegut's other works a poignant critique of the follies of man, a sense of the absurdity of life, but adds an element only hinted at before: hope. In earlier works, undoubtedly, Vonnegut had made gestures in this direction, such as Eliot Rosewater's volunteer firemen, but more often than not, his faith in humanity was overcome by a form of pessimism that might best be described as hopelessness.[1] *Galápagos*, however, embraces a process both random and superior to any human intelligence, the ultimate laissez-faire philosophy applied to the suprahuman process of natural selection itself.

In Vonnegut's postmodern iconography of American life, he frequently exhibits what I have elsewhere referred to as a "misanthropic humanism."[2] Vonnegut sees most people as fundamentally flawed, petty, avaricious, and prone to acts of almost incredible cruelty. Yet, for all that, Vonnegut also cannot abandon humanity; he marvels at man's folly, noting sadly or just curiously man's absurd perseverance, as in the bittersweet image of the triumphant Luddites who proudly put back together the very machines they had broken at the end of *Player Piano* (1952). In *Galápagos* Vonnegut takes further pity on people, arguing that it was never their fault that they were

silly, arrogant, and cruel; it was all due to their grotesquely oversized brains. A mental disease more powerful than Dwayne Hoover's schizophrenia in *Breakfast of Champions* (1973), the curse of the big brain doomed humans to a life of quiet, and sometimes noisy, desperation. In *Galápagos*, as in *Cat's Cradle* (1963), Vonnegut manages to wipe out most of humanity, but here it is not their fault; rather than the man-made *ice-nine*, an anonymous virus renders all but a small colony of the human race unable to reproduce. Reproduction, it turns out, is all that really matters, as the small colony on the northern tip of the Galápagos Islands evolves over millions of years into seal-like creatures, whose only troubles involve matters of fishing. The hope for humanity lies in that heroic perseverance witnessed in other novels, but here salvation comes from becoming animal, in losing the human, all-too-human characteristics that had defined humanity. By my reading, Vonnegut overcomes his misanthropic humanism not by abandoning the *mis-* in misanthropy but by abandoning the *anthropos*. The result is a new humanism without the human. And, unlike Vonnegut's other apocalyptic novels, *Galápagos* embraces the posthuman world with a sense of hope and futurity that one normally associates with a utopian promise. With *Galápagos*, Vonnegut offers another apocalypse in his oeuvre; but here it is an apocalypse in the optative mood.

The Thing Was . . .

In its opening lines, *Galápagos* establishes the bizarre premise that the story is being told in the year AD 1,001,986: "The thing was: One million years ago, in 1986 A.D., Guayaquil was the chief seaport of the little South American democracy called Ecuador" (3). The mix of the utterly fantastic with the utterly commonplace is striking. There is a tremendous cognitive leap between the phrase "one million years ago" and "Guayaquil was the chief seaport." The reader is put on notice, right on the opening page, that the tale will involve an outrageous temporality: we must bear in mind that we are reading about things in the distant, perhaps prehistoric past while at the same time experiencing them almost as they are happening, in what is the reader's present, late–twentieth-century world. Hence, we have an almost God's-eye view of our present world, a view that comports well with Vonnegut's sense of the writer as "the Creator of the Universe" (as he suggests in *Breakfast of Champions* [205]). This is crucial for the novel's paradoxical apocalypse in the optative mood. Since we—through the narrator—know that everything works out

for the best, we can watch sometimes horrific scenes of destruction without losing hope.

Contrast this to the apocalypse presented in *Cat's Cradle.* There, although the narrator also recounted past events he had witnessed and participated in, the events were so new and so recent that one had little sense of how everything would turn out. Indeed, that novel ends with only the most minute glimmer of hope, as the ragtag band of survivors living on the fictional Caribbean island of San Lorenzo struggles to make sense of its postapocalyptic condition. The final scene of *Cat's Cradle,* when Bokonon himself at last appears, suggests that the final, meaningful act of one who truly understands the cosmos into which humanity has been thrown is an act of playful and defiant suicide: killing oneself while thumbing one's nose at the Creator.[3] In *Galápagos* the destruction of most of humanity is hailed as the great hope for a posthumanoid humanity on the remote island of Santa Rosalia. Thanks to the natural equivalent of *ice-nine,* the unassuming little germ that first appears at the 1986 Frankfurt Book Fair, the fur-covered humanity on that remote knoll of the Galápagos Archipelago flourishes. Rather than ossify in an attitude of playful defiance, humanity finally finds itself in vibrant harmony with the natural world.

The bulk of the narrative recounts events taking place in Guayaquil on November 28, 1986, although Vonnegut's style allows him to shift between flashbacks, flash-forwards, and lateral storytelling in order to create a nonlinear history. Readers would be familiar with such narrative techniques in, especially, *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), but Galápagos provides a different rationale. In *Slaughterhouse-Five* all of history could be viewed at once, as if time were really space, such that the various moments of history could be viewed just as one views a stretch of a mountain range.[4] Hence, time travel became as simple as space travel; so the narrative, like the protagonist Billy Pilgrim, could "become unstuck" in time, moving with ease among past, present, and future. Here, it is not that time is transformed into space but that the narrator is capable of witnessing a million years of history. To do this, Vonnegut created a new type of narrator, one especially apt for presenting an apocalypse in the optative mood.

Charles Berryman has noted that "Vonnegut's boldest experiments in fiction have always been with narrative strategy" (195), and Vonnegut employs a novel strategy here. *Galápagos* is narrated by the headless ghost of Leon Trout, the son of longtime Vonnegut-alter-ego Kilgore Trout, the science fiction writer who first appeared in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* (1965) and played key roles in

Slaughterhouse-Five and *Breakfast of Champions* (he also makes an appearance in *Jailbird* [1979]). The father appears in this story as well, but in *Galápagos* Leon Trout gets to be the storyteller, and his own version of science fiction—specifically the science of Darwinian evolutionary biology—supplies the guiding thread of the novel's moral dimension. Vonnegut needed to create a narrator who could witness the events but also survive a million years of natural history. He could have created a god, an immortal alien, or the like; but with Leon Trout, he is able to combine the fantastic with the familiar in interesting ways. Obviously, a ghost-narrator is a far-fetched conceit, one that makes a mockery of the realism of the story taking place in Ecuador.[5] But likewise, this narrator makes possible the greater pathos and, in particular, empathy that illuminates the characters struggling with the horrors of the day. Leon Trout, by being a ghost, is thus able to become part of the story itself, a participant-narrator who is also a passive observer, one who sees into the minds of his characters and also reveals his own thoughts and feelings. And, as I will argue, Leon Trout—like his father, Kilgore—becomes a figure for the writer in general, and perhaps for Kurt Vonnegut himself. Leon Trout as narrator is thus a remarkable addition to the repertoire of storytelling styles employed by Vonnegut.

The cast of *Galápagos* is another colorful ensemble of oddballs, similar to those of his early novels; as in those earlier works, the characters are thoroughly flawed yet sympathetically presented. *Galápagos* is populated with the lovably motley assemblage that Vonnegut's fans have become accustomed to in other novels. Here we find Andrew MacIntosh, a captain of industry, with his blind daughter, Selena, and her seeing-eye dog, Kazakh;[6] Mary Hepburn, a recent widow from Ilium, New York, a town that regularly and generously provides Vonnegut with characters (literally and figuratively); James Wait, a sleazy confidence man looking to seduce, fleece, and abandon wealthy widows; Zengi Hiroguchi, a Japanese scientist and inventor hoping to become a businessman, and his depressed, pregnant wife, Hisako; Adolf von Kleist, a pompous, aging sea captain; and six illiterate girls from a lost tribe of rainforest dwellers, utterly bewildered and oblivious to most of the goings-on. Additionally, key roles are played by Jesus Ortiz, the good natured hotel employee who is pushed too far; Giraldo Delgado, a paranoid schizophrenic who is armed and extremely dangerous; Roy Hepburn, Mary's late and also schizophrenic husband; Guillermo Reyes, a sane fighter pilot; Hernando Cruz, a capable ship's mate; and Siegfried von Kleist, brother to an incompetent captain of a ship and the good-natured sufferer of the

early stages of Huntington chorea. Leon Trout, the narrator and guardian angel or friendly ghost, rounds out this fine ensemble for an end-of-the-world farce.

The plot may be briefly summarized: Several of the aforementioned cast arrive in Guayaquil in order to participate in "The Nature Cruise of the Century," a globally marketed event that was supposed to feature celebrity guests such as Jacqueline Onassis, Mick Jagger, and Walter Cronkite. A severe financial crisis has put the cruise in jeopardy, as the celebrities have all dropped out, but the remaining guests, for reasons of their own, remain. Mary Hepburn had promised her late husband that she would attend, and she is suicidal with loneliness and despair when we first see her. James Wait, posing as a Canadian widower, had hoped to meet wealthy women to take advantage of. Andrew MacIntosh was planning to seal a lucrative business deal first with the government of Ecuador and then with Zengi Hiroguchi, the inventor of a new handheld device (the Mandarax) that, among its other useful features, operates as a nearly universal translator. MacIntosh is accompanied by his blind daughter, Selena, and Hiroguchi by his wife, Hisako, so the business arrangements may be discussed in the relatively informal surroundings of a family vacation. Later, in their postapocalyptic life on Santa Rosalia, Selena MacIntosh and Hisako Hiroguchi will live as spouses until they commit suicide together. Captain von Kleist, the captain of the cruise ship, *Bahia de Darwin* (or "Bay of Darwin"), and his brother Siegfried, the manager of the hotel, make possible the escape of the survivors from Guayaquil to the Galápagos island. Thanks to a series of accidents, this ensemble will also include six young girls from the lost tribe of Kanka-bono Indians. These girls will becomes the new Eves to all of humanity.

The worldwide economic crisis leads to the financial and social collapse of Ecuador, and poverty there is now compounded by starvation. Additionally, war between Ecuador and Peru is on the verge of breaking out. The new hotel has been cordoned off by the army, as mobs of hungry citizens become a growing danger. Giraldo Delgado, a paranoid schizophrenic soldier, will actually be responsible for breaking the cordon sanitaire, and he will also wind up killing Andrew MacIntosh and Zengi Hiroguchi as they are pacing the grounds. Realizing that the only hope for survival lies in escaping by sea, Siegfried von Kleist loads the survivors into a bus and drives them to the seaport, where he finds his brother thoroughly drunk and the ship completely stripped off all provisions and valuables. An explosion, which kills Siegfried von Kleist, unmoors the craft, and

although the captain is not really qualified to operate the ship—his capable first mate having abandoned the vessel earlier—he sets sail to the West. A "Second Noah's Ark," as our narrator had called it, sets out for Mt. Ararat. James Wait, who has suffered a heart attack, dies shortly after "marrying" Mary Hepburn (the captain performed the ceremony), and Selena's seeing-eye dog goes missing (we soon learn that the Kanka-bonos have killed, cooked, and eaten it). Due to the captain's faulty and erratic navigating, the ship is far off course, and after five days, it eventually lands on the unpopulated northern Galápagos island of Santa Rosalia, best known for its indigenous species of vampire finches, as the former high school biology teacher Mary Hepburn recognizes. They stop there for provisions, but the *Bahia de Darwin*'s engines will not start again, so they are stranded. Thus, they are spared the ravages of a disease that first breaks out at the annual book fair in Frankfurt, Germany, a disease that destroys the reproductive capabilities of humans. What remains of humanity, a million years later, descends from this initial colony of ten survivors—Captain von Kleist, Mary Hepburn, Selena MacIntosh, Hisako Hiroguchi, and the six Kanka-bono girls. Hisako soon gives birth to Akiko, who is covered in a light fur owning to a genetic defect in Hisako's family initially caused by exposure to radiation from the bombing of Hiroshima. Watching over all of this is Leon Trout, who worked and then died in the Swedish shipyard building the *Bahia de Darwin*, thus making both the craft and the story of the "Second Noah's Ark" possible.

Apocalypse Revisited

In some ways, *Galápagos* is the apotheosis of Vonnegut's earlier work, an exemplary and perfected form of the narratives and arguments he had been laying out throughout his writing career, in what Peter Freese describes as "a baker's dozen of successful novels with apocalyptic themes and symbols" ("Natural Selection" 337). Certain themes audible in all of his writings reappear here as well. For example, the concern that human activities are increasingly performed by machines is the fundamental premise of Vonnegut's earliest novel, *Player Piano*, often thought to be a work of science fiction,[7] which depicts a dystopian near-future in the tradition of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). The apocalypse, a man-made end to the world, appears in *Cat's Cradle* as well as in more local versions in *Slapstick* (1976) and *Deadeye Dick* (1982). Schizophrenia and depression, key elements of *Slaughterhouse-Five*

and *Breakfast of Champions*, make their timely reappearance here as well.

In *Galápagos*, the narrator notes, almost in passing, how humans with their big brains almost maniacally insisted on "having machines do everything that human beings did—and I mean *everything*" (70). The world presented in *Player Piano* is one in which computers and efficient machinery have eliminated the need for the vast majority of workers; with machines fulfilling all of society's material needs while denying the satisfaction of the less well-known "need" to perform meaningful work, the abject working class of the novel is forced to choose between absolutely menial nonwork or unemployment. A white-collar middle class, represented by the allegorically named Paul Proteus, is perhaps equally dejected, recognizing that the corporate identity and pseudofamily is destroying the individual and community identities so longed for. In what will serve as the climax of the novel, a band of neo-Luddites gleefully destroy the very machines that had taken not only their jobs but their meaning in life. Vonnegut, here, could have chosen to end the novel with the scenes of glorious destruction, depicting a victorious revolutionary working class rising up to demand a dignified life worth living. Vonnegut also could have chosen to show the brutal crackdown by a cold, heartless regime, thus turning the revolutionaries into martyrs. Both images are present in the book. But the lasting image, the one that haunts the reader and that provides the theme that is audible throughout Vonnegut's works, is slightly different. As the delirious rioters gloat over the smashed machines, several begin to take pleasure and, indeed, pride in repairing the recently broken devices. At first, fixing the machine is just a puzzle to be solved, but then the satisfaction of solving it leads to the desire of creating new, better machines. Vonnegut's message is clear: the dystopian world is entirely of human creation, and there is no human solution to the problem, since the ones who suffer from the life without meaning are the same ones who will create the conditions for that meaningless life.

I have referred to Vonnegut's attitude as a misanthropic humanism. Vonnegut's notion that the *human, all-too-human* (in Nietzsche's ironic but telling phrase) condition is absurd, that human behavior inevitably leads to ruin, is complemented by the thoroughly humanist belief that a striving, however meaningless in the end, has meaning in itself. The human spirit of perseverance is, for Vonnegut, the lovable quality that overcomes the absurdity of existence, if only for a while. *Cat's Cradle* is narrated by a wandering Ishmael—or worse, the bad luck Jonah—who sets out to write a book about the events that took

place on August 6, 1945, the day that the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, Japan. He plans to call the book *The Day the World Ended*. The opening line of *Cat's Cradle*—"Call me Jonah"—invokes another great American novel, *Moby-Dick*, which also tells the tale of a fatal destruction of a figurative world. In each book, the seed of the world's destruction lies in human ingenuity coupled with the human, all-too-human desire for power, love, or understanding. Felix Hoenikker, the father of the atomic bomb and the inventor of *ice-nine* (the substance that will eventually bring about Armageddon in *Cat's Cradle*), is presented as an absentminded genius, someone who would not harm a fly but whose reckless and heedless knowledge-for-the-sake-of-knowledge actually is more destructive than the ill will of a thousand tyrants. Ahab, driven to distraction by "that inscrutable thing" of which the White Whale may be the agent or the principal, is willing to risk all to conquer it. In both cases, whether elicited by monomaniacal fury or innocent curiosity, the apocalyptic force is unleashed. The Faustian bargain is at the heart of Vonnegut's misanthropic humanism.

Leon Trout introduces and repeats a phrase, used to refer to the recently departed, throughout *Galápagos*: "Well, he wasn't going to write Beethoven's Ninth Symphony anyway." The line sums up what all of us, excluding Ludwig van Beethoven himself, amount to at death. A callous dismissal, perhaps. But Vonnegut also makes clear that the same brainpower that could write Beethoven's Ninth Symphony also made possible the bombing of Hiroshima, the famine spreading throughout Ecuador, and so on. The most ingenious device in *Galápagos* is surely the Mandarax, likened to the Apple of Knowledge in what will be humankind's New Eden on Santa Rosalia. When Hisako Hiroguchi lashes out at her inventor husband for creating the Mandarax, she discloses the frustration of someone whose life is measured by such outrageous standards as whether one might write Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. The Mandarax, a device initially designed to supplant the Gobuki (which could translate among ten different languages), could translate among a thousand languages, but it could also make medical diagnoses, provide thousands of quotations from world literature, and—apparently—teach ikebana, the Japanese art of flower arranging, also the area of Hisako's expertise. Although the Mandarax is clearly an extraordinarily useful thing, Hisako, in her anger and depression, recognizes a more baleful aspect of its creation:

> "You, *Doctor Hiroguchi," she went on, "think that everybody but yourself is just taking up space on this planet, and we make too much

> noise and waste valuable natural resources and have too many children and leave garbage around. So it would be a much nicer place if the few stupid services we are able to perform for the likes of you were taken over by machinery. That wonderful Mandarax you're scratching your ear with now: what is that but an excuse for a mean-spirited egomaniac never to pay or even thank a human being with a knowledge of languages or mathematics or history or medicine or ikebana or anything?" (70)

(The asterisk, of course, is Vonnegut's way of letting the reader know that Zengi Hiroguchi will die quite soon, and certainly long before he will ever get the chance to write Beethoven's Ninth Symphony.) Even the Mandarax, imminently useful and ingeniously devised, can cause such anguish as the machines in *Player Piano*. The *ice-nine* that winds up destroying the world in *Cat's Cradle* is, like laborsaving machinery or nuclear weapons, another grand achievement in the human, all-too-human quest for knowledge. In his early writings, Vonnegut might have looked at such behavior with cynical detachment, but Vonnegut does not blame his characters personally for building or restoring the machines that had made them miserable, for creating and using weapons of almost unimaginable destructive power, or for using words and images to make each other unhappy. It is not their fault, and *Galápagos* reveals the actual source of human misery.

Big Brains

In *Galápagos* Vonnegut finally identifies the problem and proposes a solution. The problem with humans is that they have a terrible birth defect, passed down to their progeny throughout human existence. The defect is their big brains. Such big brains cause all the trouble, and if only humans could evolve to have smaller brains, they would be so much happier and more well-adjusted to the world in which they live. As the narrator puts it, looking back over a million years and with specific reference to the devious con man just introduced,

> It is hard to believe nowadays that people could ever have been as brilliantly duplicitous as James Wait—until I remind myself that just about every adult human being back then had a brain weighing about three kilograms! There was no end to the evil schemes that a thought machine that oversized couldn't imagine and execute.
>
> So I raise this question, although there is nobody around to answer it: Can it be doubted that three-kilogram brains were once nearly fatal defects in the evolution of the human race?

> A second query: What source was there back then, save for our overelaborate nervous circuitry, for the evils we were seeing or hearing about simply everywhere?
>
> My answer: There was no other source. This was a very innocent planet, except for those great big brains. (8–9)

Throughout the novel, Vonnegut blames those big brains for all of the problems facing humanity. Such enormous brains could not help but produce its own monsters, giving what the narrator describes as bad advice on crucial matters of survival. Thus, Mary Hepburn's brain tries to convince her that suicide is the right course of action; this is the same brain that will later have her perform experiments in artificial insemination with an unwilling sperm donor and with agreeable teenage virgins. Such big brains could create outlandish scenarios, as with the big brain of the trusting, hardworking hotel employee, Jesús Ortiz. "Ortiz's brain was so big that it could show movies in his head which starred him and his dependents as millionaires. And this man, little more than a boy, was so innocent that he believed his dream could come true" (75–76). Such big brains caused the Hiroguchis, and other married couples, to fluctuate between hating or resenting each other and wanting to do whatever possible to make each other happy, often changing whimsically from mere second to second. "Of what possible use was such emotional volatility, not to say craziness, in the heads of animals who were supposed to stay together long enough, at least, to raise a human child, which took about fourteen years or so?" (67). And, as Leon Trout himself confesses, "When I was alive, I often received advice from my own big brain which, in terms of my own survival, or the survival of the human race, for that matter, can be charitably described as questionable. Example: It had me join the United States Marines and go fight in Vietnam.

Thanks a lot, big brain" (29).

Another problem with these oversized brains, regardless of the naïveté or mendacity or goodwill of the person involved in the era of big brains, is that mere opinions themselves—notions formed in those brains with no real substance exterior to them—often had life-or-death consequences. Vonnegut uses the word *magical* to describe the process by which mere opinions, when agreed upon by a substantial number of people, could transform the value of things in human minds (18). The worldwide financial crisis that had disrupted the plans for the "Nature Cruise of the Century," which was causing famine in much of South America, and which would lead to war between Ecuador and Peru, was a simple result of the changing opinion of the

value of paper representations of wealth exchanged in those places. "It was all in people's heads. People had simply changed their opinions of paper wealth, but, for all practical purposes, the planet may as well have been knocked out of orbit" (24).

Vonnegut also emphasizes that the problem with big brains is not that they are defective—the defect is that they exist at all. Leon Trout takes pains to explain this, especially since there are many dangerous characters in the story whose brains, in addition to being big, were actually malfunctioning. Not wanting to give the impression that "everybody a million years ago was insane," the narrator proclaims: "That was not the case. I repeat: that was not the case. Almost everybody was sane back then.... The big problem, again, wasn't insanity, but that people's brains were much too big and untruthful to be practical" (189). In the novel, we see Roy Hepburn's dementia, Giraldo Delgado's paranoia, and Siegfried von Kleist's nascent problems with Huntington's disease; but the real tragedy for mankind—Vonnegut insists—is not the brain that malfunctions, but the brain that functions properly and continues to cause misery in its owners and those surrounding them.

The solution, then, lies not in better mental health care or in learning to use our mental facilities more scrupulously or more effectively. The solution lies in ridding ourselves of those big brains. In *Galápagos* Vonnegut turns to real "science fiction," perhaps for the first time in his career. The science, of course, is evolutionary biology, specifically Darwin's theory of natural selection. Despite his aversion to being classified as a science fiction writer, Vonnegut has acknowledged his widespread use of "science fiction of an obvious kidding sort" (*Wampeters* 262). But *Galápagos* uses actual science to organize the fiction. As Peter Freese argues in "Natural Selection with a Vengeance: Kurt Vonnegut's *Galápagos*," Vonnegut uses "natural selection with a vengeance" to undermine the perceived superiority of human in the biosphere, and specifically to debunk the arrogant notion that the things that make humans superior are their big brains. Far from providing humankind with a superior weapon in the struggle for survival, the big brain is actually an evolutionary mistake, a congenital birth defect like Huntington's chorea. As Freese sums up Vonnegut's theory, "man is an evolutionary mistake, and the only chance to prevent the imminent destruction of the world is not to think ever better thoughts but to give up thinking all together" (339).

Vonnegut dramatizes a million-year experiment in creating a form of humankind best adapted to life on the planet. A million years ago, in 1986, there was a reasonable suspicion that the world was ending

and that humankind and the world were not very good for each other. Leon Trout, from his God's-eye vantage over this span of a thousand millennia, can view everything and everyone as parts of an overall experiment, a research program conducted by Nature herself and using the law of natural selection as its method. Individual characters within the tale are themselves subjects in the experiment:

> If Selena was Nature's experiment with blindness, then her father was Nature's experiment with heartlessness, and Jesús Ortiz was Nature's experiment with admiration for the rich, and I was Nature's experiment with insatiable voyeurism, and my father was Nature's experiment with cynicism, and my mother was Nature's experiment with optimism, and the Captain of the Bahia de Darwin was Nature's experiment with ill-founded self-confidence, and James Wait was Nature's experiment with purposeless greed, and Hisako Hiroguchi was Nature's experiment with depression, and Akiko Nature's experiment with furriness, and so on. (82)

Whether any of these personality traits are beneficial for survival is unlikely to be seen during the lifetime of the persons who have them. That Nature has use for such things is doubtful, as the narrator concludes that "there are no such experiments, either with bodies or personalities, going on at the present time" (83).

At the end of history, or at least at the end of Leon Trout's story, the seal-like humans thrive in large part strictly because they have evolved in such a way as to lose the very capacity to have personalities. Nature, not some supernatural force, had "brought humanity into harmony with the rest of Nature" via the law of natural selection:

> It was the best fisherfolk who survived in the greatest numbers in the watery environment of the Galápagos Archipelago. Those with hands and feet most like flippers were the best swimmers. Prognathous jaws were better at catching and holding fish than hands could ever be. And any fisherperson, spending more and more time underwater, could surely catch more fish if he or she were more streamlined, more bulletlike—had a smaller head. (291)

Hence, no more big brains.

The Era of Hopeful Monsters

Is it surprising that the virus that wipes out all of humanity—all, that is, except for the little colony on Santa Rosalia—first appears at

the Frankfurt Book Fair? This annual event, though the largest of its kind, would not necessarily seem to be ground zero for the end of the world. But by using the world's largest book fair as the site where humanity ends, Vonnegut links the profession of writing to his apocalypse, an apocalypse written in the optative mood.

What is perhaps most striking about the apocalypse presented in *Galápagos* is its utterly quotidian nature. Contrary to the belief of some readers,[8] the destruction of the human race in *Galápagos* is not caused by World War III, by nuclear Armageddon, or by a substance like *ice-nine*; rather, what destroys all of humanity is a little virus or bacterium that destroys women's ova, thus making reproduction impossible. Those humans who initially survive, presumably, will lead long, healthy, and perhaps happy lives, only without having any more children. (Presumably, although the text does not specifically invite the inquiry, humans alive in 1986 could go on living for another 100 years or so; Vonnegut, or Leon Trout, does not tell what might have been happening outside of the isle of Santa Rosalia.) The absolute end of nearly all humankind is anything but spectacular. Far from the image of a meteor knocking the planet out of orbit, a nuclear holocaust, or a biblical Armageddon, Vonnegut buries the root of humanity's ultimate annihilation midway through the novel, mentioned as "another David-and-Goliath" story that is actually a simple, and natural, process.

As Mary Hepburn contemplates suicide in her hotel room in Guayaquil, she thinks of the lesson she taught her students about the great land tortoises. Once they could be found "lumbering over every temperate land mass of any size" (162), but then tiny rodents evolved to feed on tortoise eggs, and the great reptiles were wiped out everywhere but for those few remote places (like the Galápagos) that remained free of the rodents. This incidental piece of natural history provides a figure for the fall of man as well. As Vonnegut writes,

> It was prophetic that Mary should imagine herself to be a land tortoise as she suffocated, since something very much like what had happened to most of the land tortoises so long ago was then beginning to happen to most of humankind.
>
> Some new creature, invisible to the naked eye, was eating up all the eggs in human ovaries, starting at the annual Book Fair at Frankfurt, Germany. Woman at the fair were experiencing a slight fever, which came and went in a day or two, and sometimes blurry vision. After that, they would be just like Mary Hepburn. They couldn't have babies anymore. Nor would any way be discovered for stopping the disease. It would spread practically everywhere.

> The near extinction of the mighty land tortoises by little rodents was certainly a David-and-Goliath story. Now here was another one. (162–63)

That this is the only mention of the cause of humanity's destruction in Galápagos is itself significant. Vonnegut, in passing, casually mentions the doom of man.

Of course, this germ that wipes out most of humanity winds up making possible the new, posthuman humanity that will evolve on the seemingly barren island of Santa Rosalia. This is, after all, the great hope for mankind. The pervasive optative mood of *Galápagos* is even given a label at one point. The title of a Kilgore Trout novel, *The Era of Hopeful Monsters*, about creatures hoping to succeed, biologically and otherwise, might be a good label for the novel as a whole. In that book, a humanoid race ignored the most serious problems with survival until, with forests dead, lakes poisoned with acid rain, and groundwater made unpotable, they began having children with monstrous birth defects. Some had "wings or antlers or fins, with a hundred eyes, with no eyes, with huge brains, with no brains, and on and on. These were Nature's experiments with creatures which might be better planetary citizens than the humanoids" (83). Most died or had to be shot, but a few survived, intermarried, and had young themselves. Such monsters had hopes for survival and, accordingly, embodied the hope for human (or humanoid) survival. Vonnegut, through the narrative voice of the disembodied Leon Trout, notes that his time—which is to say, our own time—might be dubbed "the Era of Hopeful Monsters." Specifically he refers to Nature's experiments with personalities, but Vonnegut's overall point is that we are the very monsters of the allegory. And hope is the intrinsic trait.

The persistence of hope in the face of a seeming hopeless situation is, perhaps, its own kind of madness. Leon Trout suggests as much in describing his mother's irrational belief that his father would become a great and popular writer, that the family would move into a nice house, and have friends, and dinner parties, and all that the American upper-middle-class can promise of the good life. Such a belief might be termed a "hopeless optimism." A paradox? Indeed, hopefulness is itself a hopelessly tragic condition, for those of us who ought to know better. But, in *Galápagos*, Vonnegut—for the first time in his long career—enables and even encourages us to embrace such an optative mood, to look upon the destruction of the human world we have known as part of the beautiful (and beautifully irrational) process of overcoming our human, all-too-human condition. There is

an element of Nietzsche *fröhlich Wissenschaft* or "joyful wisdom" in Vonnegut's formulation.

Vonnegut even allows for the horrors of his own time to be incorporated into the more hopeful natural history he creates in *Galápagos.* The human race that thrives in the future descends from Akiko Hiroguchi, a child born with a beneficial mutation: she "was covered in a fine, silky pelt like a fur seal's" (58). Being exposed to the harsh equatorial sun on an island without trees or having to swim in the cold waters of the Pacific, the new kinds of humans to come could only benefit from such protective insulation. The narrator makes clear that this birth defect is an indirect result of the U.S. bombing of Hiroshima forty-one years earlier, as Akiko's grandmother had been exposed to nuclear radiation. Thus had the tragedy that sent Jonah, *Cat's Cradle*'s narrator, off to write a book that led to his own apocalyptic tale become a source for the happily-ever-after postapocalypse of *Galápagos.* Thus had the Asian analogue of Vonnegut's own terrifying firestorm in Dresden in *Slaughterhouse-Five* made possible this tale written in the optative mood.

The epigraph to *Galápagos*, which Leon Trout asserts was his mother's favorite quote, expresses both the hope and the monstrosity well: "In spite of everything, I still believe people are really good at heart." At the beginning of the novel, the "everything" is on full display: greed, egoism, cruelty, and on. And, by the end of *Galápagos*, the goodness at heart is unquestioned. Vonnegut shows how humanity may be saved, and its salvation lies in shedding itself of the very human, all-too-human, qualities. The humans of AD 1,001,986 are happy and healthy planetary citizens. The broken machinery is repaired, not by some external force, but by Nature. As the narrator concludes,

> When my tale began, it appeared that the earthling part of the clockwork of the universe was in terrible danger, since many of its parts, which is to say people, no longer fit in anywhere, and were damaging all the parts around them as well as themselves. I would have said back then that the damage was beyond repair.
>
> Not so!
>
> Thanks to certain modifications in the design of human beings, I see no reason why the earthling part of the clockwork cannot go on ticking forever the way it is ticking now. (291)

The New Eden or the Second Noah's Ark experiment allows all of humanity, not least of which includes Vonnegut himself and his longtime readers, to start over.

Finally, *Galápagos* is Vonnegut's chance to make peace with the monster he is, the writer as monster. For Vonnegut, the role of the writer, perhaps best embodied by Kilgore Trout, is that of a social anomaly, an outsider who cannot help but fill the big brains of others with the distorted images of his own oversized thinking-machine. A writer is a monster, perhaps a hopeful monster, who does not fit in well with the world. Indeed, in *Galápagos*, we are given a suitably monstrous figure for the writer's horror-movie role in human affairs: a ghost. Leon Trout explains that the reason he chose to become a ghost, rather than stepping into the blue tunnel into the afterlife, was "because the job carried with it, as a fringe benefit, license to read minds, to learn the truth of people's pasts, to see through walls, to be many places at once, to learn in depth how this or that situation had come to be structured as it was, and to have access to all human knowledge" (253). Is it even necessary, to add in summation, *to become a writer*. Moreover, the ghost of Leon Trout does become a writer. In the final chapter, he famously explains that "I have written these words in air—with the tip of the index finger of my left hand, which is also air" (290). A million years in our future, where what remains of humankind is a race of seal-like fisherfolk, there are no more readers: "Nobody, surely, is going to write Beethoven's Ninth Symphony—or tell a lie, or start a Third World War. Mother was right: Even in the darkest times, there really was still hope for humankind" (259). The rendering of writers as spectral entities, floating above, within, or amid human society without being wholly of part of it, renders literature itself as a ghostly presence. But this is not viewed as a bad thing. Not at all. "Does it bother me to write so insubstantially, with air on air? Well—my words will be as enduring as anything my father wrote, or Shakespeare wrote, or Beethoven wrote, or Darwin wrote. It turns out that they all wrote with air on air" (290).

This is actually a very hopeful sentiment. Vonnegut's existential humanism had conceded that life was utterly meaningless, but here that sort of meaninglessness is embraced. What had caused so much pain and anxiety—for instance, Leon's dismay that his father had no readers—becomes a healthy acknowledgment of the transcendent power to make meaning in our own lives. In a famous interview in *Playboy Magazine*, Vonnegut had explicitly stated the role of the writer in the overall scheme of things, precisely in language resonant with the message of *Galápagos*: "Writers are specialized cells in the social organism. They are evolutionary cells. Mankind is trying to become something else; it's experimenting with new ideas all the time. And writers are a means of introducing new ideas into the society, and also

a means of responding symbolically to life. I don't think we're in control of what we do" (qtd. in *Wampeters* 237).

In the end, *Galápagos* affirms our own era of hopeful monsters. It is the apocalypse in the optative mood that signals a new beginning, a starting over from scratch that cleanses the mind of the horrors instanced in *Player Piano*, *Cat's Cradle*, and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, among others. Vonnegut's *Galápagos* is thus a gift from the writer to his devoted fans. Its message, from Anne Frank, that "in spite of everything, I still believe people are really good at heart," also calls to mind that of another great writer from the middle of that troubled century; William Faulkner, who famously suggested in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech "that man will not merely endure, he will prevail." With *Galápagos*, Vonnegut imagines a potential end of man, but produces an apocalypse in the optative mood, a hopeful end-of-the-world romance that puts to rest the misanthropic humanism that typified Vonnegut's earlier works. Here, Vonnegut allows humanity to start over... happy, healthy, and covered in a light fur.

Notes

1. In his autobiographic "collage," *Palm Sunday*, Vonnegut admits that after spending "two-thirds" of his life as a pessimist, "I am astonished to find myself an optimist now" (209). It seems to me that a sign of Vonnegut's newly acquired optimism is *Galapagos* itself.
2. See my "A Postmodern Iconography: Vonnegut and the Great American Novel."
3. The last lines of *Cat's Cradle* present the final paragraph of the Books of Bokonon: "If I were a younger man, I would write a history of human stupidity; and I would climb to the top of Mount McCabe and lie down on my back with my history for a pillow; and I would take from the ground some of the blue-white poison that makes statues of men; and I would make a statue of myself, lying on my back, grinning horribly, and thumbing my nose at You Know Who" (Vonnegut 191).
4. "All moments, past, present, and future, always have existed, always will exist. The Tralfamadorians can look at all the different moments just the way we can look at a stretch of the Rocky Mountains, for instance. They can see how permanent all the moments are, and they can look at any moment that interests them. It is just an illusion we have here on Earth that one moment follows another one, like beads on a string, and that once a moment is gone it is gone forever" (*Slaughterhouse-Five* 27).
5. Oliver W. Ferguson makes the even bolder argument that the "story" of Galapagos is really the hallucinatory fiction of a perhaps mad Leon Trout, who admittedly contracted syphilis and had psychological problems arising from his traumatic family life and military service. In

other words, the entire drama of the tourists on the "Nature Cruise of the Century" and the million years of evolution is just a fantasy, deliberately composed or otherwise, of a living Leon Trout.

6. Longtime Vonnegut fans will recognize the dog's name, which (with an additional "H") is the same as that of Winston Niles Rumfoord's beloved dog and fellow traveler on the chronosynclastic infundibulum in *The Sirens of Titan*, as well as the name of the vicious attack dog that frightens Vonnegut himself in *Breakfast of Champions*.
7. Vonnegut himself disagrees. See *Wampeters, Foma, and Granfalloons* 1–5.
8. See Klinkowitz.

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