

"The Great Beyond" is an incongruous piece in *Restless City and Christmas Gold*. What emerges from the story is the author's strain for moralizing by enjoining the reader "to make amends for all he had done wrong" before he dies (p. 39).

"Bus Stop Mystery" is an absorbing detective story about the strange death (unrevealed at the end) of a young girl, Grace Kolia, in a Lagos City bus. Ekwensi shows knowledge of how a crime reporter goes about his detective business. The reporter combs out pieces of information and tailors them into a coherent and logical sequence. (The author's impression of the city, "the wickedness of the city in the bitter struggle for survival" [p. 57], recalls that of another student of city life, the nineteenth-century American novelist, Stephen Crane.) In "Death of a Pathologist," Ekwensi handles another detective story superbly.

"The Indispensable" is a short but intense episode about the death of Dr. Leonard Kalu, a specialist surgeon, from overwork. It presents a clash between public and private duties. Dr. Kalu's death is a culmination of the fears of his protective wife, Ada, that his obsession with his medical profession would destroy their family life. The obvious lesson of the story, as of another—"Dark Christmas," is that nobody is indispensable in society. But Ekwensi appears to be unaware of the larger question raised by the doctor's death. His moral intent seems eccentric in a country where humanitarian and devoted doctors are few and far between.

Christmas is the season when most women's excessive vanity yearns for indulgence. In "Christmas Gold," Ekwensi satirizes the misconception some rich city dwellers have about Christmas. Instead of goodwill and happiness, jewelry, palatial parties, nice clothes and dances are for Ma Bimbo, and her type. Joke in another Christmas story, "Eku Palemo Odun!" all that make for "joy" at Christmas. On the other hand, Sisi Tola is satisfied that this Christmas "no one is ill" in her family. She sees in their peaceful living more blessing than Christmas gold. The spiritual decadence associated with this Christian festival is a reflection on the preoccupation with material possession in contemporary Nigerian society.

This collection of short stories portrays Cyprian Ekwensi as a moralist. He focuses on different aspects of violent and nonviolent crimes, on romantic love in the city of Lagos, and uses these themes as vehicles for commentary on some of the cultural tensions in urban African society.

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KURT VONNEGUT

Slapstick

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In narrative structure Vonnegut's latest antinovel, *Slapstick*, has the short breath of a man who swiftly grows impatient and bored with his own ideas and jettisons them, either by dumping fragmented paragraphs where they stand, or appending little meaningless phrases at the end. These phrases are the

compulsive tics of a solipsist talking to himself and frequently shrugging his shoulders, e.g. "Good for him," "Think of it," and the ubiquitous "Hi ho," a phrase which used to be a cheery greeting full of zest for life, but becomes in Vonnegut's hands "a senile hiccup"; rather like the echolalia his manic depressive car salesman suffered from in *Breakfast of Champions*.

Slapstick is prefaced by a brief autobiographical essay which shares with the following piece of futuristic phantasy a mood of sustained melancholy. The work resembles a desert of apathy watered in isolated oases by patches of wry wit, or poisoned by unfunny black humor. Vonnegut clings to what he tells us is the tough atheism of his immigrant forefathers, except that he has obviously lost the emotional stamina to bear this antireligion, and, as a result, he lapses into maudlin sentimentality or flippancy. When he is confronted with the fatal sickness of his sister, who describes her impending death as "soap-opera" and "slapstick," and when he is confronted with the cruelty of man and the brevity and beastly pointlessness of human life, his psyche cries out for religious solace. But like a man tormenting himself, he cannot give himself that solace. And so, instead, he seeks refuge in the slapstick antics of Laurel and Hardy. The only mastery that man has over his sad life is to laugh about it, and so on.

The setting of Vonnegut's futuristic phantasy bears fascinating resemblances to Stephen Vincent Benet's story *By the Waters of Babylon*. Both works are set in the ruins of New York after the armageddon. In Benet's case after the nuclear holocaust, in Vonnegut's case after a supernatural change in the laws of gravity has destroyed the urban monuments of Western technology. In either case we behold Western civilization reduced to starkly primitive barbarism. A life of sorts, allegorical in its despair, is maintained by a few physically or mentally twisted survivors. But there the similarity between Benet and Vonnegut ends, because Benet completes his story, which has been told with great compactness and pathos, with the determined optimism of "We must build again." Vonnegut's narrative manner is undisciplined and nonchalant. He casually sticks most of his plot exposition in the last few pages of his antinovel, parodies the happy endings of fairy stories with concluding lines like "You are the granddaughter of the King of Candlesticks, of the King of New York" (p. 242) and then peters out impatiently and unsatisfyingly with the words "And so on." It is evident that Vonnegut lacks the staying power or the faith to bother maintaining the illusion of fictional contrivance.

In its own cynical manner, *Slapstick* invites one to approach it as a prayer offered from the depths of despair. Vonnegut addresses his prayer "To Whom it may concern." He offers various Utopian phantasies to solve the problems of the world, including a mock-grandiose scheme to reintroduce participatory democracy in the USA. These phantasies are saved from sentimentality only because they are liberally mixed in with incidental parodies of pornography and some brilliant satirical epigrams. Take the following epigrams, for example, "Americans who had all but wrecked the planet with a form of Idiot's Delight—obsessively turning money into power, and then power back into money again, and then money back into power again" (p. 28). Or, "They were innocent great apes, with limited means for doing mischief, which in my opinion as an old, old man, is all that human beings were ever meant to be" (p. 36).

Vonnegut continues his war on the conventional novel of psychological realism. His characters are never flesh and blood, but more allegorical representatives of a single state of mind. *Slapstick's* plot shows no careful

planning, web of anticipation, foreshadowing, gradual development etc. Instead there are abrupt shocks and incredible transformations which jerk the thin plot along erratically. Indeed in *Slapstick* Vonnegut accomplishes a tongue-in-cheek transformation of materialistic, power-hungry USA by drawing a futuristic veil over it which is derived partly from the Arabian Nights and partly from Dracula horror movies. Vonnegut hugely enjoys this juxtaposition of fairy story and horror, of the primitive with the sophisticated. But he tends to spoil his own enjoyment, and the reader's too, with his insistent nihilism, viz. "The life that awaits us after death is infinitely more tiresome than this one" (p. 85).

The most inventive idea in *Slapstick* is that of the Chinese communists attaining mind-boggling spiritual power by combining "telepathically compatible specialists to think as single minds" (p. 96). Just as the innocent reader is beginning to think what an ingenious and morally admirable antidote to the American doctrine of competitive individuality, dog eat dog, and "paddle your own canoe," Vonnegut pulls this comforting rug out from under the reader's feet with the most wicked piece of black humor in the book: "The Chinese got the idea from the American and European scientists who put their heads together during the Second World War, with the single-minded intention of creating an atomic bomb. Hi ho" (p. 96). That the Chinese now use their intellectual brilliance to reduce themselves to microscopic size "so that they would not need to eat so much and wear such big clothes" is one thing, but that they also use it to experiment naively with the forces of gravity, thus reducing the civilized world to primitive chaos is another.

Vonnegut evidently has no wish to inspire us with the confidence in man's potentiated wisdom or the future security of the human race. Further Vonnegut is so determined not to sin on the side of misguided enthusiasm for life that he has invented a narrator who is also the last President of the USA, who can sustain sanity only by reducing himself through drug addiction to vegetable serenity. Nor can the reader find much comfort in the determination of Vonnegut's narrator to replace our existing and admittedly very imperfect hierarchies of wealth, intellect, willpower, or culture, with a mediocre, mindless, plebeian democracy, in which "an 11 year old black girl named Dorothy Daffodil-7 Garland" (p. 212) will allegedly show us the way to true humanity. It is a pity that Mr. Vonnegut's brilliant, cynical epigrams should be spoilt by such clumsy and unconvincing attempts to find an easy, universal panacea for human cruelty. These attempts lead to such unmitigated twaddle as "Because we're just families, and not a nation any more . . . it's much easier for us to give and receive mercy in war" (p. 220). Families, after all, are not exactly famous for producing what Vonnegut yearns for, "Please—a little less love, and a little more common decency" (p. 3).

As Vonnegut grapples with such problems as these in his late middle age, he is all too aware as a supremely self-conscious narrator that his depression and his lack of faith in the value of what he is doing, namely creating fictional entertainment, are insidiously destroying, as he himself puts it, "all that is left of my optimistic imagination, of my creativeness" (p. 19). One finds oneself wishing nostalgically that he could return to the unashamed inventiveness of plot and situation in the earlier works, *The Sirens of Titan* and *Cat's Cradle*. As it is, *Slapstick* is in its black mood and deliberately childish mannerisms a repetition of the uneven tone of *Breakfast of Champions* (see D. A. Myers, "Kurt Vonnegut Jr.: Morality-Myth in the Antinovel," *The International Fiction Review*, 3, No. 1, (1976), pp. 52-57).

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