

KURT VONNEGUT

Jailbird

New York: Delacorte Press, 1979.
Pp. 246. \$9.95.

Kurt Vonnegut's latest work, *Jailbird*, continues the trend of his two preceding works, *Breakfast of Champions* and *Slapstick*, away from sci fi entertainment towards satiric antinovels set in the sordid present and saturated with world-weary despair (see David Myers, "Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.: Morality-Myth in the Antinovel," *IFR*, 3, No. 1 [1976], 52-57). Like *Slapstick*, *Jailbird* also opens with a rambling, autobiographical segment; in it Vonnegut comments on one of his father's sad anecdotes, "The story was a sort of fairy tale, with a moral in it for everyone" (p. xvi). And this is exactly what *Jailbird* is itself: a parodistic fairy tale spiced for grown ups with Dadaistic phantasies and with a moral dictated by black humor.

In *Jailbird* Vonnegut operates as a satirical surgeon on the festering sores of North America's power-hungry plutocracy. His diagnosis is based on historical studies of the cruelty and injustice done to the workers of the world by American capitalists from 1890 to 1978. He holds his historical diagnosis together chronologically by tracing parallels between three quasi-revolutions of the little man: the great union strikes of the 1890's to obtain justice and tolerable living conditions for the workers; the similar strikes organized in the 1930's depression; and finally the surreal scheme of Mary Kathleen O'Looney to bring about "a peaceful economic revolution" (p. 231) in the 1970's. All these quasi-revolutions end in martyrdom for the idealistic socialist leaders of the time, for Colin Jervis in 1894, for Sacco and Vanzetti in 1936, and for Mary Kathleen in 1978. All three acts of martyrdom are seen by Kurt Vonnegut as *imitatio mythica* of the great act of self-sacrifice that lies at least ostensibly at the very heart of Western civilization: the martyrdom of Jesus Christ in 33 A.D.

Jailbird is a scathing *reductio ad absurdum* of American capitalism's attempt to substitute the worship of Mammon and property as a guiding dream in place of Christ's Sermon on the Mount. Vonnegut discards the salvation theology of Christianity and secularizes and politicizes Christ's gospel. With this ideal of humility and altruistic love constantly in mind, Vonnegut lam-

basts the USA for its false promise of justice and equality for all, for claiming to be the land of hope and idealism after the failure of corrupt Europe. It is representative of the haplessness of the little man that the narrator and antihero of this sad satire, Stankiewicz-Starbuck, becomes a passive and harmless accomplice to Nixon's Watergate cover-up in *Jailbird*'s contemporary setting. Starbuck is like his creator Vonnegut a self-denigrating defeatist alternating between almost psychotic apathy and flashes of hope for an all or nothing Holy Grail as he seeks some inspiration in Christian goodness and commitment to the downtrodden which will give desperately needed meaning to his life. When Starbuck lists the rather corny examples of Christian goodness he has experienced in one day since his release from prison, all for the benefit of Mary Kathleen playing a fairy tale God, then *Jailbird* begins uncannily to resemble the parable in Bertolt Brecht's *The Good Woman of Szechuan*. In both works the capitalist economy is held by the author to make the practice of Christian altruism impossible and in both works the Gods are revealed to be impotent anachronisms, leaving the only solution to be found in this world in the evolution of a new community founded on socialist ideals. But whereas Brecht's plays are resolutely optimistic, Vonnegut's novels waver irresolutely between the black humor of despair and a wistful hope beyond hopelessness.

The antihero of *Jailbird* shambles his way through a myriad of tests towards a wry kind of moral heroism in defeat. The plot relies on shameless coincidences; the events have an archetypal ring to them; and the problems evoked are always urgent moral ones whose solution is vital to the survival of our Western civilization. *Jailbird* draws its characters from a muck heap of grotesque caricatures of capitalist lawyers, politicians, and big businessmen. Their unflinching corruption serves to demonstrate the epidemic malaise of our civilization.

In *Jailbird* Vonnegut seems to see himself like his narrator as a philosophical jailbird resigned to his existential imprisonment in a meaningless world but amusing himself by pretending to transform the world through the magic of poetic fantasy. In fact, Vonnegut hints that he sees his poetic persona as "a harmless little elf in his magic dancing shoes" who turns straw into gold, and in the ironic self-deprecation of his conviction of futility, gold into

straw (p. 222). Scurrilous and flippant fairy tales for a civilization that has lost its sense of mission. Vonnegut's style resembles the behavior of one of *Jailbird's* characters who is always "overacting his surprise and dismay like an actor in a silent movie" (p. 130). For Vonnegut is addicted to the half melodramatic, half consciously humorous hyperbole of the silent movie director. He exaggerates the contrast between unbelievable innocence and cruel power mongering, between foolish optimism and apathetic defeatism. His anti-novel is thus in the tradition of Nathanael West's *Miss Lonelyhearts*. The black humor and flippancy behind which Nathanael West and Kurt Vonnegut hide their sometimes sentimental, neo-Christian visions of goodness are best understood as emanating in spirit from the softhearted father of American literary satire who grew increasingly pessimistic in old age, Mark Twain.

David A. Myers

RICHARD K. CROSS

Malcolm Lowry: A Preface to His Fiction

Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980. Pp. 146. \$12.50.

"No symbols where none intended": Samuel Beckett's dictum in *Watt* could stand as a warning to overzealous exegetes of Lowry's writing. Like Joyce, Lowry attracts those whose predilections are for the symbol rather than the surface. The hermetic researcher has the perfect subject in Lowry, whose mythopoeic vision can lead to undreamed of treasures. Of course, Lowry's world is a forest of symbols but, as Richard K. Cross points out in his *Preface*, his fiction fuses symbolism and mimesis. If some recent studies have explored the cabalistic labyrinths, Cross's study emphasises—rightly I believe—that there are important depths, too, in the representational surface of Lowry's writing.

Because of this emphasis, Cross's *Preface* is the ideal critical work for those who are new to Lowry's writing. He adopts the

reader's guide approach, leading the reader chronologically through the oeuvre from the apprentice work (which, placed in context, is Lowry's necessary preparation for *Under the Volcano*) to *Under the Volcano*—the examination of which dominates the study—to the later works (seen as interesting fictional reflections on the *magnum opus* rather than as significant in their own right). Cross ranks *Under the Volcano* alongside *Nostromo*, *Ulysses*, and *Doktor Faustus*, as one of the classics of high modernism; this assertion he demonstrates with both clarity and insight.

Under the Volcano is concerned with that which is common to all men, at all times, in all places; it is concerned with life, death, and the difficulty of loving; it is concerned with the exploration of essentially contested concepts—and it is concerned with a drunk in Mexico. And Mexico is there in all its moods of desolate splendor, of sinister magnificence and tawdry beauty. The mood music is as memorable as the Alexandrian rhythms of Durrell's *Quartet* and it establishes the slow, melancholy, tragic measure of Mexico as the backdrop to the action of the novel. As Richard Cross points out, the Consul's last, violent day has implicit parallels with a world that is slipping into the global violence of World War II, but the symbolic overtones should not overshadow the felt reality of the world that Lowry creates.

Each character reads himself into the landscape. Geoffrey's despair is articulated through the night imagery in his letter to Yvonne: ". . . Night: and once again the nightly grapple with death, the room shaking with daemonic orchestras, the snatches of fearful sleep, the voices outside the window, my name being continually repeated with scorn by imaginary parties arriving, the dark's spinets. As if there were not enough real noises in these nights the colour of grey hair. Not like the rending tumult of American cities, the noise of the unbandaging of great giants in agony. But the howling pariah dogs, the cocks that herald dawn all night, the drumming, the moaning that will be found later, white plumage huddled on telegraph wires in back gardens or fowl roosting in apple trees, the eternal sorrow that never sleeps of great Mexico." Geoffrey's world is a Kafkaesque nightmare, and the metaphors are real. The surface is the symbol: here are no biblical floods or Lawrentian rainbows: Sisyphus is a man on a greasy pole, Fate is a Ferris Wheel.