

A Fading Old Left Vision: Gospel-Inspired Socialism in Vonnegut's *Rosewater*

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KURT VONNEGUT was relegated to the fringes of the literary establishment during his last decade, having lived to see himself marginalized by the culture that popularized him. But why? Vonnegut's contemporary voice, most notably in his 2005 collection *A Man Without a Country*, was not radically different from many liberals who denounce the Bush administration and the war in Iraq. Yet one glaring difference, I would argue, set Vonnegut apart from the mass of these dissenters. Vonnegut's politics continued to carry a distinctly Old Left socialist flavor in an era when even the 1960s New Left appears an idealistic novelty, making Vonnegut a true cultural relic—an endangered species of sorts—in a society that has all but forgotten about the ideals he championed. With his true Old Left colors showing, Vonnegut proclaims in *A Man Without a Country* that “‘Socialism’ is no more an evil word than ‘Christianity’” (11), an assertion from which present-day liberals would probably shy away.

With this in mind, it is informative to glance back at Vonnegut's 1965 novel *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, largely ignored by critics, as an Old Left novel which explores the possibilities of private-sphere socialism in depth, written in the midst of the New Left emergence, and now rendered nearly irrelevant (though unjustly so) by twenty-first century politics. *Rosewater* represents Vonnegut's most direct engagement with the class-conscious politics of the Old Left, in which he experiments with “what happens when you give poor people money” (Clancy, 55), and decides that it is not money the poor need, but love. Vonnegut concludes in

Rosewater—and continued to maintain until his death in April of 2007—that by observing socialist principles and, more specifically, acting upon the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount and of socialist reformers like Eugene Debs and Powers Hapgood, American society has its best chance at what one could term a secular salvation. The key to this salvation is an emphasis on the individual, private sphere aspects of social humanitarianism rather than mass, public sphere manifestations. In order to prove that Vonnegut uses *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* as a vehicle for voicing his belief in the feasibility of solving America's social inequalities, at least in part, through socialist practices.

The basis of Vonnegut's socialism is a concern for the poor and criticism of those who participate in the system of their exploitation. This type of socialism focuses on the humanity and basic equality of each and every person, and therefore is more closely related to Marxist Humanism (a school of thought that emphasizes human agency) than any strictly traditional or institutional interpretation of Marxist or socialist doctrine. Although the unequal distribution of wealth is prominent in Vonnegut's conception of socialism, the main concern is that every human being is viewed as being equal. Although important and obviously present, the Old Left political aspects of this socialism take a backseat to a more personal philosophy rooted in New Testament teachings. The net effect here is that this brand of socialism places the utmost emphasis on the private sphere and individual human equality and kindness rather than on the public sphere's political and institutional iterations of socialism. Vonnegut's conception of this type of socialism derives largely from early Christian teachings of loving one's fellow man found in the New Testament (especially from the Sermon on the Mount, which is the generally accepted phrase to identify Matthew 5:3-7:27 in the Bible; it is widely taken to be "the quintessence of the teaching of Jesus" [Betz, 3]) and from the awareness of Indiana socialists Powers Hapgood and Eugene V. Debs he had from an early age. Eugene V. Debs (1855-1926)

was a Terre Haute, Indiana, native and “was the most well known and highly regarded leader of the American Socialist party” (Radosh, 1) and Powers Hapgood (1900-1949) was an Indianapolis, Indiana, native who was involved in American labor strikes and “protests about the executions of Sacco and Vanzetti” (*Jailbird*, x)—both obviously prominent political figures. Vonnegut himself was an Indianapolis, Indiana, native, and often wrote (albeit often with disdain) about his youth in the Midwest. The evidence for Vonnegut’s interest in two of his home state’s most prominent progressives (he in fact met Powers Hapgood in person) comes mainly from interviews spanning more than thirty years.

In an interview with *Nuvo* in January 2003, Vonnegut cites Debs’s famous quotation, “As long as there’s a lower class, I am in it. As long as there is a criminal element, I am of it. As long as there is a soul in prison, I am not free.” Vonnegut goes on to recognize Debs’s words “as a paraphrase of the Sermon on the Mount” and to make it clear that he sympathizes with Debs and another Indiana socialist radical, Powers Hapgood, who “wanted a better country, that’s all” (Hoppe). It becomes apparent from this interview that Vonnegut viewed the teachings of Eugene Debs and Powers Hapgood as following from principles set forth in the Sermon on the Mount, and not only are such socialist ideas present in Vonnegut’s consciousness, but he also holds such ideas in high esteem. Although Vonnegut’s brand of socialism doesn’t seem inherently political, it certainly seems as though it’s often instigated by political actions (and would carry political repercussions if carried out). Again, although Debs and Hapgood are inherently public, political figures, Vonnegut always seems to take a private, personal message away from their words and actions. In the process, Vonnegut demonstrates the always tenuous distinction between the public and private spheres. Vonnegut’s comments in 2003, in fact, came in reference to a decidedly public and political event—the war in Iraq coming closer and closer to fruition. Yet his response approaches the public and political from a private and per-

sonal perspective. Repeatedly, Vonnegut's concerns seem to focus primarily on the people that political policies affect rather than on the policies themselves. In short, his sympathy for private and personal effects lead to criticism of public and political causes of inequality and injustice. For Vonnegut, public political ideology and private religious teaching effectively coalesce into one social philosophy, thereby combining and indirectly challenging the division between the public and private spheres. Since Vonnegut interprets the socialist messages of Debs and Hapgood as synonymous with the message of the Sermon on the Mount, so too will this essay.

More than thirty years before the *Nuvo* interview, Vonnegut told Laurie Clancy that among the writers that influenced him was George Orwell, who "interests [him] more than anybody else." Vonnegut goes on to say that he tries to "write a great deal" like Orwell, and that he admires Orwell's "concern for the poor . . . his socialism [and] his simplicity" (52-3). In a 1973 interview with David Standish of *Playboy*, Vonnegut says that he worries about "stupid people, dumb people" and says that "somebody has to take care of them, because they can't hack it" (89). Similar to the recent *Nuvo* interview, these interviews with Vonnegut from the 1970s demonstrate a genuine concern for socialist issues, yet always in a private, personal way. Not unlike Vonnegut's more recent opinion pieces, his comments in these interviews came in the midst of another controversial public and political American military engagement, Vietnam. In the Clancy interview, Vonnegut even acknowledges the influence of socialist ideas on his writing, not just his consciousness. By consciously trying to emulate an author that was concerned with socialism and the poor, Vonnegut asserts his own interest in those very same issues.

A problem that immediately arises in trying to establish Vonnegut's interest in socialism—and consequently its presence in *Rosewater*—with the interviews cited above, however, is that each one takes place well after *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* was written. *Rosewater* was published in 1965,

and the earliest interview that is cited is the 1971 Clancy interview. The connection between what Vonnegut was concerned with at the time of *Rosewater's* publication and what he was concerned with six years later is somewhat dubious. This problem can be resolved in part by what Vonnegut himself has written about his exposure at an early age to socialist ideas.

In his autobiographical collage *Palm Sunday*, Vonnegut writes that when he was a high school sophomore, his socialist uncle gave him a copy of Thorstein Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class*. Vonnegut loved it because, as he describes it, Veblen's analysis "made low comedy of the empty graces and aggressively useless possessions which [his] parents . . . meant to regain someday" (59). Such a satire of the consumption and distribution of wealth, probably instilled basically socialist ideas in Vonnegut at a formative age (well before the publication of *Rosewater*). Those socialist ideas probably hit even closer to home since they directly applied to Vonnegut's personal life. Vonnegut seems to be particularly fond of his Uncle Alex (the uncle that gave him a copy of Veblen's work), and it seems likely that some of his socialist ideas rubbed off.

Perhaps even more indicative of Vonnegut's interest in socialism is the mention in the preface to his novel *Jailbird* of a meeting between himself, his father, his Uncle Alex, and Indiana socialist Powers Hapgood that took place in July 1945. In setting up the context of his meeting with Hapgood, Vonnegut writes that he voted for a Socialist party candidate the first time he ever voted in a national election because he "imagined [he] was a socialist" and "believed that socialism would be good for the common man" (*Jailbird*, xii), a classic Old Left position. Whether or not Vonnegut later imagined himself as a socialist or believed in the benefits of socialism, his meeting with Hapgood (in which Hapgood cites the Sermon on the Mount as a reason for advocating workers' rights) certainly seems to have had a lasting effect. In fact, thirty-four years after the meeting (the time of publication of *Jail-*

bird) Vonnegut goes on to give his own definition of the Sermon on the Mount. He summarizes it as:

the prediction by Jesus Christ that the poor in spirit would receive the Kingdom of Heaven; that all who mourned would be comforted; that the meek would inherit the Earth; that those who hungered for righteousness would find it; that the merciful would be treated mercifully; that the pure in heart would see God; that the peacemakers would be called the sons of God; that those who were persecuted for righteousness' sake would also receive the Kingdom of Heaven; and on and on. (*Jailbird*, xix)

A conception of the Sermon such as this is both a template for moral action and a prophecy of things to come. God smiles upon those that are merciful and pure of heart, and there is hope for the poor, mistreated, and disadvantaged—essentially private manifestations of socialist values according to Vonnegut. Further illustrating the importance of the Sermon to Vonnegut, he also invokes its teachings in the body of the novel as a guide by which society could act to better itself.

In sum, not only did Vonnegut hold socialist ideas dear to his heart, but he also admired them in the 1940s (before the Old Left waned), several years prior to the publication of *Rosewater*. In addition, the direct link in *Jailbird* between the influence of socialism on Vonnegut's young adulthood and the influence on him in 1979 seemingly cements Vonnegut's interest in socialism at the time of *Rosewater*'s publication in 1965, at the height of the New Left's emergence. It seems clear that Vonnegut's interest in socialism was a life-long one, spanning from childhood up through 2005's *A Man Without a Country*, not just a passing fancy or one that had developed in his later adulthood. A great deal of evidence, however, for Vonnegut's interest in the type of private-sphere socialism represented by the Sermon on the Mount when writing *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* can be found within the novel itself.

The plot of *Rosewater* centers on the fortune of a philanthropic multi-million dollar organization, the Rosewater Foundation. Eliot Rosewater is the main character of the

novel and is president of the Foundation (and so has control over how the Foundation's money is spent). At first he spends the family fortune in the traditional American philanthropic sense, by donating money to fight "cancer and mental illness and race prejudice and police brutality and countless other miseries" (*God*, 17). Inspired in part by science fiction writer Kilgore Trout, Eliot decides that a more effective way to help people is simply "to *care*" (*God*, 35) about them instead of donating large sums of money to philanthropic causes. To accomplish this, Eliot moves back to his hometown of Rosewater, Indiana—a town with seemingly more than its share of the less fortunate—and opens an office from which he can base his charitable operations.

Several characters view this move as a sign of insanity, including Eliot's father, Senator Lister Rosewater, and a devious lawyer, Norman Mushari. There is a clause in the Foundation's charter stating that if the president of the Foundation is judged insane, the control of the Foundation must be shifted to the nearest blood relative—in this case, Fred Rosewater of Pisquontuit, Rhode Island. Mushari intends to use this clause to unseat Eliot and gain his share of the Rosewater fortune in the process—"possessing the treasure for a magic microsecond, taking a little of it, passing it on" (*God*, 9). Although the main character of the novel is Eliot, Vonnegut digresses from Eliot's story line at times and uses Fred Rosewater and the people of Pisquontuit to illustrate situations in which the principles of the Sermon on the Mount are not observed. The most obvious application of the Sermon on the Mount and its socialist principles, however, is evident in Eliot's philanthropic actions.

Eliot is established early on in the novel as a man who is working to model his life (although not necessarily consciously) after the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount. Eliot writes a sealed letter to his future successor as president in which he outlines the Rosewater family history and the dubious means by which the family acquired its wealth. He shows particular disdain for the wealthy (a class to which he

belongs, of course) and concern for the injustices done to the poor, writing that "every grotesquely rich American represents property, privileges, and pleasures that have been denied the many" (*God*, 13). Eliot closes his letter with the words, "Be generous. Be kind. . . . Be a sincere, attentive friend of the poor" (*God*, 15). Eliot's admonition essentially echoes the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount by focusing on kindness and the attention he feels should be devoted to those less fortunate. Not only does Eliot encourage his successor at the Rosewater Foundation to act in this fashion, he follows his own advice.

From his office in Rosewater, Eliot answers phone calls and accepts visitors that need his help, be it financial or merely his listening ear. The office has signs in the windows and in the door proclaiming "ROSEWATER FOUNDATION HOW CAN WE HELP YOU?" (*God*, 49), and Eliot has painted a William Blake poem on the steps leading up to his office that reads (broken up so that it fits the 12 steps in his office): "The Angel / that presided / o'er my / birth said, / 'Little creature, / form'd of / Joy & Mirth, / Go love / without the / help of / any Thing / on Earth' " (*God*, 51). The sign in the window and the Blake poem form a basis for Eliot's philanthropic philosophy that he carries out in Rosewater: to help those that need it simply because they are human, not for any personal gain and not because the aid is in the public eye.

It is not entirely clear from the text of *Rosewater* why Eliot decides to execute his philanthropic desires in this fashion instead of distributing large portions of the Rosewater fortune to worthy causes, but he seems to have had enough of following in the footsteps of traditional wealthy American philanthropists. Simply donating money to charitable organizations isn't good enough for Eliot anymore, and he takes his philanthropy to the streets and helps less fortunate individuals with their everyday problems. In other words, Eliot's philanthropy takes on a profoundly more private, personal, and intimate character than the very public and impersonal act of donating large sums of money to various causes. This shift in philan-

thropic philosophy is perfectly consistent with Vonnegut's private-sphere solution to public-sphere ills that he offers in various interviews. Donald Morse likens Eliot's form of philanthropy to what he calls Ralph Waldo Emerson's "wise form of philanthropy" (157), which Emerson described as personal service to "a class of persons to whom by all spiritual affinity I am bought and sold; for them I will go to prison if need be" (qtd. in Morse, 157). The willingness to go to prison for a class of people especially resonates with Debs's statement that "As long as there is a soul in prison, I am not free." Emerson's wise form of philanthropy also touches upon the spiritual implications of the type of selfless action that Eliot exhibits.

Leonard Mustazza recognizes the underlying spiritual and Biblical connection found in Eliot's actions, writing that they are "consonant with the supplementary moral laws projected in . . . the Sermon on the Mount" (91), and David Goldsmith describes Eliot's actions as "nothing more than the work ethic mixed with early Christian love" (98). In fact, the Biblical undertones to Eliot's character are so strong that he has been described as a Christ or Jonah figure by critics (see Marvin, Schulz, and Schatt's "Whale" for essays to this effect). It's not critical to this essay which, if either, category Eliot fits into; what is important is that his actions mirror those that are encouraged in the Sermon on the Mount. While Eliot doesn't explicitly cite the early Christian love ethic found in the Sermon on the Mount as a template for his philanthropic philosophy, his thoughts and actions seem to clearly parallel these teachings. The sheer number of times that Vonnegut writes about Eliot's actions in terms of helping people merely because they are human establishes the concept as a theme of *Rosewater*.

Although Eliot's philosophy of love based solely on an individual's humanity is prominent in the novel, it is certainly not the only viewpoint presented. Ideologies that run counter to Eliot's are most often voiced by Eliot's father, Senator Lister Rosewater. Senator Rosewater is a Social Darwinist of

sorts, and essentially believes that the poor are poor for a reason and undeserving of Eliot's (or anyone else's) help. Eliot and his father argue several times throughout *Rosewater* about Eliot's lifestyle choice. Senator Rosewater even writes a rebuttal to Eliot's Blake poem at the base of the stairs in Eliot's office. He writes it in the form of another Blake poem which reads: "Love seeketh only Self to please, / To bind another to Its delight, / Joys in another's loss of ease, / And builds a Hell in Heaven's despite" (*God*, 52). Senator Rosewater seems to think that Eliot's mission to bring love to the people of Rosewater is some sort of egotistical project; he is clearly suspicious of Eliot's capacity to love all people solely for their humanity. His perception that Eliot's deeds are driven by some sort of narcissistic God complex is even more apparent at the end of the novel when he warns Eliot not to "play God to people, or they will slobber all over you, take you for everything they can get" (*God*, 186). The senator seems paranoid that the poor should ever get their hands on the fortune that he was born into, and he certainly views the poor with contempt. In fact, the Senator says he believes that Eliot's "compassion for the maggots in the slime on the bottom of the human garbage pail would vanish" (*God*, 46) if Eliot would stop drinking.

Senator Rosewater frowns upon Eliot and humanitarianism in general, and although portrayed as slightly unfeeling, he is a character that certainly does not appear unreasonable. Vonnegut allows Senator Rosewater's point of view to gain credibility, especially since the Senator sincerely cares for his son and his son's wife—he simply can't understand what motivates what he believes are misguided attempts to help the undeserving. William Rodney Allen observes that the presence of Senator Rosewater in the novel shows that "Vonnegut is willing to counter and even overthrow his own sentimentalizing tendencies" and goes on to say that Senator Rosewater "makes the observation that his son has done very little in the long run by throwing money at [the poor]" (71). Far from just throwing money at the poor, however, Eliot "lis-

tened tirelessly to . . . people who . . . would have been better off dead [and] gave them love and trifling sums of money" (*God*, 40). Eliot focuses on the needs of the poor with a private and personal response instead of public and impersonal one, hardly indicative of an egotistical God complex. Senator Rosewater just seems to fundamentally misunderstand what his son is trying to accomplish in Rosewater; Eliot isn't simply giving people money and sending them on their way, he listens to their problems and hopes and dreams. This is what the poor need the most: an understanding, sympathetic ear. Eliot follows Vonnegut's conception of the Sermon on the Mount strikingly close by comforting and acting mercifully toward those who mourn and acting with a purity of heart in the best way he knows how.

Both Senator Rosewater and Eliot agree that money isn't the solution to the problem, but the Senator is unable to make sense of his son's methods. The impact of Eliot's humanitarian philosophy resembling the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount isn't lessened by a strong opposing view presented by Senator Rosewater; it is made even more clear and sharply defined. By being willing to counter his sentimentalizing tendencies, Vonnegut makes it clear that he is comfortable with the sentimentality. Kathryn Hume recognizes the tendency of critics to view Vonnegut's work as "impractical, over-simple, sentimental, and subjective," and she goes on to respond that "Vonnegut's refusal to lay out dogmatic answers is a way, implicitly, of inviting us to analyze our own defenses against chaos" (*The Heraclitean*, 220-1). In *Rosewater*, Vonnegut presents both sides of the humanitarian argument in a compelling light and invites the reader to choose. The novel is written, however, so that choosing Eliot's side is almost inevitable.

Another aspect of *Rosewater* that could undermine Vonnegut's use of the Sermon on the Mount ethic in Eliot's character is the motives that drive Eliot's actions. Many critical interpretations of *Rosewater* recognize the cause of Eliot's actions as repressed guilt (see Broer, Giannone, Godshalk,

Goldsmith, Mayo, and Morse). Stanley Schatt speculates that perhaps it is the memory of killing unarmed German firemen in World War II that drives Eliot "to seek a way to abolish all human suffering and thus ameliorate some of his own guilt feelings" ("The Whale," 40). Whether it is the repressed guilt from this memory, Eliot's feeling he had some role in his mother's untimely death (she was knocked overboard from a boat when Eliot was young), or guilt originating from his family's immense wealth and the methods by which it was obtained, it seems somewhat likely that Eliot is trying to atone for past sins by spreading his love to the citizens of Rosewater.

Peter J. Reed contends that the motivations for Eliot's actions have an "ambiguity [that] greatly enriches the novel. It adds dimension to Eliot's characterization [and] makes the social criticism exercised through his role less easily propagandistic" (156). This is consistent with Hume's position on Vonnegut's style: it's merely his way of inviting the reader to draw their own conclusions. By not making the conclusion that should be drawn from the events easily apparent, Vonnegut involves the reader and strengthens his argument by not making it so simplistic. Reed goes on to point out that Eliot's solutions to people's problems "do not involve unquestioning distribution of large sums of money, which would surely be the gesture of a man simply trying to assuage feelings of guilt about his own wealth" (159). There is clearly some core altruistic desire in Eliot; he is not motivated solely by guilt.

A negative view of religion that could undermine the Sermon on the Mount ethic comes in the portion of the novel dealing with the segment of the Rosewater clan that resides in Pisquontuit, Rhode Island. Pisquontuit is virtually the antithesis to the community Eliot is trying to create in Rosewater by observing the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount. In Pisquontuit, Vonnegut paints a picture of an impenetrable class system created by the unequal distribution of wealth that puts everyone living there in a state of inertia. One representative family, the Buntlines, has a lower-class

maid whom they force to take an oath before every Sunday dinner stating, in part, that she "will be content with whatever station in life God Almighty may assign me to . . . and always respectful to those whom God has, in His Wisdom, placed above me" (*God*, 133-4). Thomas Marvin gives this passage a Marxist read and recognizes that, "as Marx pointed out, capitalism allies itself with Christianity in order to convince workers that an unjust system is actually God's will" (111). The Buntlines are clearly invoking religion in a much different context than Eliot (both Reed and Mayo also recognize the use of religion to justify wealth in this passage). How can these two portrayals of the function of religion in society be reconciled?

The answer to this question lies in the absurd fashion in which the Buntlines are portrayed in the novel. By creating a situation in which a maid has to take an oath at Sunday dinner reiterating her supposedly God-given status in life, Vonnegut seemingly discredits the use of religion to suppress the poor. Eliot's interpretation of the Sermon, when compared with the Buntline's use of religion, appears much more rational. Not only is religion used in an oppressive fashion in *Pisquontuit*, but it's scoffed at.

The *Pisquontuit* scene contains the only direct reference in the novel to the Sermon on the Mount in a conversation between a lawyer (Reed McAllister) and a young, idealistic Stewart Buntline (one imagines the young Vonnegut that idealistically voted for a Socialist party candidate to be not unlike Stewart) who had to be talked out of believing "the free enterprise system was wrong [and giving] all his money to the poor" (*God*, 118) in order to preserve his inheritance. McAllister mocks young Buntline's socialist ideas, saying that he is typical of a first-year college student who has "had his Christian nose rubbed, often for the very first time, in the Sermon on the Mount" and goes on to say "How dare a university teach compassion without teaching history, too? History tells us this: . . . Giving away a fortune is a futile and destructive thing. It makes whiners of the poor, without mak-

ing them rich or even comfortable" (*God*, 120). It is precisely this "path of conservatism" (*God*, 119) that McAllister encourages Buntline to follow that creates the absurd dinner oath scene and the depressing inertia in Pisquontuit. McAllister's logic is also flawed in that he directly associates the Sermon's teaching of compassion for the disadvantaged with merely giving money to the poor; Eliot's philosophy of giving the poor "love and trifling sums of money" (*God*, 40) follows the Sermon's teachings much more closely.

In light of this evidence, it becomes clear that the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount are a prominent theme in *Rosewater*. But does Vonnegut actually posit this course of action as at least a partial solution to society's ills instead of regarding such actions as noble but ultimately impractical and useless? A large part of this analysis hinges on the ending of the novel, for which there has been widely varying critical interpretation. The end of *Rosewater* finds Eliot in a psychiatric hospital after suffering a mental collapse. "Somehow, somewhere, [Eliot] had lost one year" (*God*, 183) in the psychiatric hospital; he initially remembers none of his time there but then "the memory of all that had happened in the blackness came crashing back" (*God*, 188). He awakes in the middle of a conversation with his father and finds out that he has been preparing for a sanity hearing. Norman Mushari is attempting to wrest control of the Foundation from Eliot and hand over control to the Rosewaters of Pisquontuit based on the sanity clause in the Foundation's charter. Kilgore Trout, the science fiction writer that Eliot admires, is on the scene and reflects on Eliot's actions in the town of Rosewater.

The solution to his legal problems comes to Eliot in an epiphany, and he instructs his lawyer to draw up papers acknowledging his paternity to "every child in Rosewater County . . . regardless of blood type" (*God*, 190) that claims to have Eliot as their father. By legally making all of these children his sons and daughters, the control of the Foundation would pass to them instead of to the Rosewaters of Pisquontuit. As a final gesture, Eliot raises his tennis racket

"as though it were a magic wand" and says to "Let [the children's] names be Rosewater from this moment on. And tell them that their father loves them, no matter what they may turn out to be. And tell them . . . to be fruitful and multiply" (*God*, 190).

Eliot's sanity in this scene is ambiguous at best. Even Vonnegut seems unsure of Eliot's mental state, saying in an interview with Charles Reilly that "by this time, he's reached the stage of his recovery, or his seeming recovery" (225). Vonnegut's uncertainty could indicate that he believes Eliot's sanity has no bearing on the ending's meaning. Leonard Mustazza agrees with this analysis, writing that "In the end, . . . the question of Eliot's sanity is no longer relevant. . . . The gesture is all" (101), but critics Stanley Schatt and William Godshalk have contended that the scene and the uncertainty of Eliot's mental state make the ending bleak and ambivalent. Schatt writes that "Vonnegut, whether intentionally or not, has painted a very absurd picture. The saintlike Eliot is so ludicrous that he evokes laughter rather than devotion. It is very difficult, if not impossible, to determine whether he is sane at this point." If Eliot's final gesture is an empty one, then it becomes unclear as to whether Vonnegut adheres to and believes in the feasibility of the socialist line of thought that Eliot follows throughout the novel. A clue to how the ending should be interpreted possibly lies not with Eliot's admittedly somewhat comical final gesture (with a tennis racket for a magic wand and echoes of God's decree in Genesis ["The Whale," 41]), but with the appearance of Kilgore Trout beforehand.

It is generally accepted by critics that Kilgore Trout serves as Kurt Vonnegut's alter ego; he is a character that often voices Vonnegut's thoughts and feelings. Therefore, it stands to reason that Kilgore Trout's impression of the events of Rosewater should be analogous to Vonnegut's impression of things. Trout tells Eliot that "what [he] did in *Rosewater* County was far from insane" (*God*, 183) and that the lesson learned was "that people can use all the uncritical love they

can get" (186). It seems safe to say that if Trout doesn't view Eliot's actions as insane, nor does Vonnegut. Instead, Eliot's struggle for sanity could be attributed to his attempts to commit loving and truly selfless acts in an insane society that is dominated by the public separation of rich and poor and not focused on their private shared basic humanness. Reed states that "having the sanity to feel compassion in such a world is enough to drive a man insane" (169).

Reed's analysis of Eliot seems to be logical, yet James Lundquist classifies Eliot's actions as "self-delusion" and "absurd attempts at being a good samaritan," claiming they are an "indication of his insanity" (44). Lundquist isn't alone; Schatt writes that "Vonnegut presents formidable data that indicates that Eliot is insane, unable to distinguish illusion from reality" ("The World," 63). The key to understanding Eliot's sanity or lack thereof may lie in how Vonnegut has portrayed Eliot in the novel as compared to every other character. Eliot is surely not without his flaws (he's a drunk, "flamboyantly sick" [*God*, 23], incredibly overweight, guilt-ridden man), but Mustazza points out that nonetheless, "Vonnegut deliberately places [Eliot] within a milieu where no one is morally superior to him, however troubled he might be" (99). So while Eliot might appear to be insane on the surface, when compared to other characters (such as Norman Mushari and Senator Rosewater) and when Kilgore Trout's opinions are taken into account, Eliot arrives at the end of the novel a vindicated character. If Eliot is vindicated, that means that so too is his humanitarian philosophy, in other words, the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount. A private and personal attention to suffering (somewhat paradoxically deriving from private religious doctrine and public socialist ideology) remained for Vonnegut the only sane—if not always effective—solution to ills caused by public and impersonal forces.

Whether it is represented in Eliot's kindness towards the citizens of Rosewater or in *A Man Without a Country*, Vonnegut argues that a personal, private manifestation of socialist ideals is the best chance to make a positive difference in both

the public and private spheres. Indeed, as Vonnegut writes in *A Man Without a Country*, paraphrasing Eliot's words in *Rosewater*, "There's only one rule that I know of: Goddamn it, . . . you've got to be kind!" (107). Even then, it may be too little too late, however. Though he did not want to believe it, Vonnegut seemed to sense that his Old Left ideals—embattled, yet so alive in *Rosewater*—had become hopelessly outdated and nonfunctional just forty years later, writing that "I know now that there is not a chance in hell of America becoming humane and reasonable" (*A Man*, 71). By the end of his life Vonnegut may have outlived his own Old Left idealism, appearing as cynical and resigned as Eliot's *Rosewater* appeared insane.

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