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# *Cat's Cradle*: The Apocalypse of Human Thought

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Cat's Cradle: The Apocalypse of Human Thought  
Presented by Daniel Minguez  
To the ECLS Department  
On March 19<sup>th</sup> 2009

Kurt Vonnegut's Cat's Cradle:  
The Apocalypse of Thought

"I have a kitchen.  
But it is not a complete kitchen.  
I will not be truly gay  
Until I have a  
Dispose-all." (Vonnegut 78)

Poetry written in excrement, a dead cat, a burnt couch, and lipstick scrawled on a bedroom wall - in Kurt Vonnegut's Cat's Cradle these are the remnants of a party thrown by the philosophically hopeless, an apartment tenant named Sherman Krebs. The "nihilistic debauch," as Vonnegut describes it, is one of many constituents in the narrator's journey through expressions of philosophical possibility that constitute a continuum of human thought. The response that results in a rejection of nihilism by the narrator is typical to many of the encounters within this continuum: "I might have been vaguely inclined to dismiss the stone angel as meaningless, and to go from there to the meaninglessness of all. But after I saw what Krebs had done, in particular what he had done to my sweet cat, nihilism was not for me" (Vonnegut 78). Together these excerpts are a characterization and rejection of a line of intellectual speculation. This characterization-rejection structure is representative of the work Vonnegut's novel does as it moves to break the reader of a reliance on texts by questioning the sufficiency of any scripted postulation of truth.

These postulations, or texts as they shall be called, are the accompaniment on a multi-layered journey towards what is on the surface of the narrative, the end of the physical world, but what is in effect, a revealing of the failure of human thought in its reliance on texts. Cat's Cradle acts as a sort of "anti-text" in two ways: primarily the

novel explores the reliance of humanity on the “doctrines” of philosophy, science, religion, and other classic lines of intellectual speculation by reducing a supposition of their truth, along with a reliance on their claims as a means by which to live, to an absurdity. Secondly, and perhaps more subtly, Cat’s Cradle subjects itself to the same vortex of criticism based in the absurd, making a reliance upon itself as absurd as a reliance on the other texts.

To do this, the novel establishes a sort of continuum of human thought comprised of several representatives. These representatives indicate why the distinction of “human” thought is important. Existing in abstraction, thought by itself claims no thinker responsible for its failings. Texts as a product of human thought, however, implicates all people as guilty in an adherence to texts that are unreliable, and whose use has destructive potential. This continuum is therefore a way of calling the totality of doctrinal human thought by name.

The representatives of the continuum of human thought indicate what is meant here by texts: any scripted, or pre-scribed way to think or to live. In the novel they include Christianity; the pursuit of a Platonic truth; Nihilism; the made up religion of Bokononism, which is a sort of skepticism; and science in the broadest sense. Along with these texts the vehicles that express them are called into question: vehicles like poetry, music, visual and abstract art, architecture, sculpture and more than any of these and inherent to some of them: written and spoken language. This gamut of intellectual expressions and methodologies is constituted by forms that have been or are at risk of becoming doctrines that attempt to postulate a legitimate truth.

Alongside Cat’s Cradle’s continuum are the satiric critiques that elucidate its

constituents' inadequacy. John R. May uses the narrative of Cat's Cradle itself to describe this satiric mechanism:

“Vonnegut clearly does for his readers, or at least tries to do, what Sherman Krebbs does for Jonah in *Cat's Cradle*... Krebbs is, in the language of Bokonon, a "*wrang-wrang*,... a person who steers people away from a line of speculation by reducing that line, with the example of the *wrang-wrang's* own life, to an absurdity" (p. 59)...Judging from the vision of man that underlies the lines of speculation that Vonnegut would steer us from, we ought to acknowledge him as a member of our *karass*, but nevertheless one who serves it as a *wrang-wrang*." (May 25)

The "*karass*" that May mentions can be most easily translated from Vonnegut's world as "team." While May's parallel describes Cat's Cradle's satiric engine adequately, a method that reduces lines of speculation to an absurdity, it lacks the detail by which this is accomplished. As can be derived from May's statement, Cat's Cradle uses absurd imagery in some cases to ridicule a line of speculation, in others, to attack the vehicle of that line of speculation, most often this is language. These instances are frequently to comic effect. The way this absurdity accomplishes the reduction May describes is by moving beyond the level of absurdity that breaks a speculation down, and taking these lines of speculation to a place in which they become destructive to their own purposes. The novel takes clichés and idioms not only to the place where they are no longer appropriate, but where their use diminishes and disgraces the experience they attempt to describe. It takes speculation in the form of religion and philosophy to the place where they not only cease to be a source of understanding, but become a means for the dissolution of society. It takes science not only to a place where it ceases to be a method of observation and exploration, but becomes a method of annihilating the observed.

To prevent a reliance upon itself, Cat's Cradle turns to a modified version of the paradox of the liar which appears on the title page of the book:

“Nothing in this book is true.  
Live by the foma\* that make you brave  
and kind and healthy and happy.”

*The books of Bokonon. I: 5*

At the bottom of the page is a footnote: “\*Harmless untruths.”

To open the novel in this way may seem confusing to the reader, but the narrator describes how Vonnegut might expect us to treat his title page; “I passed quickly over the warning on the title page of *The First Book*: ‘Don’t be a fool! Close this book at once! It is nothing but *foma!*’” (Vonnegut 265). Passing over the title page is exactly what a reader of this fiction must do. Knowing that the book is fiction almost seems to make the warning superfluous at first glance, but having digested by the end, a long series of satiric critiques of human thought, this warning becomes the necessary first step towards breaking the reader of a reliance on the satirical methodology of Cat’s Cradle. This is accomplished by trapping the novel in a paradox as impossible to make sense of as a reliance on texts whose approximation of truth is questionable at best. With a remnant feeling of distrust in the very thoughts the novel critiqued, Cat’s Cradle then submits to its own vortex of destructive criticism, culminating in a distrust not only of itself, but of all texts as portals to truth, reducing a reliance on text to an absurdity.

It is important to note that Cat’s Cradle does not suggest that value does not exist. Nihilism is, after all, not for our narrator. Some sense of right and wrong or the value of life over death must be left to account for the value the narrator places on his cat, apartment, and work. It is only the *reliance* on texts that the novel breaks. It departs from old thought, and in its conclusion departs from its own thought. In the dissolution there is no text a reliance on which would allow its follower to wave the banner of truth.

## Part 1

### **Cat's Cradle: Allegorical exploration of the continuum of philosophical possibilities**

**Exposition: Locating the text in the western tradition and postulating a new prophet**

“Call me Jonah. My parents did, or nearly did. They called me John.  
Jonah-John-if I had been a Sam, I would have been a Jonah still-not because I  
have been unlucky for others, but because somebody or something has compelled me to  
be certain places at certain times, without fail.” (Vonnegut 1)

Cat's Cradle establishes the continuum of human thought by making constant reference to famous texts or doctrines, especially in the western tradition. The two texts that should come to mind in Vonnegut's exposition are The Holy Bible and Moby Dick. Vonnegut's first sentence echoes Melville's first line in the classic tale: “Call me Ishmael” (Melville 27). Using the prophet Jonah instead of Ishmael, Cat's Cradle also summons up images of a great whale from the biblical story in which Jonah spent three nights in the belly of a whale or, big fish. The fleshy quarry for Ahab turns out to be a transcendental quarry for humans in Cat's Cradle, whose end is foreshadowed in parallel to the end of Moby Dick:

“A sky-hawk that tauntingly had followed the main-truck downwards from its natural home among the stars, pecking at the flag, and incommoding Tashtego there; this bird now chanced to intercept its broad fluttering wing between the hammer and the wood; and simultaneously feeling that ethereal thrill, the submerged savage beneath, in his death-gasp, kept his hammer frozen there; and so the bird of heaven, with archangelic shrieks, and his imperial beak thrust upwards, and his whole captive form folded in the flag of Ahab, went down with the ship, which, like Satan, would not sink to hell till she had dragged a living part of heaven along with her, and helmeted herself with it.” (Melville 653).

Like the *Pequod* in Moby Dick, Cat's Cradle is capped with supposed articles of “heaven.” In Cat's Cradle however, heaven is not the realm of God, but as will be seen, heaven is the realm of truth that humans attempt to access with philosophy, science and religion. As Ahab's pursuit in Moby Dick ends in the destruction of the *Pequod* and all aboard, so does Cat's Cradle scuttle itself and all other texts that would pursue truth.

This scuttling takes place through a rendering of texts as unreliable portals to truth. The invocation of the prophet Jonah and his association with the narrator facilitates this process by establishing the narrator and his narration in relation to prophecy. The original prophet Jonah, who was swallowed by a whale, was deposited on the shores of Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, to warn the people to repent from their wicked ways. This new Jonah, or John, is up to something similar. The unreliability of his self proclamation however, both beckons the reader to listen, and distances the reader from his prophecy. The mock and all-too-willing prophet is as unreliable as any other text, which allows the narrative to break the reliance on texts through a reduction of them to absurdity and simultaneously be absurd, disallowing a reliance on itself. In this way Cat's Cradle's satiric vehicle elucidates the "wickedness" of human thought as the prophet Jonah, or John, visits various representatives of the continuum of human thought.

Satire is this Jonah's new prophetic technique. It co-opts the audience's laughter to validate its critique until having made a mockery of the very text the reader may have been clinging to for truth. The parallel between John and Jonah establishes the relationship between Cat's Cradle and its reader, a relationship constituted by a harbinger of chastisements (the novel) and the unwitting sinners (the readers). Unlike Jonah however, Cat's Cradle does not claim to represent God, or anything divine. It in fact claims the opposite "Nothing in this book is true." As an inverse Biblical prophet the narrator is set up not to claim God's truth, but to claim the untruth of all things.

This tying of the novel to the Bible and Moby Dick, performed by the first few words, serves the dual purpose of establishing the first representatives in the continuum of human thought, and postulating the narrator as prophet, here to elucidate the

wickedness of that continuum. The warning on the title page of the novel proclaims this new Jonah is a false prophet however, and that a reliance on his sermon would be a reliance on untruth. The narrator need not be outside that continuum for Cat's Cradle's purposes, the paradox of a chastisement from the guilty, along with many other paradoxes and failures within the novel, serves the purpose of making the novel as unreliable as the texts it critiques.

**Development: The Establishment of the Continuum and the Critique**

The continuum and the critique appear together in Cat's Cradle. The presentation of representative texts is also the critique of those texts in the absurdity of their presentation. That presentation is made more absurd by the tenacity by which characters cling to their inadequate texts, a fervent belief in which leads to death either by malice or stupidity. In the case of stupidity, the misuse of "Ice-Nine," (which sounds a lot like asinine) a substance created to keep Marines from wallowing in the mud, results in the freezing of the world. In the case of malice, religious intolerance leads to laws on the fictional island of San Lorenzo whereby individuals are put to death for their religious beliefs. In both cases the pursuit of science, law, and justice as texts by which to live are made absurd, and seem to destroy humans rather than advance human understanding.

Christianity is one of the first representatives in the continuum of human thought that Cat's Cradle attempts to reveal as inadequate to rely upon:

"In the autobiographical section of *The Books of Bokonon* he [Bokonon] writes a parable on the folly of pretending to discover, to understand:  
I once knew an Episcopalian lady in Newport, Rhode Island, who asked me to design and build a doghouse for her Great Dane. The lady claimed to understand God and His Ways of Working perfectly. She could not understand why anyone should be puzzled about what had been or about what was going to be.  
And yet, when I showed her a blueprint of the doghouse I proposed to build, she said to me, "I'm sorry, but I never could read one of those things."  
"Give it to your husband or your minister to pass on to God," I said, "and, when God finds a minute, I'm sure he'll explain this doghouse of mine in a way that even *you* can understand."

She fired me. I shall never forget her. She believed that God liked people in sailboats much better than He liked people in motorboats. She could not bear to look at a worm. When she saw a worm, she screamed. She was a fool, and so am I, and so is anyone who thinks he sees what God is Doing” (Vonnegut 4).

The passage is taken from *The Books of Bokkonon*, the fictional texts of the religion of Bokkononism. Locating the satirical critique in a fiction within a fiction allows Cat’s Cradle to make its critiques of historical philosophies or religions (like Christianity) directly on plausible but not factual circumstances or instances of that philosophy. The novel thus prevents itself from attempting to access truth, as another explicit social commentary may be accused of doing, by three times removing itself from the truth (Nature of the novel as fiction, the fiction within the fiction, and the warning at the beginning of the novel “Nothing in this book is true). Bokkononism in its nature as fiction and fiction weaving is extremely unreliable, yet the nature of its critiques rely on the plausibility of its imagined instances. Although Bokkononism uses made up words and is centered on a self-proclaimed “spurious holy-man”(Vonnegut 272) who is crass and speaks in confounding paradoxes, the critiques made through its lens use the language of the philosophy itself. They are logical albeit deriding, and as seen above, come to a concise point, in this case “anyone who thinks he sees what God is doing [is a fool].”

The universality of Cat’s Cradle’s critique seems questionable given the very limited scope of religions it pursues (Christianity and Bokkononism, which is not even real). Even though Cat’s Cradle is a text written for an American audience with American references (the narrator is Hoosier) the novel’s critiques are not exclusive. “Anyone who thinks he sees what God is doing” includes all theistic practices, as the speaker of this quote is Bokkonon and represents his own religion whose God is not the necessarily the Christian one.

Even if Bokonon's God is the Christian one, Cat's Cradle postulates a Christian minister whose ideas about doctrine are very different from mainstream Christianity:

"There was also a Christian minister, who was ready to take care of "Papa's" spiritual needs as they arose. He had a brass dinner bell and a hatbox with holes drilled in it, and a Bible, and a butcher knife-all laid out on the bench beside him.

He told me there was a live chicken in the hatbox. The chicken was quiet, he said, because he had fed it tranquilizers...

"He turned out to be an intelligent man. His doctorate, which he invited me to examine, was awarded by the Western Hemisphere University of the Bible of Little Rock, Arkansas. He made contact with the University through a classified ad in *Popular Mechanics* he told me. He said that the motto of the University had become his own, and that it explained the chicken and the butcher knife. The motto of the University was this: MAKE RELIGION LIVE!

He said that he had had to feel his way along with Christianity, since Catholicism and Protestantism had been outlawed along with Bokononism.

"So, if I am going to be a Christian under those conditions, I have to make up a lot of new stuff." (Vonnegut 214)

The grounding of this ministers "new stuff" in Christianity reveals an inherent weakness in all texts. The addendum "MAKE RELIGION LIVE" says little about chickens and butcher knives, but as it claims relation to Christianity it allows Christianity itself to be co-opted by this minister to legitimize his own practices. This easy adulteration of Christianity questions the legitimacy of the origins of mainstream Christianity, demonstrating how any part of doctrine can easily be made up, even with a hard copy of the Bible sitting next to the hat box and the butcher knife. This examination implies that one may rely upon an iteration of Christianity with the same confidence of its truth as one may rely upon their own guess at the workings of the universe. For the purposes of the people on the island in the description (San Lorenzo) this mode of being in Christianity is just as valid as any other iteration. It shows that Christianity is just as effective without the accepted dogma of the Catholic or Protestant church and renders the text as inconsequential to the enactment of Christianity itself, except as a novelty. In this way that text's strict following seems absurd.

Having clearly exemplified that Cat's Cradle makes its critique with religion,

there are two other major categories within the continuum that the novel steers its readers from: philosophy and science. One of philosophy's representatives in the continuum is the slightly amorphous line of speculation (if it may be called that) Nihilism. Nihilism, as a philosophy, has been shaped and commented upon by the likes of Ivan Turgenev, Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Martin Heidegger. A more well-known line of speculation within Western philosophy would be difficult to come by. By choosing Nihilism to represent philosophy in the continuum of human thought, Cat's Cradle also calls upon the names of all those philosophers who have commented upon it.

The embodiment of Nihilism is Sherman Krebs, the man responsible for the Nihilistic debauch in the introduction of this paper:

"During my trip to Ilium and points beyond...I let a poor poet named Sherman Krebs have my New York City apartment free...

Krebs was a bearded man, a platinum blond Jesus with spaniel eyes. He was no close friend of mine. I had met him at a cocktail party where he presented himself as National Chairman of Poets and Painters for Immediate Nuclear War. He begged for shelter, not necessarily bomb proof, and it happened that I had some" (Vonnegut 77).

Though the mixing of religious symbols and nihilistic philosophy may seem incongruous, it also moves to reduce the two to a common denominator, unreliable texts. Postulating a nihilist as a "platinum blond Jesus" links a sort of adulterated image of salvation (in Christ) to Nihilism, and postulates these texts as a supposed salvation in that they offer passage to truth or understanding. The "platinum blonde" and "spaniel eyes" describe an attractive person who is not only a person, but a symbol for Nihilism. The novel postulates that the attractive hope of salvation also surrounds philosophical pursuits of truth. As Cat's Cradle would have it, no such salvation is legitimate, and the attraction is a fatal one. As a stand-in for a philosopher, Krebs makes the pursuit of metaphysics out to be an irreverent and destructive force as evidenced by the results of his debauch.

The short chapter on Krebs and Nihilism turns philosophy into an excuse to violate the property and loved ones of the narrator.

Another philosophical representative is addressed in the form of the famous Cartesian statement “I think therefore I am.” Cat’s Cradle adds the addendum “I think therefore I am, therefore I am photographable” (Vonnegut 151). The one liner takes the token phrase of Cartesian thought and ties it to a practical and physical end: being photographable. The statement of this physical end ignores the metaphysical value of the Cartesian statement and reduces it to a cliché. In this way philosophy also becomes a text used in normative conversation, not as an introduction of fertile new thought, but the end of a thought that serves as a ready-made accessory in the speaker’s vocabulary. This accessory serves as pedantic prefix onto which the speaker attaches, “I am photographable.” The phrase alienates the reader and truncates the philosophical conversation by connecting the metaphysical to the physical possibility of the speaker’s photograph-ability. In this instance the philosophical text discourages thought, becoming counter productive to its truth pursuing intent by moving the realm of the metaphysical to the physical, and in the incongruity forces the temporary abandonment of metaphysical thought.

Science within Cat’s Cradle constitutes a relatively larger part of the continuum than philosophy. The faith in the efficacy and truth of science within the novel is the easiest faith to fall into. Nearly every character is a part of the cult and the mass blind following of the text of Science receives a proportionately massive reduction to absurdity:

“I’m sick of people misunderstanding what a scientist is, what a scientist does...Here and shockingly few other places in this country, men are paid to increase knowledge, to work toward no end but that.”

“That’s very generous of General Forge and Foundry Company.”

“Nothing generous about it. New knowledge is the most valuable commodity on earth. The more truth we have to work with, the richer we become.” (Vonnegut 40)

The narrator’s conversation with the scientist connects scientific knowledge with truth, and the action of a scientist with the pursuit of that truth. In this discussion of science an exploration of the problem of using texts to form scripted ways of being forms. Once a text, like science, is established as truthful and valid, it demands its precise following if any subsequent statement made in the same conversation is also to be true and valid. To not follow the text would be to claim that its truth is inconsequential, or that the subsequent statements are not true, thus breaking the user of their reliance upon that text. Of course, Cat’s Cradle attempts to treat texts in both ways, that they are neither true, nor that it would matter if they were true. The danger of accepting the opposite for those incapable of following the text is that the text itself becomes a dead end of thought, turning off that individual to a thinking about the world and leading to understanding it merely as magic, as these two excerpts from the text show:

“At her crisp touch, lights twinkled, wheels turned, flasks bubbled, bells rang.

“Magic,” Declared Miss Pefko.

“I’m sorry to hear a member of the Laboratory family using that brackish, medieval word,” said Dr. Breed. “Every one of those exhibits explains itself. They’re designed so as *not* to be mystifying. They’re the very antithesis of magic.”

“The very what of magic?”

“The exact opposite of magic.”

“You couldn’t prove it by me.”

Dr. Breed looked just a little peeved. “well” he said, “we don’t *want* to mystify. At least give us credit for that.” (Vonnegut 36)

“You and Hoenikker, you teach them science.”

“Yessir, we will,” I promised.

“Science is magic that works.” (Vonnegut 218)

While the scientists within Cat’s Cradle disdain the use of the word magic, it surrounds the discussion of science by the other characters, and occurs in other locations in the book. Science’s affiliation with the mystical, strips it of its claim to truth and

rationality. As seen in Dr. Breed's reaction to Miss Pefko the scientists feel this is a misrepresentation of their pursuit. Yet even Dr. Breed cannot avoid the use of the word when recognizing how other people see scientists as he described Dr. Hoenikker, one of the creators of the atom bomb: "They looked upon him as a sort of magician who could make America invincible with a wave of his wand" (Vonnegut 42). Casting science in the terms of magic reduces, not science, but a reliance upon science as something that one so poorly understands to an absurdity. The end of the world is brought about in the novel by the use of science's most destructive creation by someone who did not understand its power or implications, but treated it like a cure-all for his particular problem. While this consequence seems purely physical, Cat's Cradle concerns itself with the adequacy of the truth, if it is truth, that science discovers:

"Dr. Breed keeps telling me the main thing with Dr. Hoenikker was truth."

"You don't seem to agree."

"I don't know whether I agree or not. I just have trouble understanding how truth, all by itself, could be enough for a person" (Vonnegut 54).

The discussions of religion and philosophy in Cat's Cradle state that a strict adherence to one or the other is not actually a good way to account for being. In this case, the idea that even if a line of speculation could ascertain the truth, it may not be enough to satisfy a person. Ms. Pefko's sentiment amounts to a refutation of an adherence to a line of speculation as a meaningful way to account for being by questioning satisfaction derived from such an activity.

Religion, philosophy, and science thus constitute the major categories of the continuum of human thought within Cat's Cradle. The suspicion of their inadequacy suspicion arises from an exposure of the inadequacy of the content of the texts themselves to account for truth and thus the unreliability of their use in forming a script

to follow as a means of being in the world. Furthermore the suspicion is exacerbated with the introduction of the sentiment that truth may not be enough for a person, that somehow even complete knowledge of some-thing might fail to satisfy the desire that spurs its pursuit. Suddenly the solution postulated by the novel to "live by the foma [harmless untruths] that make you brave and kind and healthy and happy" seems plausible, but the Novel intends to break the reader of a reliance upon that suggestion as well.

## **Part 2**

### **Cat's Cradle: The application of "The Paradox of the liar" in its own self-incrimination**

Lest Cat's Cradle be taken as some sort of new instantiation of a methodology of being in the world by following the suggestion on the title page, the novel adopts a stance as an insolvable philosophical conundrum, and thus irreconcilable as truth. The narrative uses what is known as "The Paradox of the Liar" to break the reader of a dependency on Cat's Cradle itself. Shimon Sandbank has already eloquently done the work of making a fairly obvious connection between Cat's Cradle and "The Paradox of the Liar" in an essay in which he attempts to use Vonnegut's work to elucidate Kafka's:

"But Vonnegut outdoes Kafka (and also comes short of him, as I shall argue) by making self-cancellation an integral, thematic ingredient of the very "religion" he devises. This paradoxical strategy precedes the narrative itself: the first motto on the back of the title page, "Nothing in this book is true," is the logical conundrum known as the Paradox of the Liar. If it is true, it is false; if false, true. If the narrator is telling the truth in saying that nothing in this book is true, these words too are not true. Thus, he is both telling the truth and lying. Incidentally, he is also canceling his second motto, a quotation from "The Books of Bokonon." "Live by the foma [harmless untruths] that makes you brave and kind and healthy and happy." If nothing in this book is true, this commendation of un-truth is also untrue" (Sandbank 261).

Sandbank shows that "The Paradox of the Liar" works to place Cat's Cradle in the realm of truth and falsity simultaneously. Such a location both draws the reader to the novel's critiques and casts the reader away from a reliance upon them. Thus "The

Paradox of the Liar” operates not to disclaim the historical accuracy of the novel, that is unnecessary, instead it works to challenge the methodology of the novel itself, the constant derision of metaphysical-religious inquiry, as a valid text to rely upon as a way of being in the world. Yet there is a semantic problem in Sandbank’s argument, the quote from “The Books of Bokonon” is not a statement, and therefore cannot even be called untrue. The statement is an imperative, and neither an imperative nor an interrogative phrase cannot be called untrue, as they assert nothing, but instead demands something to be done in response. What is demanded by Cat’s Cradle is the cessation of a reliance on text, what comes next, must come from the reader him or herself. Should what comes of the reader be new thought, to follow the suggestion of thinking anew is in fact to follow no script at all, as to think is an inherent part of human being, and to do otherwise (to follow a script or cease to think, both have the same effect) would constitute the apocalypse of human thought, that is to say, a process whose end is destruction. Cat’s Cradle takes the process of script building and following to its end result, stale language and dead bodies.

### **Part 3**

#### **Cat’s Cradle: A satiric critique of the vehicles of thought - conventional language**

The narrator encounters a man named Franklin Hoenikker, the supposed son of one of the fathers of the Atom bomb. Frank is the centerpiece of Cat’s Cradle’s critique on the primary vehicle of texts, language:

“Poor Frank has had almost no experience in talking to anyone...hoping to be hearty and persuasive he said tinny things to me, things like, ‘I like the cut of your jib!’ and I want to talk cold turkey to you, man to man!’ And he took me down to what he called his ‘den’ in order that we might, ‘...call a spade a spade, and let the chips fall where they may.’” (Vonnegut 194).

Frank embodies both the reliance on the script within language and the

inadequacies of language. These scripts are the clichés and idioms represented in Frank's conversation with the narrator, his heavy reliance upon them shows that any one of them contains no inherent meaning. Along with Frank's bombardment of one-liners are a series of other clichés, idioms, or failed attempts to use the vehicle of language:

"They serve science, too," Dr. Breed testified, "even though they may not understand a word of it. God bless them, every one!" – Asa Breed referring to the girl pool (38)

"Sometimes I think that's the trouble with the world: too many people in high places who are stone-cold dead." Marvin Breed (33)

"If you wish to study a granfalloon,  
Just remove the skin of a toy balloon." –Bokonon (92)

"Yes. The pot of gold at the end of the rainbow is ours." Minton (99)

At best these peculiar phrases recapitulate the sentiment of the chapters that they end. They do this however, out of a total reliance on the prose that precedes them. The phrase "God bless them, every one!" especially makes no sense without being immediately preceded by some narrative, and in this case actually diminishes that narrative by reducing it to an invocation of God to intervene on the behest of science. The incongruity flows naturally and excitedly from Dr. Breed however, whose use of the language betrays his agenda to steer away from mysticism. This phrase and the other one-line finales serve to truncate their chapters, not as the concluding sentence would in a well-formed paragraph, but as an alien phrase that disrupts the flow of thought within the chapter. Their prevalent use throughout the Novel mimics a reliance upon them, but it is a reliance that diminishes the text. As though Cat's Cradle was an example of what not to do, it breaks the reliance upon scripts within language by exposing the diminishment they cause within the novel. This critique continues by mocking the literary form of poetry which attempts to, like clichés, capture a sentiment, but fails.

The Nihilist Krebs was a poet who wrote in excrement. What this says about the

nature of his poetry, which appeared in the beginning of this paper, is less than flattering. The concatenation of lines in Krebbs poetry culminates in a sort of meaninglessness that can perhaps be read as an attack on modern or abstract literary forms. Yet Cat's Cradle attempts to reach farther than any particular genre, the chapter titled: "On the Poet's Celebration of his First Boko-Maru" contains a mockery which references more mainstream literary expressions:

"These are not Bokonon's words. They are mine.

Sweet wraith,  
 Invisible mist of...  
 I am-  
 My Soul-  
 Wraith lovesick o'erlong,  
 O'erlong alone:  
 Wouldst another sweet soul meet?  
 Long have I  
 Advised thee ill  
 As to where two souls  
 Might tryst.  
 My soles, my soles!  
 My soul, my soul,  
 Go there,  
 Sweet soul;  
 Be kissed.  
 Mmmmmmm."  
 (Vonnegut 206)

The title of this chapter, which is perhaps the title of this poem, is a play off of the meditative form. Some famous meditative titles include, "On the nature of things" by Lucretius and "On the Poet's Soul" in Plato's republic. By invoking the meditative form Cat's Cradle invokes the methodology used by some of the most cherished minds of Western philosophy. The novel places this poem as a stand in for absolutely elementary articles of a classical education, the platonic and subsequent explorations of truth. This stand in uses poetic form to give birth to incomprehensible and incongruous formulations of language. The use of archaic words like "wraith" and constructions liked "wouldst" and "o'erlong" in this poem are anachronisms that contribute to the unintelligibility of the

poem. Though they aggrandize the poetry, they render it out of touch with modern language. This exemplifies following what has so far been called the scripts within language. Older celebrated poetry may use constructions like “o’erlong,” that is sensible within their historical context. This poet’s use of them is like an attempt at resurrecting an old verse form that is out of step with the way ideas are communicated in modern time. In this way following the script of an old poem results in a failed way to communicate in a contemporary setting. This failure exposes the inability of language to maintain meaning through time, making a reliance upon language through time absurd. The words that retain their meaning however can still be used improperly or incongruously, which makes relying upon written texts difficult. “Wraith” for example opens the poetry by conjuring an image of a ghost of someone past away, a ghost that is love sick, yet seeks the physical sexual interaction of the living. There are a number of problems with this premise. First, the narrator admits that he has advised the wraith ill in his pursuits, but that a living man could advise a dead man about how to operate sexually in the after life or somehow reconnect with the living world is ridiculous to begin with. The idea that a ghost would have sex at all violates the spiritual nature of ghosts by adding to it a corporeal element that has clearly already passed away. This poem is an example of what Rober W. Uphaus calls a reduction in Cat’s Cradle: “What we see repeatedly in Vonnegut’s fiction is individual action reduced to sham theatricality-to gestures without ultimate significance but desperately laden with personal meaning” (Uphaus 168). The intimate mingling of souls seems like something “laden with personal meaning” but a it is a futile pursuit for the ghost. The narrator has no pity however as his expression of corporeal satisfaction “Mmmmmmm,” closes the poem addressed to the

love-sick wraith. It is a poem that tries to express the excellence of Boko-Marú, but reduces it to a sham through its reliance on language.

In the clichés, the idioms, and the poetry, language becomes a bastion for empty phrases and cruel destructive slurs that take the form of art, but reduce the meaning of an event to an expression of “no ultimate significance.” In the narrator’s poem he confuses the soul of being with the sole of the foot. The one soul feels as the feet do and in their shared experience meaning beyond the physical and pursuit thereof, becomes a joke.

**Part 4:  
The Cataclysmic Finale of Cat’s Cradle and the Apocalypse of Reliance:**

The culminating gesture of Cat’s Cradle is a final attempt to break the reader of a reliance upon texts. To understand it, one must have a purchase on the vehicle that has taken the narrator from the beginning of the book to the end. That vehicle is the fiction weaving religion of Bokononism. This passage is paramount for the sake of the discussion to come:

“We Bokononists believe that humanity is organized into teams, teams that do God’s Will without ever discovering what they are doing. Such a team is called a *karass* by Bokonon, and the instrument, the *kan-kan*, that brought me into my own particular *karass* was the book I never finished, the book to be called *The day the World Ended.*”  
(Vonnegut 2).

Knowing now what a *Karass* is, and what the narrator has been trying to accomplish throughout the narrative of the book, we can look at the final moment of the novel in which the scientifically created “Ice-Nine” has been dropped into the ocean, freezing the whole world over, leaving few people alive. The narrator and one of his last few companions exchange these words:

“I know now what my *karass* has been up to, Newt. It’s been working night and day for maybe half a million years to get me up that mountain.’ I wagged my head and nearly wept. “But what, for the love of God, is supposed to be in my hands?”

I looked out of the car window blindly as I asked that, so blindly that I went more than a mile before realizing that I had looked into the eyes of an old Negro man, a living colored man, who was sitting by the side of the road.

And then I slowed down. And then I stopped. I covered my eyes.

“What’s the matter?” asked Newt.

“I saw Bokonon back there” (Vonnegut 286)

...

“Bokonon?”

“Yes?”

“May I ask what you’re thinking?”

“I am thinking, young man, about the final sentence for *The Books of Bokonon*. The time for the final sentence has come.”

“Any luck?”

He shrugged and handed me a piece of paper.

This is what I read:

“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 287)

Bokonon’s final sentence is also Cat’s Cradle’s final sentence. It is also the answer to the narrator’s question about what he is supposed to be holding as he climbs Mt. McCabe, “a history of human stupidity.” As the reader reads the last lines of Cat’s Cradle he or she comes to the realization that they are holding that book, a history of human stupidity, which at the end proclaims itself as such a history by having shown humanity’s attempts to grasp its world by blindly following the texts of religion, philosophy, science, and language. The termination of the novel holds within it the implication that the book ends because the narrator has done exactly what Bokonon would have done if he was able. The narrator has described a movement from philosophy, religion, science, and pursuit of truth - to Bokononism, magic and a valorization of lies. This movement as a history Bokonon calls stupid, but Cat’s Cradle’s treatment of the texts within itself comprises a gesture that it is a reliance on the use of texts, of scripts that confine ways of thinking and being in the world, that is in fact stupid, as those texts are clearly laden with falsities and inadequacies. The narrative shouts that

texts are not enough to rely upon, even if they could discover it, saying, “I just have trouble understanding how truth, all by itself, could be enough for a person” (Vonnegut 54).

Cat's Cradle satirically reveals that the continuum of human thought and its texts do not adequately access the truth. Yet the text itself often valorizes untruth in its fiction weaving religion of Bokononism. What the novel critiques is the reliance upon these texts as a means to form a scripted way of being within the world, as these scripts often lead to conflict and subsequent destruction. This destruction is evinced in the novel by bad poetry, religious killings, desecrations of property, and the destruction of the Earth as an environment that supports life. The reduction of those texts to an absurdity with absurd consequences, communicates an over exaggeration of plausible employments of real texts in the continuum of human thought. It is an exaggeration that breaks the reader of a reliance upon texts as portals to truth by revealing the uncertainty of their origins and their contents as well as the failure of any one to account for the totality of being. By exposing this inadequacy Cat's Cradle also exposes the inadequacy of any scripted way of being formed from these flawed doctrines. Finally it traps itself in a paradox that refuses to allow the reader to claim the validity of the novel and form another script to follow. The suicide the narrator enacts that ends the writing of his narrative comes at the point in the novel where the continuum of human thought has been thoroughly deemed unreliable, and so the narrative seeks oblivion for itself, to become just as un-followable, as unreliable, as any text it sought to render so.

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