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# Marginally Speaking: A Collection of Modernist and Post-Modernist Texts

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Several years ago, I attended a lecture by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., entitled "How to get a job like mine." The author informed members of the audience who might be searching for career advice that they would be disappointed; all his lectures shared the same title, and almost never related to vocational paths. Instead, he talked about the importance of belonging to a community—a church, reading group, model train club. The purpose of the group was irrelevant; whether or not you shared their philosophy was irrelevant. What mattered was human contact.

Later that day, Vonnegut signed books at another venue. I stood in the long line, which slithered around the room, out into the hallway, and down the stairs, a worn hardback copy of Breakfast of Champions in my hand. Reaching the front of the line, I handed the book to the author, muttering some vaguely slavish praise about hours of happiness and life-changing words, becoming both tongue-tied and inane in the presence of this man whose work I'd greedily absorbed and worshipped throughout my high school years. The slavish inanities he was used to, I imagine. But he became puzzled when I asked him to sign the book not on the title page, but on page 295, in the space below the text's final word, which is "ETC.", hand-drawn in letters two inches tall. He glanced at me over the top of his glasses, doubtful. "You know, it won't be worth as much."

"That's all right, if you don't mind signing it there," I answered.

He shrugged. "Makes no difference to me. After all, it's your book."

And so it is. With its misplaced signature, the book fits nicely with the rest of my collection, volumes whose financial worth is marginal, whose condition hasn't been mint in years, and to which I cling like a miser. My first copy of Breakfast of Champions, for instance, was a paperback that came not from a bookstore, but from the GoodWill on Forest Park Blvd. I bought it along with a copy of Slaughterhouse Five; the books were 50 cents each. For the next few years, I haunted that stretch of road, home to several thrift stores. In my younger mind, I envisioned myself romantically rescuing books whose previous owners

who had cruelly cast them adrift. My copy of Slaughterhouse Five, for instance, has illegible notations, next to meticulously underlined passages, apparently managed using a ruler. The name in the front of the book is Dianne C. Wozniak. What made her part with the work, I remember wondering. What was the final straw? Were her paperbacks taking up too much space in the basement? Did her husband/mother/father rail at all her "junk" crowding the house? Did she tearfully part with the book, or disdainfully toss it into the donation box, a castoff from a Current Authors course that she never liked anyway? Her loss, my gain. And if I could only read her writing, I would love to quibble with her marginal notes. Via the thrift stores, I began building my collection, including several texts whose covers had been ripped off, signs of accounting skullduggery in some forgotten bookstore. These waifs, rescued from the bargain section, mean more to me than my pristine, hardback copies of Vonnegut's Timequake or Thomas Pyncon's Mason & Dixon, both purchased new from dust-free shelves, for the used texts connect me with a community of readers, if only through the conversational medium of marginalia.

That illusory connection—a feeling of attachment to people whose names I know only from scrawlings on title pages; whose personalities I must intuit from their doodles, their preferred highlighter color, or whether they underline or bracket passages; who may even be long dead—I experience as a modern dilemma: I cling to the connection however thin or frail. Perhaps this partially explains my attachment to modern and post-modern texts.

In the modernists, one finds unremitting pessimism coupled with unreasonable optimism. Joseph Conrad, for example, posits that at the end of days, "when the last aqueduct shall have crumbled to pieces, the last airship fallen to the ground" there will still be one person, the artist, who will attempt to "interpret the ultimate experience of mankind in terms of his own temperament" (On Fiction 84). And while for a moment, Conrad "doubt[s] the heroism of the hearers," he never for a moment questions the artist for whom "silence is like death." Given a "group alive" who will listen, the artist can't help but extend his voice to them, to perform the "rescue work" of human contact, taking his readers out of the world of "perishable activity into the light of imperishable consciousness" (84).

For the modernists, then, and in my unique reading, even for the post-moderns, there is frequently this saving grace of human connection. Let everything else fail—religion, government, philosophy, all the

great theological and sociological institutions—and there will still be a need to speak, and to listen. William Faulkner echoes Conrad in his Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech, looking not for the sound of man's "puny inexhaustible voice, still talking," on the "last red and dying evening" of humanity's existence, but for a poet's voice that "need not merely be the record of man, it can be one of the props, the pillars to help him endure and prevail."

Why would anyone cast such props aside, I wonder? Why, for example, did David Zorensky, who like Faulkner's character Quentin Compson attended Yale, but unlike the suicidal Quentin survived to later live in Ladue, abandon Soldier's Pay, New Orlean's Sketches, and The Faulkner-Cowley File? I feel a bond with this man I've never met, for somehow I've come to own three valuable items from what I imagine to be Mr. Zorensky's once vast Faulkner library.

I flatter myself that my own modern and post-modern collection is also vast, for it includes texts from all of the classic, high modern authors, as well as less canonical writers, and both general and specific literary criticism. I have, for instance, the collected poems of Yeats, Eliot, and Frost, as well as extensive selections from Virginia Woolf and D. H. Lawrence, and almost everything Joseph Conrad and William Faulkner published. In addition, I have selections from the works of James Joyce, Gertrude Stein, Wallace Stevens, Ernest Hemingway, John Dos Passos, Jean Toomer, Flannery O'Connor, and William Carlos Williams. The moderns have led me to the post-moderns, who both react against and yet eventually echo their literary predecessors. My post-modern collection samples liberally from Vonegutt, Jr., in addition to containing works by Toni Morrison, Thomas Pynchon, Walker Percy, Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Mario Vargos Llosa.

Some of these texts I obtained new from bookstores, but my favorite finds are always those that have a story behind them. For instance, three of my favorite works are Faulkner, Mississippi, Creating Faulkner's Reputation, and Faulkner and Ideology. None are particularly influential or challenging, though they contain valuable perspectives. Rather, these are remainders I salvaged from Square Books in Oxford, Mississippi, Faulkner's longtime home and the basis for Faulkner's Jefferson, Mississippi, the seat of his fictional world, Yoknapatawpha County. Square Books sits on the corner of Oxford's square, in the shadows of the old courthouse which figures so prominently in novels such as Light in August and Intruder in the Dust.. When I

acquired them, I imagined a connection with the author in whose shadow I've felt my own intellectual life residing for many years.

Other favorites cast both an impressive intellectual shadow, and a physical one. My favorite copy of Joseph Conrad's Nostromo, though I own three, is a somewhat garish, impossibly big, boxed edition. With large silver letters spelling out the title along the light blue spine, the book apparently descends from the "taller is better" school. The pages seem to have received no attention from the previous owner, a member of The Heritage Club, whose newsletter, The Sandglass, remains tucked neatly in the book's middle. From it, I learn that the illustrations for the volume will "repay careful study" for they "have a fineness and delicacy of detail never surpassed in Heritage Club history." This book appeals to my imagination, for I envision it sitting in a conspicuous place on a built-in bookshelf in some distant living room, speaking to a certain level of high culture and severe respectability. Now it sits on my shelf, speaking to something rather different.

If that edition of Nostromo connects me to living rooms of the past and their occupants, another copy connects me to myself. The work practically drowns in multi-colored sticky tabs, protruding from its pages, which are themselves pockmarked with my own illegible script—a conversation that I carry on with myself, every time I pick up the book anew.

Picking up the signed Vonnegut again, I discover that it once belonged to the Carpenter Branch of the St. Louis Library, at 3309 S. Grand Blvd. The proof is a stamp, in black ink, on the title page. This raises, rather than diminishes, the book's value in my eyes, for I now remember that I purchased it at the St. Louis Book fair, back when it was held on the parking lot of the Clayton Famous-Barr, now an extension of Washington University's own book collection. So this book, like so many of my other texts, had a life before me. And now it sits on a shelf in my bedroom, in a place of honor, a shabby volume in marginal condition, wearing a cellophane dust jacket, ink-stamped, with an out-of-place signature, its market value forever compromised, an invaluable part of my financially valueless collection.

Unless, that is, one counts the value of the community in which I, along with my collection, live—one that includes the long-lost member of the The Heritage Club; David Zorensky, who attended Yale and lived in Ladue; an imaginary William Faulkner whose paths I followed in Oxford; and a very real Kurt Vonnegut, who one day shrugged and said, "Makes no difference to me. After all, it's your book."