

I. Preface

People who have been exposed to overwhelmingly horrible events such as physical violence, sexual abuse, rape, the death of a loved one, military combat, concentration camps, accidents, natural or man-made disasters, very often have great difficulties afterwards to cope with these experiences and to go on living as they used to. They find themselves unable to speak about what has happened to them but on the other hand, they are forced to re-experience the event over and over again in flashbacks or nightmares without any chance of intervening. This paradox is the central characteristic of psychological trauma.

This term paper deals with one of the most 'popular' and well-examined traumas, namely war trauma, and its representation in Kurt Vonnegut's World War II novel *Slaughterhouse-Five*. The paper is structured in the following way:

In the first – theoretical – part, I describe the functioning of the memory system and the emergence of a traumatic memory by mainly focusing on the theories of Pierre Janet and Sigmund Freud, who were the first to study the nature of trauma. Subsequently, I am going to present the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, a mental disorder traumatized people are very likely to develop.

The second part will deal with the novel *Slaughterhouse-Five* and the problem of how to write about something unspeakable. In order to show in what way Vonnegut solves this problem, I first want to enlarge on the story told in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Afterwards, I am going to discuss the narrative technique and the novel's structure, by means of which the trauma is conveyed to the reader.

The paper closes with a conclusion, in which the main results will be summarized and discussed.

II. The Concept of Trauma

II.1. Memory Processing and the Fixation of Trauma

Pierre Janet (1859-1947) , a French philosophy professor and psychologist working with hysterical patients at the Salpêtrière in Paris, is said to be the first to have systematically studied the functioning of the memory system and the psychological reactions to traumatic events.¹ In his book *L'Automatisme Psychologique*, published in 1889, Janet introduced the basic principles of memory processing and the engraving of trauma, which are as relevant today as they were then and which have provided the framework for most subsequent psychological studies in that field.

Janet claimed that the two basic functions of the memory system are the life-long processing of every new sensation and the categorization and integration of all incoming data into flexible meaning schemes, which have been formed on the basis of previously integrated memories. These adaptations take place automatically, i.e. without much conscious awareness, therefore they are called *automatisme*. For the meaning schemes, in which memories are automatically stored, Janet coined the word *subconscient*. Thus, the subconscious is a kind of guideline for the individual to help him/her in interacting with the surrounding world. Once adapted into existing schemes, a particular memory is very difficult to decode again, because it is transformed by and integrated with other memories, i.e. it becomes distorted. According to Janet, in a healthy person's memory system, an experience is stored with all its psychological facets, such as sensations, emotions, thoughts and actions, and it is under voluntary control. The most crucial characteristic of normal memory is that memories of past events can be reproduced in language: They form a story that is integrated in the person's life story, they have a meaning attached to them and can be evaluated. Thus, normal memory is also called narrative memory. However, if an experience is especially frightening, it may not fit into any of the existing meaning schemes. Therefore it has to be stored differently, separate from conscious awareness and voluntary control. Janet called this reaction to a traumatic event *désagrégation*. The failure to integrate traumatic experiences into cognitive schemes and the formation of a traumatic memory that is dissociated from normal narrative memory results in the emergence of *idées fixes*. Although the traumatized person is not consciously aware of these subconscious fixed ideas, they continue to influence his/her perceptions, states and behaviour. Usually, they become accessible under hypnosis, as Janet discovered when treating his hysterical patients.

¹Cf. van der Kolk/ van der Hart, "The Intrusive Past" and "Pierre Janet and the Breakdown of

In *Studien über Hysterie*, first published in 1895, Freud and Breuer took up Janet's concept of trauma as the origin of hysterical phenomena. They defined trauma as an event "welches die peinlichen Affekte des Schreckens, der Angst, der Scham, des psychischen Schmerzes hervorruft, und es hängt begreiflicherweise von der Empfindlichkeit des betroffenen Menschen [...] ab, ob das Erlebnis als Trauma zur Geltung kommt."² Because of its painful quality, the traumatized person wants to forget the traumatic event and therefore pushes it out of conscious awareness, i.e. represses it.³ It is the memory of the trauma itself that causes the hysterical attacks, the patient then experiences the trauma again in its full emotional impact and with unaltered vividness. According to Freud and Breuer, the reason for this lies in the fact that in the moment of trauma, the person fails to react appropriately: he/she fails to work off his/her emotions and consequently, the memory remains emotionally charged.⁴ Furthermore, when repressing it, the person also fails to associate the memory of the traumatic event with other memories, for example of the rescue from the dangerous situation. Therefore, the traumatic memory cannot be corrected, changed or distorted, which is normally the case when a memory is put into context.⁵ Freud and Breuer explained the curious fact that, when in a normal psychic state, their patients were unable to remember the traumatic event they relived in their hysterical attacks with the existence of two types of memory activity: conscious and unconscious ("bewußt und unbewußt"). They called this "Spaltung der Psyche" and claimed: "[...] diese unterbewußten Vorstellungen [sind] auch durch das bewußte Denken nicht zu beeinflussen und nicht zu korrigieren."⁶ Thus, in hysteric persons, two psychic groups can be found, which co-exist without influencing each other. A hysteric attack can be triggered by stimulating a hysterogenic zone or through an event that resembles the traumatic one.⁷ Or, as Mardi Horowitz puts it: "persons with hysterical symptoms actually suffer from reminiscences because they cannot remember and they cannot *not* remember. When they try to remember, they have either partial amnesia or an overwhelming uncontrolled recollection. And when they try not to remember, they have intrusive 'breakthroughs' such as unbidden images."⁸ In *Jenseits des Lustprinzips* (1920), Freud modified his theory of the active repression of unwelcome memories and introduced the concept of a "protective

Adaptation in Psychological Trauma" (see also for the following remarks on Janet)

2S. Freud/ J. Breuer, *Studien über Hysterie*, p.9

3Cf. *ibid.*, p.13

4Cf. *ibid.*, p.11

5Cf. *ibid.*, pp.11-12

6*Ibid.*, p.182

7Cf. *ibid.*, pp.17-18

shield“ (“Reizschutz“) to control the intake of external stimuli and to protect the organism from being confronted with too many or inappropriate stimuli. Exposure to traumatic experiences can break this protection mechanism if the event is experienced as life-threatening and extremely terrible.⁹ The person feels paralysed and thus, he/she is not able to develop fear, which is the emergency mechanism of the protection system to ward off extreme stimuli. Freud viewed the repetition compulsion and the traumatic nightmares, in which his patients relived the moment of terror over and over again, as the attempt to make up for the failure of the protective shield in the moment of trauma. In other words, for him, the function of repetition is the attempt to develop the fear that was lacking in the actual moment and if this attempt is successful, it is finally possible to react appropriately and consequently to deal with the experience.¹⁰

Mardi Horowitz, a contemporary psychiatrist, developed a theory of memory processing similar to Janet's: He postulates a “completion principle“ which “summarizes the human mind's intrinsic ability to continue to process new information in order to bring up to date the inner schemata of the self and the world.“¹¹ Traumatic events cannot be integrated into this “cognitive map“, therefore they are stored in a special kind of “active memory“, which “has an intrinsic tendency to repeat the representation of contents.“¹² Like Freud, Horowitz views repetition as the attempt to motivate the mind's completion tendency to create a new mental scheme, in which the memory of the traumatic event can be assimilated. Only then does the repetition cease and the memory can be understood and dealt with.

To sum up, there seems to be a broad agreement among early as well as contemporary psychologists regarding the active and constructive quality of memory processing and the existence of mental schemes, according to which incoming sensations are categorized and in which memories are stored. These schemes form a map that helps the individual to cope with different situations, interactions with the environment and sensations he/she encounters by making him/her able to evaluate and attach meaning to them. Experiences of overwhelming terror that do not fit into any of these cognitive schemes have to be stored differently, separate from conscious awareness. Opinions differ whether this is a temporary or a permanent state.

8M. Horowitz, *Stress Response Syndromes*, pp. 87-88

9Cf. Freud, *Jenseits des Lustprinzips*, p.29

10Cf. *ibid.*, p.32

11M. Horowitz, *Stress Response Syndromes*, p.93

12*Ibid.*, p.94

Unassimilated memories have the tendency to come up again in their full emotional impact and vividness in flashbacks as well as in nightmares. This happens because of the fact that they have not been integrated into normal narrative memory, which means that they cannot be reproduced verbally – one of the most important characteristics of normal memories. As the moment of trauma is an experience of 'speechless terror', the memory of it cannot be organized on a linguistic level, which is the most elaborate stage of development in the central nervous system. Consequently, it has to be organized on one of the lower levels representing earlier stages of CNS development, namely on a somatosensory or on an iconic level. Therefore the memory of a traumatic experience cannot be reproduced in language but only as somatic sensations, behavioural reenactments, nightmares and flashbacks.¹³ Thus, the memory of a traumatic experience is on the same level as the mental experiences of a child before it acquires language.

Furthermore, the failure to integrate the memory of the traumatic event into narrative memory and, by doing so, to make it an integral part of one's life story, makes it, in a sense, timeless. As Freud already postulated, two states of mind – an ordinary and a traumatic one – exist simultaneously, which are incompatible and cannot be bridged. The traumatic memory is fixed to a certain moment in the traumatized person's lifetime and it has not developed since. A person who has been traumatized as a child might live a normal adult life but when re-experiencing the traumatic moment, in his/her behaviour, emotions and perceptions, he/she becomes a child again.¹⁴ This is why traumatized people often have the feeling to live in two completely different, separate worlds, the most extreme case of whom being persons with multiple personality disorder.

II.2. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

As mentioned above, the infliction of trauma itself is a failure to make sense: The traumatic experience does not enter conscious awareness but leaves a vacuum. Only when, after a period of latency, the traumatic event is repeated in nightmares, flashbacks or behavioural reenactments does it actually become visible. It is not the traumatic wound that bothers the traumatized person but its belated representation, which begins to haunt him/her.

After World War I, these intrusive symptoms, characteristic of Janet's and Freud's female patients, could be found in combat veterans as well. Gradually, psychiatrists

¹³Cf. van der Kolk/ van der Hart, "The Intrusive Past", p.172

¹⁴Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 176-177

began to acknowledge that this “shell shock syndrome“ had its origin in traumatic experiences during the war. However, it took more than half a century, two more great wars (World War II and Vietnam) and a strong anti-war movement to finally “recognize psychological trauma as a lasting and inevitable legacy of war.“¹⁵ In 1980, post-traumatic stress disorder was eventually included in the American Psychiatric Association’s manual of mental disorders.

As Janet and Freud had already found out, traumatized people tend to become attached (or, as Freud called it, fixated) to the trauma: They are forced to re-experience the traumatic event over and over again without ever being able to make sense of it because it is not in their memory. This strange, even paradoxical, coexistence of amnesia for the trauma and its intrusive and repetitive character is the central characteristic of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). According to the official American psychiatric nomenclature, the diagnostic criteria for PTSD are:

- A) Existence of a recognizable stressor that would evoke significant symptoms of distress in almost anyone.
- B) Reexperiencing of the trauma as evidenced by at least one of the following:
 - 1. recurrent and intrusive recollections of the event
 - 2. recurrent dreams of the event
 - 3. sudden acting or feeling as if the traumatic event were recurring because of an association with an environmental or ideational stimulus
- C) Numbing of responsiveness to or reduced involvement with the external world, beginning some time after the trauma, as shown by at least one of the following:
 - 1. markedly diminished interest in one or more significant activities
 - 2. feeling of detachment or estrangement from others
 - 3. constricted affect
- D) At least two of the following symptoms that were not present before the trauma:
 - 1. hyperalertness or exaggerated startle response
 - 2. sleep disturbance
 - 3. guilt about surviving when others have not, or about behaviour required for survival
 - 4. memory impairment or trouble concentrating
 - 5. avoidance of activities that arouse recollection of the traumatic event
 - 6. intensification of symptoms by exposure to events that symbolize or resemble the traumatic event¹⁶

However, in an article published in *The American Journal of Psychiatry*, Elizabeth A. Brett and Robert Ostroff suggest a two-dimensional framework to reorganize the above criteria. After having reviewed and taken into consideration all important theoretical models of stress disorder, they construct their framework around the two

¹⁵J. Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, p.27

dimension that can be found in all relevant works on trauma and PTSD: repetition phenomena (as in criterion B, reexperiencing of the trauma) and defence (as in criterion C, numbing of responsiveness). The symptoms listed under criterion D, they argue, can be assigned to either criterion B or C.

The attachment to the trauma and its manifestation in alternating intrusive and numbing symptoms has an immense impact on the traumatized person's life and his/her relationship with others. Soldiers returning home from war, where they have been very likely to be exposed to traumatic experiences, are often reported to have great difficulties in adapting again to a civilian environment, in dealing with their wives and children and in returning to their workplace. Combat veterans as well as rape victims and survivors of natural or man-made disasters often have the feeling that the experience of trauma has completely changed their personality. They are not the same person anymore that they were before the traumatic event – as if a part of them is lost and can never be rescued or come back. The experience of a traumatic event shatters a person's identity and his/her faith in himself/herself, others and God. Feelings of extreme helplessness, shame, fear and guilt make it impossible to go on living as before. A rape victim puts it like this: “The person I was on the morning of November 19, 1988, was taken from me and my family. I will never be the same for the rest of my life.”¹⁷

Billy Pilgrim, the protagonist in Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, could have said the same regarding February 13th, 1945. He too has been traumatized and the effect this has on his life will be dealt with in the next part.

III. *Slaughterhouse-Five* by Kurt Vonnegut

III.1. Billy Pilgrim's Story

Slaughterhouse-Five is a novel about the firebombing of Dresden in February 1945, which Vonnegut himself as well as his protagonist Billy Pilgrim experienced and survived as prisoners of war.

Billy Pilgrim is a ridiculous-looking and pitiful character: In the war, he is a chaplain's assistant, “customarily a figure of fun in the American Army”¹⁸, who is sent to Europe in December 1944. When he arrives in Luxembourg, his regiment is “in the process of being destroyed by the Germans in the famous Battle of the

¹⁶Table taken from Horowitz, *Stress Response Syndromes*, p.23

¹⁷Quoted in J. Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, p.56

¹⁸K. Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five*. New York: Dell, 1991 [1969], p. 30. All subsequent references are to this edition.

Bulge.“ (p.32) He survives and becomes “a dazed wanderer far behind the new German lines“ (p.32). He does not have a steel helmet and combat boots but wears thin, unsuitable civilian clothes, thus “[h]e didn’t look like a soldier at all. He looked like a filthy flamingo.“ (p.33) After just three days, Billy and his companion Roland Weary are caught by German soldiers. Together with hundreds of others, “a Mississippi of humiliated Americans“ (p.64), Billy is finally taken to Dresden where they are accommodated in the Dresden slaughterhouse and work in a factory producing malt syrup for pregnant women. Dresden, the open city that contains neither war industries nor important troop concentrations, is destroyed on February 13th, 1945. The American prisoners and their guards survive in a meat locker in the slaughterhouse while nearly everybody else is killed. When they step out of their shelter the following day, “Dresden was like the moon ..., nothing but minerals.“ (p.178) with “little logs lying around“ (p.179) -- people burnt in the firestorm. It is the prisoner’s job now to dig for bodies in the ruins of the city.

Billy is obviously traumatized by this experience. After the war, he returns to the USA, he becomes a successful optometrist, marries and has two children but he always remains attached to his memories of the war. He shows the typical alternating intrusive and numbing symptoms of people with PTSD: It is said that he is “unenthusiastic about living“ (p.60), he is very passive and has the feeling that everything that happens just happens *to* him, without any chance for him to change something or to take action. Three years after the end of the war, he suffers “a mild nervous collapse“ (p.24), a belated reaction to the horrible experiences he has had in the war, and spends some time in a veterans' hospital. There, he meets Eliot Rosewater, a former infantry captain, who is there for the same reason as Billy: “They had both found life meaningless, partly because of what they had seen in the war.“ (p.101) Having seen the senseless deaths of so many people and the destruction of the undefended city of Dresden, “the loveliest city that most of the Americans had ever seen“ which “looked like a Sunday school picture of Heaven to Billy Pilgrim“ (p.148), Billy has come to not “really lik[ing] life at all“ (p.102).

In addition to these numbing symptoms, Billy also reexperiences and recollects his traumatic war experiences all the time: When a siren in the firehouse of his hometown Ilium goes off to announce high noon, it “scare[s] the hell out of him“ because he is “expecting World War Three at any time“ (p.57). Driving through the desolate black neighbourhood of Ilium reminds him of Dresden’s moonlike appearance after the bombing. (cf. p.59) An anti-Polish song his father-in-law

requests from a barbershop quartet on board of a plane makes Billy recollect a scene he witnessed before arriving in Dresden: A Polish man being hanged in public for having had sexual intercourse with a German woman. (cf. pp. 155-156) When the plane crashes only moments later and Billy is the only one to survive, he is rescued by some Austrian ski instructors wearing black wind masks over their faces. Billy, thinking he is back in World War II, “whisper[s] to him his address: 'Schlachthof-fünf.'“ (p.156) -- their Dresden address he and the other American prisoners had had to learn by heart. At his first encounter with Kilgore Trout, the science fiction author of whom Billy is a big fan, he mistakes him at first for someone he had known in Dresden because “Trout certainly looked like a prisoner of war“ (p.167). Furthermore, when nervous or emotionally aroused, Billy tends to repeat a phrase uttered by a dying colonel, who was mistaking him for one of his regiment`s soldiers. This colonel was called Wild Bob and in his feverish hallucinations he believed that he and his “boys“ had beaten the Germans and he invited the soldiers to come to his house in Cody, Wyoming, after the war to have a barbecue. “If you`re ever in Cody, Wyoming, just ask for Wild Bob!“ (p.67) is what he said shortly before he died, thus involuntarily capturing the horror of the war, in which all hope is in vain, in this phrase, which is repeated not only by Billy Pilgrim (pp. 188 and 206) but by the author/narrator as well (p.212).

However, the most intense recollection Billy has appears on his eighteenth wedding anniversary. The same barbershop quartet which later dies with Billy`s father-in-law in the above mentioned plane crash, sings a song called “That Old Gang of Mine“, which, to his own surprise, upsets Billy tremendously:

He had never had an old gang, old sweethearts and pals, but he missed one anyway, as the quartet made slow, agonized experiments with chords – chords intentionally sour, sourer still, unbearably sour, and then a chord that was suffocatingly sweet, and then some sour ones again. Billy had powerful psychosomatic responses to the changing chords. His mouth filled with the taste of lemonade, and his face became grotesque, as though he really were being stretched on the torture engine called the *rack*. (pp.172-73)

This of course is a hint at Proust`s *A la Recherche du Temps perdu*, in which the temporal difference between the (momentary) process of remembering and the (past) events being remembered is done away with by remembering in a stream-of-consciousness way, in which even the most subtle perceptions (e.g. smells, tastes) can evoke memories of the past. Billy does not know why the song affects him so strangely, he just realizes that there has to be something unknown inside him, which he is not aware of: “He had supposed for years that he had no secrets from himself. Here was proof that he had a great big secret somewhere inside, and he

could not imagine what it was.“ (p.173) In order to find out, he retires to his bedroom where he finally manages to find an association with an experience in the war:

He was down in the meat locker on the night that Dresden was destroyed. There were sounds like giant footsteps above. Those were sticks of high-explosive bombs. The giants walked and walked. The meat locker was a very safe shelter. All that happened down there was an occasional shower of calcimine. The Americans and four of their guards and a few dressed carcasses were down there, and nobody else. (p.177) [...] The guards drew together instinctively, rolled their eyes. They experimented with one expression and then another, said nothing, though their mouths were often open. They looked like a silent film of a barbershop quartet.

“So long forever,“ they might have been singing, “old fellows and pals; So long forever, old sweethearts and pals – God bless 'em –“ (p.178)

Whereas in Proust's novel long forgotten events are revitalized, analysed and recreated by verbal articulation, Billy only reexperiences this traumatic event in its full visual, sensory immediacy. In contrast to *A la Recherche du Temps perdu*, in which the process of remembering is central, it is the quality of the memory itself that is crucial in Billy's case.¹⁹ This night in the meat locker of the Dresden slaughterhouse and the unbelievable destruction of that once beautiful city due to American bombs is Billy's trauma, an experience he cannot grasp verbally but only reexperience in its full impact. This is not a story that can be told and, by doing so, be explained, understood and evaluated. This traumatic memory is and has to be stored differently, in full vividness and immediacy and can only be reexperienced in the same 'speechless terror' it evoked when actually happening. This is the only appropriate way to 'remember', the incomprehensibility and monstrosity of such an event can only be grasped directly, not in the abstract and interpretative nature of language. This is also underlined in a scene when Billy and his wife Valencia are on their honeymoon: When Valencia asks him about the war, he does not want to (cannot?) talk about it, all Billy has to say is: “It would sound like a dream, ... [o]ther people's dreams aren't very interesting, usually.“ (p.121) It would sound like a dream because it *can* only come back as a dream (or a flashback) but never as a story.

What makes Billy special, is his ability, or rather his fate, to travel in time. Like all traumatized people, he is doomed to forever revisit the past but Billy can also travel to the future and even to another planet, Tralfamadore. Like so many other things, the time travels just happen to him:

Billy is spastic in time, has no control over where he is going next, and the trips aren't necessarily fun. He is in a constant state of stage fright, he says, because he never knows what part of his life he is going to have to act in

¹⁹Cf. W. Hölbling, *Fiktionen vom Krieg*, pp. 252-254

next. (p.23)

Thus, his life is not a dialectic and chronological life story but has a timeless quality, in which every moment remains unaltered – like in a traumatic memory. Billy “has seen his birth and death many times, he says, and pays random visits to all the events in between.” (p.23)

The first time he comes “unstuck in time“, is during the war shortly before he is taken prisoner. Because of the cold, the long and strenuous walk and his bad physical condition, Billy is so exhausted he wants to give up and die. The moments of his life he visits in this situation are about death and loss of control, too: First he travels back to his childhood when he nearly drowned after his father had thrown him into the deep end of the local swimming-pool in order to 'teach' him how to swim. Then he travels to the future to see his mother very old and ill and supposedly about to die. Afterwards, he sees the body of a once famous marathon runner being wheeled down the corridor. Finally, still in the future but some years earlier, he finds himself drunk at a party where “for the first and only time“ (p.46), he betrays his wife with another woman. Afterwards, he is in his car, desperately trying to find the steering wheel but without success because he is in the back seat. This is exactly what Billy`s life is all about: He has no control over where he is going, he is always in the back seat, so to speak, being taken to places without any chance of intervening or choosing the direction.

Although they start long before Billy is kidnapped by Tralfamadorians and taken to their planet Tralfamadore to be exhibited in the zoo, his trips in time are Tralfamadorian, too. As Tralfamadorians can see in four dimensions instead of only three as “Earthlings“, they have a different concept of time:

All moments, past, present, and future, always have existed, always will exist. The Tralfamadorians can look at all different moments just the way we can look at a stretch of the Rocky Mountains, for instance. They can see how permanent all the moments are, and they can look at any moment that interests them. It is just an illusion we have here on Earth that one moment follows another one, like beads on a string, and that once a moment is gone it is gone forever.

When a Tralfamadorian sees a corpse, all he thinks is that the dead person is in a bad condition in that particular moment, but that the same person is just fine in plenty of other moments. (p. 27)

Consequently, every moment is structured in a particular way, it always has been and it always will – there is no way to change it. Unlike Earthlings, Tralfamadorians do not ask *why* a moment is structured the way it is: “[Time] does not lend itself to warnings or explanations. It simply *is*.” (p.86) Thus, Tralfamadorian time is like traumatic memory: It never changes, it does not become distorted and it is forever

preserved in its original quality without any explanation or evaluation attached to it. Because of what he has learned on Tralfamadore, Billy's passivity becomes understandable. Why take action, why worry about things if you know you cannot change them anyway? But whereas the Tralfamadorians simply ignore horrible moments such as wars and "spend eternity looking at pleasant moments" (p.117) instead, Billy does not succeed in doing the same. When on Tralfamadore, he feels happy – for the first time in his life, he is enjoying his body, he has a fulfilling relationship and a baby with his female Earthling companion, Montana Wildhack, a porno movie star, and he is even able to tell Montana about what he has seen in Dresden after the firebombing. But on earth, he is not able to just concentrate on the happy moments of his life but always has to travel back in time to the war and the horrible things he has seen there.

The Tralfamadorian outlook on life and science fiction in general are "a big help" for Billy in "trying to re-invent" (p.101) himself after the war and to cope with the many dead and deaths he has seen. He can view these with a certain indifference: "Now, when I myself hear that somebody is dead, I simply shrug and say what the Tralfamadorians say about dead people, which is 'So it goes.'" (p.27) But although this might look like a valuable lesson learned from creatures so much wiser than human beings, it actually is just another name for the defence mechanism (numbing, denial, suppression, avoidance) everyone with PTSD develops.

Billy shows all the symptoms of PTSD – repetition phenomena as well as defence – and he is far from being cured from his war trauma. He does not have a life story with each memory being integrated and combined with other memories. What he has instead is a collection of memories that are isolated from each other and that he does not remember but reexperiences. His memories are not put into context and consequently, they do not have a meaning attached to them. As the Tralfamadorians say: They just *are* and cannot be explained. Billy has to live with this "great big secret somewhere inside" (p.173), he will never be able to make sense of his experience of the Dresden firebombing. Facing an experience of such horrifying quality, the meaning schemes in Billy's mind have to fail.

But it is not only Billy Pilgrim's story that is a failure but, as the author/narrator says himself in the first chapter, the book itself is a failure, too. The following chapter will therefore deal with the question how Billy's story is told and in what way the author/narrator fails in doing so.

III.2. The Structure and the Narrative Technique

The first chapter of *Slaughterhouse-Five* can be seen as Vonnegut's comment on the urge to write about his traumatic experience and at the same time, the impossibility of doing so. Billy Pilgrim's trauma actually is the author/narrator's trauma. Ever since he returned from the war, he has been obsessed with the idea of writing a book about his experiences "[b]ut not many words about Dresden came from my mind" (p.2). It becomes quite clear that the author/narrator suffers from PTSD, too: "I think of how useless the Dresden part of my memory has been, and yet how tempting Dresden has been to write about" (p.2). To illustrate how much impact the two main symptoms of PTSD, defence and repetition phenomena, have on his life, he quotes a limerick and a song, which go as follows:

There was a young man from Stamboul,
Who soliloquized thus to his tool:
"You took all my wealth
And you ruined my health,
And now you won't *pee*, you old fool." (pp. 2-3)

My name is Yon Yonson,
I work in Wisconsin,
I work in a lumbermill there.
The people I meet when I walk down the street,
They say, "What's your name?"
And I say,
"My name is Yon Yonson,
I work in Wisconsin ..." (p.3)

The limerick refers to the uselessness of his memory regarding Dresden, i.e. the amnesia he developed in order to defend himself from the overwhelming terror he has experienced. A traumatized person might say to his memory: You have been haunting me for such a long time, caused me a lot of pain and trouble and changed my life completely but now you won't even give me the chance to remember, to free me of the past and to make sense of what I had to go through. The song of Yon Yonson clearly stands for the repetition, the endless intrusion of the traumatic experience, a traumatized person has to live with and that goes "on to infinity" (p.3). Billy Pilgrim cannot talk about the air raid and the destruction of Dresden – how can Vonnegut thus write a whole book about it? Fact is, he cannot either. He does write a book about World War II and Dresden but "[i]t is ... short and jumbled and jangled ... because there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre." (p.19) He, the "trafficker in climaxes and thrills and characterization and wonderful dialogue and suspense and confrontations" (p.5), is not capable of telling the story of what happened to him but produces a "schizophrenic" (front page) tale that – like the traumatic memory – defies categorization. *Slaughterhouse-Five* is not structured

chronologically but its structure is constituted by an accumulation of momentary images that are connected through associations, juxtapositions and leitmotifs.²⁰ Like a “duty-dance with death“ (the novel’s subtitle), it jumps around in circles but like a dance, it always comes back to the same basic combination of steps²¹: Death is always present as the expression “so it goes“ that is repeated about 85 times throughout the novel indicates for it appears whenever someone or something dead is mentioned – whether people or things like water or champagne. The same can be said about the repetition of “mustard gas and roses“, originally referring to the smell of the decomposing bodies dug out of the ruins of Dresden, and “blue and ivory“, the look of a dead prisoner of war’s feet. Like the author/narrator, the novel cannot free itself from Dresden but remains attached to the horror of it all.

In a similar manner, “[t]here are almost no characters in this story, and almost no dramatic confrontations“ because “[o]ne of the main effects of war, after all, is that people are discouraged from being characters.“ (p.164) In the same way as a part of a traumatized person’s personality stops developing and remains forever frozen on a certain stage of development, none of the figures in *Slaughterhouse-Five* is a round character in the traditional sense, i.e. a figure that develops and changes in the course of the plot. The people in this novel are merely types, they are like “bugs trapped in amber“ (p.77): unable to move on, to gain knowledge and insight and to mature.

Furthermore, not only the traditional chronological way of storytelling and characterization are done away with but also the narrative perspective is re-invented. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, there is not an omniscient *or* a first person *or* a third person narrator but a mixture of them all: It is not hard to make out that Billy Pilgrim is Vonnegut’s *alter ego* but then again, the author/narrator intrudes into Billy’s story several times by suddenly saying “I was there.“ (p.67), “and for me, too.“ (p.121), “That was I. That was me. That was the author of this book.“ (p.125), “That was I. That was me. The only city I’d ever seen was Indianapolis, Indiana.“ (p.148). In addition, in the last chapter, the perspectives of Billy, the fictional protagonist, and of the author/narrator fall together:

Billy Pilgrim was meanwhile traveling back to Dresden, too, but not in the present. He was going back there in 1945, two days after the city was destroyed. Now Billy and the rest were being marched into the ruins by their guards. I was there. O’Hare was there. We had spent the past two nights in the blind innkeeper’s stable. Authorities had found us there. They told us what to do. We were to borrow picks and shovels and crowbars and wheelbarrows from our neighbors. We were to march with these implements

²⁰Cf. W. Hölbling, *Fiktionen vom Krieg*, p.238

²¹Cf. J. Schöpp, *Ausbruch aus der Mimesis*, p.117

to such and such a place in the ruins, ready to go to work. (pp. 212-13)
The reader, who is apparently struggling to figure out who tells what in this novel and how the events are to be ordered chronologically, is given the message that, in order to grasp what the book wants to 'tell', it is unsuitable to make an attempt to distinguish between past and present and between storytelling and experience.²² No meaning or truth can be found because there is none.

Slaughterhouse-Five is like a Tralfamadorian book that consists of “brief clumps of symbols separated by stars“ (p.88):

[...]each clump of symbols is a brief, urgent message – describing a situation, a scene. We Tralfamadorians read them all at once, not one after the other. There isn't any particular relationship between all the messages, except that the author has chosen them carefully, so that, when seen all at once, they produce an image of life that is beautiful and surprising and deep. There is no beginning, no middle, no end, no suspense, no moral, no causes, no effects. What we love in our books are the depths of many marvelous moments seen all at one time. (p.88)

The moments depicted in *Slaughterhouse-Five* are not exactly all marvellous but these moments too have to be read “all at once, not one after the other“. In the note on the front page, Vonnegut describes himself as “a fourth-generation German-American [...], who as an American infantry scout [...], as a prisoner of war, witnessed the fire-bombing of Dresden, Germany, 'the Florence of the Elbe', a long time ago, and survived to tell the tale.“ However, his attempt to tell this story in *Slaughterhouse-Five* “is a failure, and it had to be, since it was written by a pillar of salt.“ (p.22) Like Lot's wife in the Bible, the author/narrator of this book has been fossilized by the overwhelming terror of his traumatic experience, the bombing and destruction of Dresden. His book has to be a failure because one cannot put into words something that is beyond language. The same way a traumatic experience cannot be categorized according to existing cognitive meaning schemes, this novel defies all categories of traditional storytelling regarding narrative perspective, chronological narrative technique and characterization. The reader, being confronted with a temporal chaos, a multitude of perspectives, science fiction elements and paradoxes (e.g. “living from moment to moment in useful terror, thinking brainlessly with their spinal cords“, p.49), finally fails to make sense of it, too.

And this is exactly what makes *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the failure, so valuable: Vonnegut wants “to tell the tale“ but to be able to do so, he first would have to be cured from his trauma so that it becomes integrated into narrative memory and accessible through language. However, “the capacity to remember is also the capacity to elide or distort“ and, even more profoundly, “the loss ... of the event's

essential incomprehensibility.“²³ The dilemma is that once one is capable of telling the story of one`s trauma, it is no longer a trauma anymore. To talk (or write) about a traumatic experience means to understand it and make sense of it. Consequently, if something is too terrible to make sense, it cannot be told or written down. This is why *Slaughterhouse-Five* has to fail and yet why it is so successful: Through Billy Pilgrim`s story and through his narrative technique Vonnegut has found a way to pass the very incomprehensibility of his traumatic event on to the reader in order to let him/her take part, too. The reader fails the same way the author failed, the novel is as incomprehensible as the traumatic event itself, to make sense of what one is reading is as impossible as making sense of the destruction of Dresden. Nothing “intelligent“ -- in the original meaning of 'understandable' -- is to be said about this massacre, therefore *Slaughterhouse-Five* has to fail as a story. Beyond language, however, it is a great success.

IV. Conclusion

In an earlier draft of his “Dresden book“, Vonnegut wanted the typography to become darker and darker as the date of the Dresden air raid drew near, until the pages would be completely black at that point where the course of the plot had reached February 13th, 1945. Only when the event was over was the typography supposed to gradually become legible again.²⁴ In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the book he finally published, all words are legible but they do not tell a story with a beginning, a middle and an end. Instead, the novel is an accumulation of isolated moments, the succession of which is not of a temporal nature. As in the earlier draft, the traumatic moment, the destruction of Dresden, remains black, a vacuum. In a *Playboy* interview, Vonnegut talks about “a complete blank where the bombing of Dresden took place“ and that “as far as my memory bank was concerned, the center had been pulled right out of the story.“²⁵

Consequently, if he could not even remember the event, he could not include it in his book, either. What he did instead, was to find a way to pass the impossibility to understand on to the reader. Vonnegut, who “survived to tell the tale“ of his traumatic experience, has managed to do so although he has failed to make sense of it. He has managed to obey the imperative Cathy Caruth in her reading of Lacan puts

22Cf. W. Hölbling, *Fiktionen vom Krieg*, pp. 238-39

23C. Caruth, “Recapturing the Past: Introduction“, pp. 153-54

24Cf. J. Klinkowitz, *Literary Disruptions*, p.49

25K. Vonnegut, *Wampeters, Foma and Granfalloon*, p.262

as follows: “To awaken is ... to bear the imperative to survive: to survive [...] as the one who must tell *what it means not to see*“²⁶

By writing *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut has not redeemed his trauma, the attempt to create a narrative of something that cannot be narrated had to fail. Instead, he has acknowledged that there is something one cannot put into words and has created a structure and a narrative technique by means of which the very incomprehensibility of the traumatic event is conveyed to the reader. *Slaughterhouse-Five* is a successful failure and in my view, this is what makes it so valuable.

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