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## **“To give form to what cannot be comprehended”: Trauma in Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five* and Martin Amis’s *Time’s Arrow***

**Abstract.** The primary objective of this article is the analysis of trauma in Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five* and Martin Amis’s *Time’s Arrow*. It is argued that through the deployment of experimental literary techniques (particularly destabilized and non-linear narratives) these two novels offer valuable insights into the mechanisms of a traumatized mind and help to understand the uncertain sense of the self experienced by those who suffer from traumatic memories.

**Keywords:** Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Martin Amis, *Time’s Arrow*, trauma, PTSD, war, 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The traumatic experiences of WWII and the Holocaust in particular, more acutely than ever before raised the questions concerning limits of literary representation. As the comprehension of these events has always been very problematic, writers are notoriously presented with two major challenges: how to express by means of writing something that is beyond human understanding, and what form and language could be adequate for such a task. What lies at the core of that confusion and inability to comprehend and articulate genocide is the experience of profound trauma. Indeed, as E. Ann Kaplan notes, trauma studies originally arose from the research about the Holocaust; so great was the magnitude of this genocide that it warranted the use of the term in its “classical” form (2005: 1).

The idea which is central to the theory of trauma is that an event “can be both experienced *and* forgotten,” and therefore it “divides the mind not only from itself, but also splits it in time: there’s a lag, a snatch, in the experience of the traumatized that pulls them out of linear chronology” (Stonebridge 2009: 196). This elusiveness of traumatic experience may be precisely what makes writing about war atrocities so challenging. Authors of fiction and non-fiction have long struggled in their search for a mode of expression adequate to the task of rendering the past too painful to be recollected and yet too formative to be ignored. Consequently, as Luckhurst suggests, they have been seeking forms which would be “experimental, fragmented, refusing the consolations of beautiful form, and suspicious of familiar representational and narrative conventions” (quoted in Gibbs 2014: 26).

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In the late 1960s, a radical form of literary response to the war coalesced, and it did so perhaps most compellingly in, among others, Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five, or, The Children's Crusade: A Duty-Dance with Death* (1969) (Crosthwaite 2009: 5). The novel's non-linear, repetitive chronology mirrors the intricate mechanisms of trauma, which somehow disturb the flow of time and cause the sufferer to be stuck in an endless cycle of forgetting and re-experiencing the traumatic event. The influence of Vonnegut and other experimental writers of that period<sup>2</sup> continued to influence the literary generations that followed, and among the writers who in their works revisited the traumatic events of the 1940s is Martin Amis. With its destabilized, non-linear narrative, his 1991 novel *Time's Arrow, or The Nature of the Offence* embraces the tradition of postmodernist writing and continues its search for the mode of expression adequate to the task of representation of WWII. The novel takes as its subject the events of the Holocaust but, rather unconventionally, chooses to depict the perpetrator, not the victim, as a trauma sufferer. The main aim of this article is to analyze the ways in which the two novels – *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Time's Arrow* – approach the issue of trauma representation.

The word *trauma* (an English alteration of *trōma*) derives from Greek, and since it literally means “wound,” it was originally used to refer to an injury inflicted on the body. It was only later that the psychoanalytic work of Freud popularized the use of it in its contemporary understanding, and suggested that the wound may be inflicted upon the mind, rather than the body (Caruth 1996: 3). This psychological wound, “the breach in the mind’s experience of time, self, and the world” (4), is not simple and healable damage comparable to a bodily injury, but rather an event which is “experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor” (4). The first mention of trauma, or rather of a disorder called “traumatic hysteria,” can be found in the volume *Studies on Hysteria* (first published in 1895), which Freud wrote in collaboration with Josef Breuer. The now-famous statement that “hysterics suffer mainly from reminiscences,” which appears in this essay (Breuer & Freud 1957: 7), already points to the fact that the symptoms of a distressful experience may be belated. According to Freud and Breuer, the memories of a traumatic event are not easily available to the patient, because, in contrast to ordinary memories, to encounter trauma is to encounter “a foreign body”, an alien part of our psyche, which acts as a “contemporary agent . . . long after its forcible entrance” (221).

The fact that a traumatic event should impose itself on the mind of a traumatized person in the form of recurring nightmares and relivings is what perplexed Freud the most since, as he stated, these night horrors do not agree with the wish-fulfilling nature of dreams, which is so crucial to Freud’s theory (1961: 24). It seems that the only possible explanation for the emergence of this pathology is the psyche’s complete inability to cope with the traumatic experience and the fact that, since it defied comprehension, it had not been assigned any psychic meaning. As a result, the traumatic event forces the mind to compulsively relive the experience in order to understand it. Since traumatic events often involve a direct threat to one’s life, the trauma may not necessarily be a response to these experiences, but rather to the perplexing act of survival (Caruth 1996: 60). Expanding

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<sup>2</sup> Consider, for example, the fragmented and destabilized narratives of Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22*, Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*, or J.G. Ballard’s *The Atrocity Exhibition*.

Freud's assertion, Cathy Caruth defines trauma as "a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event" (1995: 4), once again bringing attention to the fact that a traumatic event is always incomplete since the psyche fails to sufficiently register it when it occurs – a person experiencing something traumatic is never fully conscious during the event's occurrence. And because it is never fully assimilated when it happens, the event may impose itself on the mind of the traumatized and be relived with great clarity in the form of intrusive thoughts, flashbacks, nightmares, or hallucinations. The assertion may at first sound somewhat paradoxical: how can the mind repeat in exact detail an event during which one was not completely conscious? As Caruth points out, "the literal registration of an event—the capacity to continually, in the flashback, reproduce it in exact detail—appears to be connected, in the traumatic experience, precisely with the way it escapes full consciousness as it occurs" (153). This perplexing contradiction stems from the fact that a traumatic recollection is not a simple memory, and it is not ordinarily encoded in the human brain (153). Such a theory seems to be confirmed by the research conducted by two psychiatrists – van der Kolk and van der Hart – who, working with neuroscientists, argue that trauma differs from an ordinary memory in that it "has affect only, not meaning" (Kaplan 2005: 34). It causes one to experience emotions such as fear or shock, but above all, it rives "the normal feeling of comfort" (34). That is so because only the amygdala, the sector of the brain responsible for sensation, is active during trauma; while the meaning-making sector, the cerebral cortex, which is responsible for cognitive processing and rational thought, remains shut down as the affect is too powerful to be registered cognitively in the brain (34). A traumatic event is never fully integrated into memory, and as psychiatrists state, it is "in a sense, timeless. It is not transformed into a story, placed in time, with a beginning, a middle and an end (which is characteristic for narrative memory)" (van der Kolk & van der Hart 1995: 177). A traumatized person is unable to treat the traumatic memory as an ordinary aspect of their life, as it does not fit with other experiences. This lack of integration, according to van der Kolk and van der Hart, results in dissociation. The idea that there may exist a breach, a lag in the experience of a traumatized person, which disengages him/her from linear chronology, is central to the present analysis of *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Time's Arrow*.

In a 1974 interview, asked about the incentive to write about the firebombing of Dresden, Vonnegut explained that he "came home in 1945, started writing about it, and wrote about it, and wrote about it, and WROTE ABOUT IT. This thin book [*Slaughterhouse-Five*] is about what it's like to write a book about a thing like that. [He] couldn't get much closer" (Bellamy 1988: 163). Yet, finishing the book proved to be more grueling than Vonnegut had expected, as it was not until twenty-four years, numerous false starts, and hundreds of pages of unpublished drafts later that the readers were finally endowed with his "famous Dresden book" (Vonnegut 2009: 4). In the oft-cited interview for *Playboy*, the author admits that "there was a complete blank where the bombing of Dresden took place", and that his "war buddies" did not remember it either (Standish 1988: 94). He also adds that "[t]here were all sorts of information surrounding the event, but as far as my memory bank was concerned, the center had been pulled right

out of the story. There was nothing up there to be recovered — or in the heads of my friends, either” (94).

The fact that Vonnegut’s inability to write about Dresden stemmed in a large part from a difficulty with accessing that specific memory is consistent with symptoms exhibited by persons who endure a traumatic experience. Since during a traumatic event the meaning-making sector of the human brain, the cerebral cortex, remains shut down, such an event is never fully integrated into memory and cannot be accessed in the same way that an ordinary memory can (Kaplan 2005: 34). Likewise, Dresden became part of Vonnegut’s unconscious memory, as an event both too painful to recollect and too formative to ignore. The urge to write his novel can be understood as a cathartic impulse that allowed Vonnegut to confront the trauma he had undergone, and act on that knowledge by attempting to narrate his traumatic experience. Such a claim seems to be confirmed by his own words as, after finishing the novel, he admits that “It was a therapeutic thing. I’m a different sort of person now. I got rid of a lot of crap” (quoted in Wicks 2014: 333). Arguably, Vonnegut’s personal experiences allowed him to create a method of communicating traumatic memories that engages the reader on an empathic level.

The readers learn that *Slaughterhouse-Five’s* protagonist, Billy Pilgrim, like Vonnegut (who shares the experiences of the book’s narrator), is an ex-prisoner of war and survivor of the Dresden bombing. Vonnegut’s struggle to define Billy’s mental state becomes visible from the very first paragraphs of the narrative. As the title page suggests, it is a book written “somewhat in the telegraphic schizophrenic manner of tales of the planet Tralfamadore” (Vonnegut 2009). Referencing schizophrenia is an obvious attempt to find the right words to describe Billy’s condition, and Vonnegut’s confusion must have been amplified by the fact that no medical discourse on PTSD existed yet, as it was only included in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III) in 1980. Billy experiences a range of symptoms consistent with PTSD, with the most striking one being his fractured perception of time, which he perceives as the condition of being “unstuck in time”:

Billy has gone to sleep a senile widower and awakened on his wedding day. He has walked through a door in 1955 and come out another one in 1941. He has gone back through that door to find himself in 1963. He has seen his birth and death many times, he says, and pays random visits to all the events in between.

He says.

Billy is spastic in time, has no control over where he is going next, and the trips aren’t necessarily fun. (Vonnegut 2009: 29)

His being “spastic in time” actually refers to the fact that Billy has to relive the same traumatic events of the war over and over again. What is important is the information that “the trips aren’t necessarily fun,” which points to the involuntary nature of traumatic memory, a quality that imposes itself on the mind of a person suffering from PTSD.

On the level of narrative structure, Billy’s time travels justify the novel’s fragmented, non-linear chronology. Such a narrative organization seems to be adequate for the task of representing the uncertain and confused sense of the self as experienced by a traumatized person. Employing traditional narrative modes to represent trauma may

seem unsuitable, as trauma does not conform with the typical ways of organizing a story. The episodes of time travel, then, reproduce the workings of a traumatized psyche, which often involuntarily revisits the painful memories, and consequently metaphorize Billy's state of mind. Additionally, as Cacicedo notes, "Billy constantly circles around that central traumatic moment, almost recollecting it but, as is typical of traumatic memories, not quite managing to seize on the event" (2005: 363). Consequently, despite intrusive flashbacks, the exact moment of the Dresden bombing constitutes a "complete blank" in Billy's mind, to recall Vonnegut's phrase. Such a description aligns with the symptomatology of trauma described earlier; since the traumatic event was never fully comprehended in the first place, it creates a breach in one's mind and one's experience of time (Caruth 1996: 62).

It appears that Billy's time-travel episodes occur at random; in fact, repressed memories of the war are often triggered by events that somehow remind him of his past. For instance, the sight of an orange and black wedding tent, which is reminiscent of German trains that transported the prisoners of war (Vonnegut 2009: 88), causes Billy to return to that extremely distressing moment. Such a process of free association and hyperarousal is consistent with the mechanisms of a traumatic memory described by van der Kolk and van der Hart: "traumatic memory is evoked under particular conditions. It occurs automatically in situations that are reminiscent of the original traumatic situation. These circumstances trigger the traumatic memory" (1995: 163). Among other stressors triggering Billy's memory of Dresden are sounds, such as the sound of a siren, which Billy associates with air-raid alarms (Vonnegut 2009: 73), and certain colors (such as the aforementioned orange and black, or blue and ivory), as well as smells (mustard gas and roses). Another indication of Billy's trauma is his disordered sleeping patterns. A traumatic event often resurfaces in the traumatized person's dreams, forcing them to unwillingly relive the original experience. There are multiple passages in the novel which point to the fact that Billy suffers from sleep disturbances, ranging from narcolepsy to night terrors (71, 99-100). Billy's fellow prisoners-of-war are particularly aware of his condition; apparently, during sleep Billy "kicks, yells, and whimpers" (99). The readers also learn that "[n]early everybody, seemingly, had an atrocity story of something Billy Pilgrim had done to him in his sleep" (100).

The wide range of symptoms ultimately leads Billy to commit himself to a mental hospital, fearing that "he was going crazy" (Vonnegut 2009: 127). However, perhaps due to the fact that PTSD was not officially recognized as a mental disorder yet, the establishment fails Billy by neither providing an accurate diagnosis nor proposing any coping mechanisms (Vees-Gulani 2003: 298). Consequently, Billy needs to embark on his own path of "trying to reinvent [himself] and [his] universe" (Vonnegut 2009: 128), which he attempts to achieve through resorting to science-fiction. As it transpires, the genre provides Billy, as well as the novel's author with a sense-making tool, and offers a valuable insight into the challenging task of narrativizing trauma. As previously mentioned, Vonnegut struggled to find not only the right words to share his experience but also a form and method adequate for such a task. Theoretically, reporting skills, which he perfected during his work in journalism at both collegiate and professional levels, should have provided him with a clear entryway into Dresden, but soon he realized that in order to write about his experience, he had to find a method far less realistic (Wicks 2014: 334). Lacking the discourse capable of rendering trauma, the

author and his protagonist resort to science fiction to find the vocabulary and subject matter needed.

As a genre, science fiction encompasses a number of styles and subject matters; in fact, as Carl Freedman notes “[n]o definitional consensus exists” with respect to science fiction (quoted in Wicks 2014: 334). Yet, it is without a doubt that the genre explores a wide range of topics that lie outside the bounds of ordinary human experience. Arguably, the definition of science fiction as “literature of cognitive estrangement” (1972: 372), put forward by Darko Suvin, proves to be of aid here. According to him, two opposite poles meet in science fiction: the “exact recreation of the author’s empirical environment” and the “exclusive interest in a strange newness, a *novum*” (Suvin 1972: 373). The fusion of the two concepts results in “cognitive estrangement” which allows the writer to mediate their and their readers’ empirical reality, and present that reality from a new and alienating perspective (374). In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the cognitive estrangement is achieved through the fusion of Billy’s mediated account of the Dresden bombing with the science fiction alien-abduction plot. That synthesis allows the writer, as well as the reader to remove themselves from their empirical reality and move towards the fantastic. For Vonnegut, the employment of science fiction elements presented an opportunity to distance himself from the horrors of Dresden and reclaim his objectivity. In a way, it enables him to create a safe space, in which he could access and verbalize his trauma.

In “Diagnosing Billy Pilgrim,” Susanne Veas-Gulani suggests that time travel episodes present in the novel exist as some kind of fantasy, providing a sort of mental escape for the protagonist: “[w]ith the help of his Tralfamadorian fantasy and his idea of time travel, Billy conquers his trauma in a way that enables him to function” (2003: 299). However, I choose to interpret these moments as something more than a mere fantasy and argue that Billy’s travel episodes serve to literalize his condition and provide the readers with a better understanding of traumatic memory. As an experience that is not easily communicated, a traumatic event defies the bounds of a traditional narrative; the employment of time travel allows for an alternative way of representing and reproducing the traumatized mind. Therefore, as Amanda Wicks writes, “[b]y reading the time-travel episodes as literal experiences of traumatic memory rather than as Veas-Gulanian fantasies, readers gain a clearer understanding of a bewildering experience that cannot be shared easily through language” (2014: 337).

When Billy suffers a mental breakdown, he finds a plausible explanation of his psychological condition in the science fiction novels of a fictional author, Kilgore Trout. Trout’s book *Maniacs in the Fourth Dimension* is “about people whose mental diseases couldn’t be treated because the causes of the diseases were all in the fourth dimension, and three-dimensional Earthling doctors couldn’t see those causes at all, or even imagine them” (Vonnegut 2009: 132). Wicks notes that “[w]hen read metaphorically, the fourth dimension symbolizes the mind in that whatever trauma has occurred cannot not be seen without the use of medical technology” (2014: 335). Therefore, when Billy restructures his painful memories of Dresden and begins imagining Tralfamadore instead of Germany, he clearly does so in order to regain some agency over his life; by reframing such memories as science fiction, Billy is able to reflect on these moments without feeling overwhelmed or suffering a nervous breakdown. Consequently, while the

psychiatric establishment and medical science ultimately fail Billy, science fiction offers a structure and language that allows him to comprehend his experiences.

Still, the employment of science fiction elements in the novel that concerns a topic as serious as the Dresden bombing may seem inappropriate to conservative readers. However, had the book consisted of the more somber moments, it would have worked against Vonnegut's staple literary style. The author had to find a way of communicating his traumatic experience in a way that would simultaneously invoke his distinctive dark sense of humor; as Vonnegut himself explained, "[h]umor is an almost physiological response to fear. ... I saw the destruction of Dresden. I saw the city before and then came out of an air-raid shelter and saw it afterward, and certainly, one response was laughter. God knows, that's the soul seeking some" (2005: 3). The genre of science fiction provided the writer with tools, which allowed him to process and represent his traumatic memory in a way he had been unable to thus far. Where more traditional literary modes of narration proved to be inadequate for such a purpose, science fiction moved closer to depicting and understanding a traumatic experience. With the aid of science fiction, Vonnegut and his hero are finally able to verbalize their trauma and integrate the painful memories into a coherent whole. Ultimately, I believe that by ceasing to transform an incomprehensible experience into the language of standard realist narrative and employing the devices and vocabulary of the science fiction genre instead, *Slaughterhouse-Five* offers a unique way of comprehending and narrating a traumatic experience in particular, as well as enriching our understanding of trauma in general.

Throughout history, most of the discussions revolving around the ethics and aesthetics of the Holocaust representation have been primarily concerned with a particular aspect of it – that of the portrayal of the victims' suffering and pain. Indeed, for decades after WWII, it has been considered standard and even natural to approach the topic of the Shoah from the victims' point of view. However, as Dominick LaCapra notes, due to the Holocaust's traumatic nature, there is an effect of belatedness in relation to it, that is, certain significant facets of the event become visible only after a period of latency since earlier they were simply too painful to be even considered (Lothe et al. 2012: 10). As a result, there now exist other aspects of the Holocaust representation which were previously obscured, and which are yet to be extensively analyzed. One such area is concerned with a literary depiction of the perpetrators. Quite understandably, in the years directly following the Second World War, any attempt at portraying the agents of the victims' suffering would be perceived as highly inappropriate since there existed a sense that "to focus critically on the perspective of the perpetrator would at best be unseemly and at worst a betrayal of the memory of the victims, surrounded by a particular sense of literary and cultural unease" (McGlothlin 2010: 213).

By the early 1990s, for reasons which possibly had to do with the shifting approach of a new generation of writers to the problem of the Holocaust representation, or perhaps due to "the hyper-mediated ethos of modern mass society" (Spargo 2010: 6), the anxiety about the depiction of the Holocaust, including aspects of it which had been previously obscured, began gradually to fade away. That atmosphere of change did not imply that the taboo of the perpetrator representation was suddenly lifted, but it certainly prompted more writers to consider a newly emerged kind of question: "how does one depict the correlative element of the atrocity, that of the perpetration of the suffering?" (McGlothlin

2010: 210). Among the writers who decided to tackle this challenge is Martin Amis. As though in a response to the common narrative, according to which Holocaust literature belongs exclusively to the victims, he comments:

People say, legitimately in a way, what am I as an Aryan doing with this subject? But I'm writing about the perpetrators and they are my brothers, if you like. I feel a kind of responsibility in my Aryanness for what happened. This is my racial link with these events, not with the sufferers but with the perpetrators. (quoted in Martinez Alfaro 2008: 2)

The remark, as controversial as it may seem at first, signals a certain problem, namely, that the history of the perpetrators, whether they are authentic or else fictionalized, is embedded in the wider, collective history of Europe in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Therefore, even if we choose to disregard the perpetrators in the belief that they had relinquished the right to our attention, it will not change the fact that they existed in the real life, and that they will continue to exist in the text, and therefore, must be accounted for (McGlothlin 2010: 214).

Every effort to depict the perpetrators raises some valid ethical and aesthetic concerns. What narrative techniques can a writer employ in order to avoid encouraging identification with the perpetrator? How to depict the acts of perpetration without de-emphasizing the victims' viewpoint and suffering? Or, in what ways can the writer attempt to transgress the taboo of applying notions such as trauma in the context of the perpetrators? In the following section, I examine the ways in which Martin Amis chose to address some of these pressing issues in his novel *Time's Arrow or the Nature of the Offense*.

Narrated in a reversed order, the novel recounts the life of a fictional Nazi doctor, Odilo Unverdorben, opening with the protagonist's death and concluding with his birth. All movements are therefore inverted and "in a poetic-justice version of the turning-back topos, the Holocaust itself is un-done, and Auschwitz turns out to be a place where humans are taken from the air and restored to bodies, families are brought together, and the Jews are returned to formerly *Judenrein* Europe" (Rosenfeld 2014: 124). There are several implications of Amis's technique of backward narration. The underlying suggestion seems to be that the Nazis' inverted logic inherently called for an inverted narrative. Indeed, the Nazis' paradoxical view of progress draws attention to the line between creation and destruction, as according to the Nazi doctrine, extermination of millions of people was supposed to lead to racial ("Aryan") revival, and violence constituted a justifiable means to that end (Harris 1999: 489). Therefore, by his choice of narrative method, Amis seems to be suggesting that to enter the world of Auschwitz is to enter the world of fundamentally reversed logic. Consequently, what transpired at the death camp can only begin to make sense if the entire process is inverted by the means of backward narration; in that way the form and content of *Time's Arrow* become inseparable. The inverted chronology requires the readers to participate actively in the process of correcting all of the reversals; it compels us to be active interpreters of the presented events and rectify all the misinterpretations which confuse cause and effect. As a result, such narration affects the readers' ethical response; even though in the novel the horror of the Holocaust is undone, the readers are aware that the same could not possibly happen in the real world (Martinez Alfaro 2008: 6).

The reversal of the novel's time's arrow may be indicating that trauma, as an experience inherently missed at the time of its occurring, has to be repeated in the psyche's desperate struggle to assign some meaning to it; hence the protagonist's compulsion to relive his life backwards. This point is perhaps nowhere more poignantly articulated than in the book's final paragraph:

Look! Beyond, before the slope of pine, the lady archers are gathering with their targets and bows. Above, a failing-vision kind of light, with the sky fighting down its nausea. When Odilo closes his eyes, I see an arrow fly— but wrongly. Point first. Oh no, then. . . . We're away once more, over the field. Odilo Unverdorben and his eager heart. And I within, who came at the wrong time—either too soon, or after it was all too late. (Amis 1992: 165)

The fact that the narrator can see an arrow fly “point first”, therefore, in a correct direction, and that he and Odilo should be “once more, over the field” seems to be suggesting that Odilo will be forced to relive his life once more, this time in chronological order. The narrator's sigh “[o]h no, then...” could be thus interpreted as a brief moment of realization that since time flow will no longer be reversed, it will not be possible to misread the relation between cause and effect any longer, as Odilo will repeat his atrocious actions and, inevitably, his trauma.

Yet, the reversed chronology is not the only key choice on Amis's part when it comes to his chosen narrative techniques. As the reader learns early in the story, aside from the “diseased” flow of time, the voice which is relating the events seems to be diseased as well. “Passenger or parasite” (Amis 1992: 8), the narrator occupies Odilo's body and although he has access to Unverdorben's feelings and nightmares, he is completely severed from Odilo's consciousness and has no way of communicating with him; what is more, Odilo seems to be unaware of the narrator's presence: “[w]e are in this together, absolutely. But it isn't good for him to be so alone. *His* isolation is complete. Because he doesn't know I'm here” (14). The narrative split in the consciousness of the main protagonist seems to allude to PTSD-induced psychological dissociation on one hand, and to the psychiatrist's Robert Jay Lifton's theory of psychological doubling on the other. In his research, Lifton was determined to discover the motives which prompted the physicians of the Third Reich to violate the Hippocratic Oath they originally swore and, ultimately, to become the backbone of the genocidal killing process at Auschwitz. The psychiatrist enumerated various such reasons, yet by far the most significant one seems to be concerned with the Nazis' biomedical vision, according to which the Aryan race was suffering from a “deadly racial disease” (Lifton 1986: 16), and the only solution consisted of the extermination of all Jewish people. Such extreme indoctrination allowed for the “medicalization of healing” (14), which led to the formation of what Lifton refers to as the “killing as a therapeutic imperative”, that is, killing in the name of healing the Aryan race (15).

However, even the doctors most loyal to the Third Reich could not accede to the healing-killing reversal which occurred at Auschwitz without employing certain psychological protection mechanisms. Lifton describes how strenuous it was initially for the physicians to accept this paradox, and how in the process of acclimatization a split in the men's subjectivity occurred, ultimately allowing them to participate in the killing (422). The split resulted in the creation of two selves, both of which were employed at different times; in Lifton's words “[t]he individual Nazi doctor needed his Auschwitz self

to function psychologically in an environment so antithetical to his previous ethical standards. At the same time, he needed his prior self in order to continue to see himself as humane physician, husband, father” (419). Moreover, Lifton argues that a crucial part of the doubling process which ultimately allowed the doctors to avoid the feelings of guilt was what could be referred to as “the transfer of conscience”: “[t]he requirements of conscience were transferred to the Auschwitz self, which placed it within its own criteria for good (duty, loyalty to the group, ‘improving’ Auschwitz conditions, etc.), thereby freeing the original self from responsibility for actions there” (421).

*Time’s Arrow* could be argued to constitute an almost perfect fictional rendition of Lifton’s idea of doubling: the narrator is clearly a part of Odilo’s psyche, yet at the same time he is autonomous in his thoughts and seems not to remember his past; in Lifton’s terms then, he is the prior self, and Odilo is the Auschwitz self. While Unverdorben seems to be experiencing guilt and symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, as reflected through his nightmares and pervasive feelings of anxiety and fear, the narrator apparently does not comprehend these emotions. Most importantly though, as the story is unfolding backwards, and the readers are approaching the Auschwitz section of the book, the narrator is becoming visibly closer to Unverdorben, until finally, they merge together in Chapter 5, which covers Odilo’s time at the camp:

I, Odilo Unverdorben, arrived in Auschwitz Central somewhat precipitately and by motorbike, with a wide swirl or frill of slush and mud, shortly after the Bolsheviks had entrained their ignoble withdrawal. *Now*. Was there a secret passenger on the backseat of the bike, or in some imaginary sidecar? No. I was one. I was also in full uniform. . . . Auschwitz lay around me, miles and miles of it, like a somersaulted Vatican. Human life was all ripped and torn. But I was one now, fused for a preternatural purpose. (116)

Since the laws of time are inverted, it indeed seems like a moment of becoming whole again in the story; however, when the passage is analyzed in the correct order, one can understand that it was precisely during Unverdorben’s work at Auschwitz that the doubling occurred.

Since the story progresses in the reversed order and the narrator is forced to relive his entire life backwards, the reader finds him constantly misreporting and misinterpreting events. The resulting misreading of the relations between cause and effect has major consequences when it comes to the interpretation of the events which take place during Odilo’s past as a Nazi doctor. Whereas in reality Unverdorben actively participated in the project of mass murder of the Jewish people, in the reversed timeline he becomes a part of a drastically opposite grand plan which strives to bring millions of people back to life: “[o]ur preternatural purpose? To dream a race. To make a people from the weather. From thunder and from lightning. With gas, with electricity, with shit, with fire” (Amis 1992: 120). Perhaps unsurprisingly then, upon his arrival in Auschwitz the narrator informs the readers that “the world is going to start making sense... Now” (Amis 1992: 115). Yet, even though for the narrator/Odilo the time spent at Auschwitz seems like a moment in which everything finally begins “making sense” (115), we recognize that in fact this experience is about to scar him for life. The cost of Odilo’s atrocious deeds at Auschwitz is highlighted through his dissociation of the self, and the fact that even during his postwar life, Odilo is unable to become whole again. The consequences of his actions haunt Unverdorben for the rest of his existence, resulting in a lifelong trauma, which he is unable to address since he remains in complete denial of his

own participation in the mass killings during the Holocaust. Yet, even though I believe that the inverted chronology of the story, as well as the psychological doubling of the main protagonist discussed above, serve as the most important indicators of Odilo's trauma, they are not the only ones, as there exist some additional points in terms of his trauma.

When Odilo is first introduced to the readers (although under the alias of Tod Friendly at this point), he has just been brought back to life and is now in a hospital bed surrounded by doctors. The atmosphere is that of extreme anxiety, and it seems to be connected precisely with the presence of the physicians in the room. The narrator straightforwardly comments on this fact, admitting that he "hate[s] doctors. Any doctors. All doctors," whom he considers to be "life's gatekeepers" (Amis 1992: 4). The emotions connected with the presence of doctors suggest that the sight of the physicians alone constitutes a powerful trigger for Unverdorben, and as such, sets the tone for the examination of his trauma. As has been mentioned earlier, one of the major symptoms of PTSD includes "increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli" relating to the traumatic event (Caruth 1995: 4). This symptom is prominently exhibited by Odilo, and even though he chooses to continue working as a physician after the war, his consciousness lets the readers know how uncomfortable hospital surroundings make him feel. The narrator reveals that in his private life "Tod doesn't use doctors; he doesn't go near doctors. 'You don't want to listen to doctors,' he tells Irene, coming as close as he ever does to talking and smiling at the same time. 'They'll try to get their knives in you. Don't ever let them get their knives in you.'" (Amis 1992: 57). What is more, the symbolic figure of the doctor repeatedly appears in Odilo's dreams which, as already mentioned, is another significant symptom of PTSD: "[t]he other people. . . They're lucky. I bet they don't have the dream we have. The figure in the white coat and the black boots. In his wake, a blizzard of wind and sleet, like a storm of human souls" (8). The anxiety experienced in the presence of physicians on his deathbed, as well as the omnipresent fear of the doctor-figure in general, suggest that even though doubling provided him with a temporary protection mechanism, Odilo did not manage to cope with his past, and the consequences of his misdeeds remained with him for the rest of his life.

Another trigger that causes Odilo to have a strong emotional response is the sound of German. Clearly, the language subconsciously reminds Odilo of the past he is attempting to suppress. More importantly, it reminds him of who he is as a person. Even though Tod has successfully managed to blend in with the American society, Odilo cannot escape his German identity – an identity in which he once took so much pride. As mentioned earlier, the Nazi ideology was rooted in a belief which presupposed the superiority of the "Aryan" race; accordingly, the part of the novel which takes place during the war abounds in descriptions that underline Odilo's sense of supremacy. The narrator speaks proudly of his wife, the "German girl" (Amis 1992: 151), and his daughter whom he calls their "German baby" (138); he also mentions "the faint dampness of [his] German feet" (117). On more than one occasion, he marvels at the physical beauty of the German men, as well as his own physique: "we're perfect" (50). Evidently, whereas the sense of German identity constituted a source of Odilo's great pride in the past, after the war it became a major source of shame and guilt for him; a remnant of past atrocious deeds performed as a Nazi doctor.

Regarding other triggers, the narrator enumerates fire or, more specifically, the smell which he associates with it. Although at first the narrator is clueless when it comes to the interpretation of the source of Odilo's fire aversion, the readers may already begin to suspect what its origins are. Unverdorben's strong emotional response to the smell foreshadows his "terrible secret" (Amis 1992: 5), that is, his shameful role as a Nazi doctor in a concentration camp. This becomes clear, as during the Auschwitz part of the novel, the narrator frequently mentions that the camp's air was filled with an all-pervasive "sweet smell" (119, 134, 144). Clearly, at some point, even if only for a brief moment, Odilo must have acknowledged that he personally played a major role in the extermination of thousands of people, and the overwhelming feeling of guilt and shame over his actions left him traumatized for life.

I have already indicated that intrusive, repetitive dreams constitute a significant symptom of PTSD, and provided examples of the images that resurface in Odilo's nightmares. However, there is one more of Unverdorben's recurring dreams which is worth addressing – that of the "bomb baby". Throughout the novel, the narrator frequently mentions that, out of all of his dreams, this particular nightmare tends to incite the strongest emotional response in Odilo. The readers learn about the origins of the nightmare towards the end of the novel, that is, during the section of the book describing Unverdorben's life before Auschwitz. As it transpires, the original event concerned the time when Odilo, along with other SS men, discovered a group of Jewish people staying in one of the warehouses; the Jews were hiding behind a wall panel when their presence was betrayed by the cry of a baby – hence the name "bomb baby" (Amis 1992: 142). It was Odilo himself who uncovered the panel and found the hiding group; needless to say, the Jews were executed afterwards. Arguably, the fact that this event remained with Odilo for the rest of his life and continued to resurface in his nightmares over and over again indicates that he never fully assimilated the experience in the first place. Thus, the recurring dreams could be interpreted as Odilo's mental attempts at mastering the trauma retrospectively, since only through such mastery could he confront his abhorrent past.

As the above analysis has demonstrated, although Odilo is not a victim in the word's standard sense, he does exhibit symptoms that are consistent with the description of post-traumatic stress disorder. Unverdorben lives in a constant state of "fear and shame" (Amis 1992: 8) and is haunted by recurring nightmares which repeatedly bring him back to the moments of the original trauma. He experiences strong emotional responses to certain stimuli which act as triggers for his PTSD. It is crucial to note that Odilo's trauma does not absolve him from his actions; nor does it entail "a reconfiguration of the perpetrator as a victim" (Mohamed 2015: 1212). In Unverdorben's case, trauma is precisely the cost of his atrocious actions during WWII and, as the novel demonstrates, the psychological consequences of his misdeeds remain with him for the rest of his life. Nevertheless, by bringing attention to the issue of perpetrator trauma, *Time's Arrow* suggests that there exist areas of Holocaust representation that demand further inquiry. Among these areas are: finding an acceptable way of speaking about the perpetrators, as well as considering the applicability of such notions as trauma to them.

Concluding, the authors of the two novels found analogical ways of rendering the reality of trauma in literary discourse. By employing non-conventional, experimental modes of narration, both mimic the ways in which a traumatic event destabilizes one's

sense of the self and, as a result, bring us closer to understanding the nature of a traumatic experience. Vonnegut and Amis propose effective ways to confront the ethical and aesthetical challenges which inherently entail trauma representation. In an attempt to “give form to what cannot be comprehended” (Stonebridge 2009: 204), *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Time’s Arrow* turn narrative conventions topsy-turvy, mimicking the ways trauma disrupts one’s secure sense of the self. In such a way, both novels provide us with valuable insights into the minds possessed by traumatic experiences and invite the readers to think about trauma comprehensively, and empathetically.

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