ALL THIS HAPPENED, MORE OR LESS: WHAT A NOVELIST MADE OF THE BOMBING OF DRESDEN

ANN RIGNEY

ABSTRACT

Kurt Vonnegut’s novel Slaughterhouse-Five (1969) was a popular and critical success when it first appeared, and has had a notable impact on popular perceptions of “the bombing of Dresden,” although it has been criticized by historians because of its inaccuracy. This article analyzes the novel’s quirky, comic style and its generic mixture of science fiction and testimony, showing how Vonnegut consistently used ingenuous understatement as a way of imaginatively engaging his readers with the horrors of war. The article argues that the text’s aesthetics are closer to those of graphic novels than of realist narratives and that, accordingly, we can understand its cultural impact only by approaching it as a highly artificial linguistic performance with present-day appeal and contemporary relevance, and not merely by measuring the degree to which it gives a full and accurate mimesis of past events.

The article uses the case of Vonnegut to advance a more general argument that builds on recent work in cultural memory studies: in order to understand the role that literature plays in shaping our understanding of history, it needs to be analyzed in its own terms and not as a mere derivative of historiography according to a “one model fits all” approach. Furthermore, we need to shift the emphasis from products to processes by considering both artistic and historiographical practices as agents in the ongoing circulation across different cultural domains of stories about the past. Theoretical reflection should account for the fact that historiography and the various arts play distinct roles in this cultural dynamics, and while they compete with one another, they also converge, bounce off one another, influence one another, and continuously beg to be different.

Keywords: cultural memory, cultural dynamics, ingenuous representation, performativity, Vonnegut, Dresden

I. INTRODUCTION

A difficulty inherent in any attempt to conduct a comparative analysis of the ways in which accounts of the past are constructed in different media and in different discursive genres is how to find a level playing field that provides the basis for comparison without a priori subordinating all parties to a single standard of achievement. This is a common pitfall especially in discussions conducted in historical journals about different forms of “history.” If historiography is taken as the standard for measuring what can count as historical truth, then every other

1. I am grateful to Joep Leerssen, Hans Bertens, Wulf Kansteiner, Claudio Fogu, Judith Keilbach, and Christoph Classen for their comments on earlier versions of this article.
cultural practice that is involved in representing and interpreting events will be defined in the terms it dictates, and is hence doomed to be second-best. Other ways of engaging with the past can be at best a poor relation that is “almost as good” as the real thing, at worst an irresponsible younger sibling. Since a fictional work is not a work of historiography, however, nor does it ever aim to be, this sort of comparison from a “one model fits all” perspective can only lead to a skewed and distorted form of cultural analysis.

A more fruitful starting point for comparative analysis is to take the broader framework offered by the concept of cultural remembrance. I use the term “cultural remembrance” here to designate the complex set of mnemonic practices through which collective views of the past are continuously being shaped, circulated, reproduced, and (un)critically transformed with the help of media. “Cultural remembrance” (as distinct from “memory” tout court) is used as the preferred term here in order to highlight the constructive and performative aspects of social memory production and to suggest the need for examining it in terms of an ongoing cultural process, involving a whole range of mnemonic practices, rather than in terms of discrete products such as texts, monuments, rituals, or “sites of memory.” In choosing this broader framework as my starting point, I am not denying that there are significant differences between various mnemonic practices in terms of their epistemological authority or, alternatively, their popular appeal.

Historiography stands out within this framework as the disciplined investigation of the past using recognized methods and modes of argumentation that help produce authoritative accounts of past events that have the backing of academic institutions. Artistic practices, on the other hand, stand out in other ways: while artists and writers shape views of the past too, they usually do so while often flouting the rules of evidence and pursuing goals that are not only epistemological, but aesthetic or moralistic. Imaginative writers may be considered reprehensible from the point of view of historiographical standards, then, but this does not take away from the fact that they are loved by large numbers of people for what they do best in their own way. Nor does it prevent historians, defending their own standards and priorities, from mounting a corrective offensive in the form of alternative accounts. The point, as I have argued at length elsewhere, is that different mnemonic practices do not just function side by side in parallel universes. They react to, build on, and bounce off one another as narratives are circulated across different media, across different institutions, and engage the loyalties of different social groups. Thus Stephen Greenblatt’s general view of culture as based on recycling, 2


3. For a more extended account of the cultural dynamics of memory formation, see Ann Rigney,
All this happened, more or less imitation, appropriation, and exchanges across various practices can usefully be applied to understanding the dynamics of cultural remembrance. This general framework provides the playing field for the following analysis. Having been invited to examine the case of a literary work that had been successful in shaping public perceptions of a particular event, I might have opted for a classic work of realist historical fiction—Tomasi di Lampedusa’s *Il gattopardo* (1958) or Hella Haasse’s *Woud der verwachting* (1949), for example—that would exemplify the power of creative writers to capture the past in its experiential fullness and hence to complement the work of historians by treating subjects that historians had neglected and doing so in ways that would enhance their impact.

But rather than choosing a case where a novel seemed closest to history, I opted instead for a case that seemed at the farthest remove from traditional historiography (and indeed from the traditional realist novel): Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five: Or the Children’s Crusade, a Duty Dance with Death* (1969). A flagrantly fictional novel will hopefully help open the way toward pinpointing the distinctiveness of artistic writing as a mediator of historical understanding.

There is no doubt about the high public profile of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. When Kurt Vonnegut died in April 2007, the many obituaries celebrating his life differed in detail, but generally agreed on one thing: that Vonnegut’s critical breakthrough as a novelist had come with the publication of *Slaughterhouse-Five* in 1969. When his “famous Dresden book” appeared, based on his own experiences in World War II, the *Economist* wrote, he went from “science-fiction writer” to “literary icon”: “the novel caught the brooding anti-establishment mood of the times and became an instant bestseller.” Similar sentiments were echoed in *Newsweek* and the *American Book Review*: In 1969, Vonnegut went from cult writer to bestseller with *Slaughterhouse-Five*, which dealt directly—or as directly as he could in a novel also involving time travel and an alien abduction—with his experience in Dresden. This was the book which gave us the catch-phrase "plenitude, Scarcity and the Circulation of Cultural Memory,” *Journal of European Studies* 35, no. 1 (2005), 209-226; _idem_, “Divided Pasts: A Premature Memorial and the Dynamics of Cultural Remembrance,” *Memory Studies* 1, no. 1 (2008), 99-113; _idem_, “The Dynamics of Remembrance: Texts between Monumentality and Morphing,” in *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, ed. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nümming (Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 2008), 345-353.


phrase “So it goes” as a response to deaths and disasters. Cynicism? Fair and balanced reporting.7

“All this happened, more or less,” writes Vonnegut in the opening lines of his masterpiece *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969). Vonnegut taught—more or less—a generation how to rewrite and reread American culture.8

That *Slaughterhouse-Five* was not only a critical success but also a popular one is borne out by the number of editions published and the sales figures (at least twenty English-language editions in the first year, including some 800,000 copies sold in the U.S.). The book was also rapidly translated into many languages, within three years reaching audiences in Spain, Norway, Italy, Holland, Sweden, Russia, Finland, France, Poland, Brazil, Portugal, Japan, Czechoslovakia, and Germany, this rapid spread justifying the claim made by *Time* magazine that Vonnegut’s work enjoyed a “global fame.”10 In 1972, a film version directed by George Roy Hill hit the screens and further helped to spread the story, becoming a classic, albeit a minor one compared to the book.11 The cultural penetration of *Slaughterhouse-Five* is perhaps most clearly illustrated by the ubiquity of the catchphrase “so it goes,” which became something of a mantra for opponents of the Vietnam War, as both *The New York Times* and the *Economist* recalled in their obituaries.12

Although Vonnegut never quite lost his reputation for being a “cult writer,” attracting great loyalty among select fans and occupying a quirky position on the margins of literary respectability because of his anti-establishment opinions, penchant for science-fiction, and his apparent simplicity, there is no doubt about the mainstream cultural impact of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. As time has passed, it has gradually come to occupy a fairly comfortable position in the canon of post-war literature and has become more and more an icon of sixties pop culture (Vonnegut has been likened to a “literary rock star” and a “hero of the counterculture generation”).13 His “famous Dresden book” has been consistently voted one of the hundred “greatest American novels of all time” since its publication nearly forty years ago. (It has also regularly figured on the list of books banned from American schools and libraries for being profane and obscene—but that is another story.14)

*Slaughterhouse-Five* has not only circulated as a canonical work of literary art and, increasingly as time passed, as an icon of the sixties. From its publication in 1969, it has had a demonstrable impact on public perceptions, especially

11. *Slaughterhouse-Five* (directed by George Roy Hill; screenplay by Stephen Geller), Universal Pictures, 1972; tagged in the Internet Movie Database (http://www.imdb.com) with the line: “Man Becomes Unstuck in Time in the Film that became a Classic.”
All this happened, more or less American ones, of the Allied bombing of Dresden (though it has been curiously absent from recent German discussions on this subject). To begin with, it seems to have helped make people aware in very general terms that “Dresden” was a significant event. It brought the bombing onto a public radar screen that was particularly sensitive to its significance in light of the ongoing American operations in Vietnam. Indeed, one could argue that the fact that “Dresden” tout court can now be used as an abstract noun standing for a heavily-burdened memory site (on a par with 9/11, according to a recent novel) is attributable in part to the influence of Vonnegut’s work. The latter is regularly invoked as a specific point of reference in the popular media referring to February 13, 1945: both the English and the German Wikipedia articles on this subject list *Slaughterhouse-Five* as one of the by-products of the bombing, with the English version also referring to the fact that Vonnegut himself was actually present in the city as a POW. In the separate article on the novel, the German Wikipedia suggests that it was instrumental in re-opening the public discussion on the ethical justification of the bombings within the English-speaking world.

In a recent survey of the ways in which Dresden has been remembered in Britain and the United States, Tami Davis Biddle gives a prominent place to Vonnegut’s novel and accuses it, along with the work of David Irving, of being responsible for perpetrating hyperbolic and sensationalist misconceptions about the bombing:

In 1963, David Irving’s book *The Destruction of Dresden* brought the air raid back into view in a dramatic way, and reaction to the book—reviews had headlines such as “MASACRE AT DRESDEN” and “APOCALYPSE AT DRESDEN: The Long Suppressed Story of the Worst Massacre in the History of the World” often reflected Irving’s hyperbolic tones. Likewise, Kurt Vonnegut’s novel *Slaughterhouse-Five*, which would become a classic in the American literary canon, took the firebombing of Dresden as its central theme. First published in the year after the Tet Offensive in Vietnam, the book raised awareness of the Dresden raid among a new and deeply sceptical generation of Americans.

15. Vonnegut’s work does not figure in the recent flurry of publications about the Allied bombings, including Aleida Assmann, *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit: Erinnerungskultur und Geschichtspolitik* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2006); Jörg Friedrich, *Der Brand: Deutschland im Bombenkrieg 1940–1945* (Berlin: Propyläen, 2002); W. G. Sebald, *Luftkrieg und Literatur: Mit einem Essay zu Alfred Andersch [1999]* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2001); Andreas Huyssen, “War Legacies: From Dresden to Baghdad,” *New German Critique* 90 (Autumn 2000), 16-176. The absence of references to Vonnegut is all the more remarkable given his reception in Germany, including the performance of *Slaughterhouse-Five* as an opera in Munich as recently as 1994; a possible explanation would be that the reception of *Slaughterhouse-Five* in Germany was directly related to 1960s anti-Americanism and not to questions relating to Germany’s past or German victimhood, a topic that has emerged recently via different channels into public debate.

16. That “Dresden” belongs to the canon of “sites of suffering” is borne out by its use within Jonathan Safran Foer’s novel *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005) as a parallel to the events of 9/11.


Kurt Vonnegut and David Irving: bien étonnés de se trouver ensemble? Although Biddle does not spell this out, the link between the two works is not fortuitous and leads us into the thorny question of Vonnegut’s reliability as a source of knowledge about events in 1945.

In the paratextual credits to his novel Vonnegut himself acknowledged using Irving’s The Destruction of Dresden and having had permission to quote from it along with a poem by Theodore Roethke. This acknowledgment of a debt to Irving was presumably a legal requirement since Vonnegut actually quotes extensively from Irving’s book later on in the novel; more specifically, he quotes from the preface to that book written by Air Marshal Sir Robert Saundby, second-in-command to Sir Arthur Harris, who admitted that the bombing had not been a military necessity and, moreover, that the tragic death of 135,000 people in Dresden made it more deadly than the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima. The passages from Saundby (as quoted by Irving) are read out by a fictional character in Slaughterhouse-Five and do not, therefore, necessarily express the views of the novelist or the implied message of his narrative. Nevertheless, it is clear from other elements in the novel that Vonnegut’s own view of the bombing was influenced by what he himself had read in Irving’s book. To be sure, the novelist could write on the basis of his own experience since he had himself been present as a prisoner of war in Dresden at the time of the bombing, and had survived the firestorm, like his fictional avatar Billy Pilgrim, by sheltering in a slaughterhouse (in interviews he has confirmed the extensive parallels between the fate of his main character and his personal experience). But while his personal experience certainly informed his account of the bombing and lent it some testimonial authority and authenticity, he needed other sources to supplement his knowledge of what was beyond his purview as a participant observer. As an eyewitness Vonnegut paradoxically knew less than a historian who had access to a wider range of sources. The writer’s choice fell on Irving’s The Destruction of Dresden, a not unreasonable choice at the time for a non-specialist, given the paucity of other books on the subject and the considerable splash that Irving’s book had made in the media.

Irving’s influence is especially apparent in calculations of the number of victims of the firestorm, about which there has been considerable controversy over the years. The figure of 135,000, used by Sir Robert Saundby in order to back up his argument that “Dresden” was worse than “Hiroshima,” was the figure put forward by David Irving himself in his 1963 book. As subsequent studies have shown, however, this figure is considerably inflated; and although it does not come close to the figures put out by the Nazi propaganda machine (which were double those of Irving), it has subsequently been discredited. There seems to be a general consensus by now that the number of fatalities was between 25,000 and

21. In the preface to the latest revised edition of his work, now called Apocalypse 1945: The Destruction of Dresden, Irving admits that his figures may have been inflated without committing himself to any specifics; available online http://www.fpp.co.uk/books/Dresden/ (accessed July 22, 2008).
40,000, and hence nowhere near the 135,000 claimed by Irving. Writing back in 1969, however, when Irving had not yet become the discredited historian he is today and when Dresden had not yet become the lieu de mémoire it has since become, Vonnegut took over Irving’s general estimate of the number of casualties. He did so when he quoted from Irving/Saundby through his fictional avatar, but also elsewhere in the narrative.

Speaking in what appears to be his own voice in the opening pages, Vonnegut tells us: “Even then I was supposedly writing a book about Dresden. It wasn’t a famous air raid back then in America. Not many Americans knew how much worse it had been than Hiroshima” (14). Later on we are told how “Billy had seen the greatest massacre in European History, which was the fire-bombing of Dresden. So it goes” (70); later again that: “It was the next night that about one hundred and thirty thousand people in Dresden would die” (111). In turning to Irving for his source on the bigger picture, the novelist Vonnegut unwittingly helped perpetrate an untruth. The figure of 130,000+ continues to turn up in non-specialist accounts of Dresden either through direct reference to the Irving book or to Slaughterhouse-Five. It is specifically Vonnegut’s casualty figures and blanket comparison with Hiroshima that has seen him criticized by historians like Biddle as a generator of a false historical awareness. The fact that Cliffs Notes on the novel, a popular guide to American literature often used by secondary-school students, should in its section on “historical background” repeat the “knowledge” about the number of victims picked up from the novel itself (based on the recycling of Irving’s faulty history) would seem to confirm the worst suspicions of critical historians: the novel is a powerful tool for the promulgation of misconceptions.

To sum up the case so far: Slaughterhouse-Five is a high profile, highly-valued literary work that continues to feed into popular perceptions of the bombing of Dresden without being a source either of up-to-date information about what happened on February 13, 1945 or of insights into its place as part of the Allied strategy in the closing months of the war. This could all be taken as reason to reject the work as merely an example of “failed history.” But even if the concept of “failed history” were applicable in some sense, it still fails to account for the degree and nature of the novel’s success. So rather than use Vonnegut’s inaccuracies as a prelude to dismissing him, I propose to use the (ir)relevance of numbers as a springboard for considering historical fiction as a distinctive medium in the ongoing production of collective remembrance. Vonnegut’s mistake regarding the number of victims is enough to discredit the novel as a source of historical knowledge in the traditional sense. But the novel was not received by its many fans as a work of history (even if it was perceived as being about a real event in the past). Nor was it ever intended to be taken seriously as history, as the opening

lines make clear: “All this happened, more or less.” So what sort of knowledge is being produced in this “more or less” approach to documented facts? And how does this relate to the specific features of *Slaughterhouse-Five* as a novel?

What follows is an attempt to characterize the aesthetic qualities of Vonnegut’s work and their implications for a more general understanding of the role of literature as a mediator of historical understanding. To define the unique flavor of a work like *Slaughterhouse-Five* in terms that are also applicable to other cases is the daily challenge of academic criticism. But describing Vonnegut’s quirky style with the tools of academic scholarship is a particularly tricky business, since any analysis of his work constantly runs the risk of being too heavy-handed and ponderous to do justice to writing that has self-consciously chosen the path of the lightweight, the naïve, and the comical.

II. A NARRATIVE *HORS CATÉGORIE*

That Vonnegut’s “famous Dresden book” will be different from anything you might have read before is apparent from the very title page of *Slaughterhouse-Five: Or the Children’s Crusade, a Duty Dance with Death*. Where one might have expected to find the author’s name *tout court*, we read instead that the book was written by:

Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. / A fourth-generation German-American / now living in easy circumstances / on Cape Cod / [and smoking too much], / who, as an American infantry scout / *hors de combat*, / 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. / This is a novel / Somewhat in the telegraphic schizophrenic / manner of tales / of the planet Tralfamadore, / Where the flying saucers / come from. / Peace.

This tongue-in-cheek opening epitaph (spread out across the title page like a prolix pastiche of an eighteenth-century pamphlet) provides a strong signal that we are dealing with an unusual work and an ontological potpourri. It not only plays with the conventions of the title page; it *displays* this fact and flaunts its own artificiality. As such the novel answers to one of the basic characteristics of literature as put forward by Mary Louise Pratt, namely the art of *displaying* language, of putting on a show with the verbal medium, and not merely using that medium to convey information.25

In the same gesture, the title page also flaunts the work’s generic hybridity: it belongs to many different categories, and hence to none in particular. While the main event of the plot is the historical bombing of Dresden, the throwaway reference to “a long time ago” in the title points more in the direction of a fairy tale or parable than of a historiographical disquisition on the basis of archival research. Moreover, there are also elements of autobiographical testimony (it is true that Vonnegut lived on Cape Cod, smoked, and had been in Dresden in 1945), though it is neither traditional autobiography nor memoir since the historical Vonnegut could never have been in the imaginary Tralfamadore (unless one happens to believe in

extraterrestrials). It is a “novel,” we are told, but the introduction of a science-fiction element makes the label “historical novel” seem curiously ill-fitting, while the presence of historical elements sits equally uneasily with the science-fictional ones. Finally, although it is evidently about serious things (the combination of the slaughterhouse in the title and the reference to Dresden announce this), its style recalls a children’s book as much as it does a work of adult reflection. With characteristic brevity, then, Vonnegut has managed to get lots of generic wires crossed and expectations muddled before the reader has even gotten to the first page.

The idea of making a work that does not fit fully into any single, predefined category is not in itself Vonnegut’s invention. Mixing generic registers is especially prominent in the comic traditions of vaudeville, pantomime, and other popular medleys. In the course of the novel, parallels with these comic modes become particularly appropriate when we are told about the performance by British POWS of a Cinderella pantomime and about the gormless Billy Pilgrim’s ending up dressed up in a coat with a furry collar that was far too small for him and in high-heeled boots (60). It seems that war has become an insane piece of bad theater. Later too, the novel will combine echoes of these popular “unserious” genres with direct quotations from actual statements by President Truman (on the bombing of Hiroshima) and the essay, mentioned earlier, by Air Marshal Saundby. By bringing together various registers in this way, *Slaughterhouse-Five* exemplifies the heteroglossia that Mikhail Bakhtin saw as characteristic of the novel as an inherently heterogeneous genre with different “voices” cutting through it. More than any other form, the novel has historically provided a meeting ground for the many discourses operative in society at any given time.26 Because of its loose and “undisciplined” form, the novel can absorb different sorts of knowledge and ideological viewpoints, and adapt a whole range of narrative models, in the course of portraying a world and the people who populate it. Thus *Slaughterhouse-Five* has woven into the fabric of its text nuggets from Irving, quotations from Truman, commonplace bearing on the German camps (that the candles given to the POWs were made from the “fat of Jews and Gypsies” [67], for example), echoes of popular self-help guides and psychobabble, along with recalls of the *Pilgrim’s Progress*, *The Red Badge of Courage*, and of cheap science-fiction movies.

If knowledge is produced within the framework of a particular discursive field that both disciplines speakers and lends them authority (to paraphrase Michel Foucault), then Vonnegut seems to go out of his way from the outset to locate his narrative outside any particular “regime of knowledge” and well beyond any recognizable discursive discipline.27 He writes on the basis of his personal experience, and he does so in the style of a lawless freebooter, possibly a crank, possibly a wise fool. The fact of being a freebooter, rather than “disciplined,” is something Vonnegut arguably shares with every writer of fiction (and his comic wit shows obvious affinities with the work of Mark Twain and Joseph Heller). However, the actual ways Vonnegut gets our wires crossed and holds incongruous discourses together is his own and make for that aesthetic surplus value

with which the Russian formalists identified “literariness”: qualities displayed by a narrative that could not have been predicted and, being unique to a particular work, provide a constantly renewed reason to return to it.\(^{28}\) I am not suggesting that Vonnegut holds the reins over his material so tightly that he ends up with a seamless, highly organized, and unified text in which everything is subordinated to a dominant organizing principle. This view would be theoretically outdated and, in this specific case, would fail to take into account the various loose ends (echoes of other discourses that Vonnegut does not control and is not necessarily aware of) that have been picked up by readers of his work. Nevertheless, the success of the novel would seem to suggest that the text had a certain aesthetic integrity and power that goes beyond the impact of particular details or single phrases, and that this needs to be accounted for. “So it goes” would not have gained a proverbial status had it not appeared in this particular narrative and in the company of the memorable Billy Pilgrim.

In what follows I focus on the novel’s narrative design, its use of point of view, and its style in order to pinpoint some of its specific qualities both as a story and as a historical account. The single term that seems best to characterize the various features of the work is that of the ingenuous: literally, the innocent or the undisciplined, the *hors catégorie*. By deliberately not fitting in and doing what one might expect, by not writing from a position of knowledge, the novel does something distinctive and makes its mark.

III. A NARRATIVE “UNSTUCK IN TIME”

*Slaughterhouse-Five* tells the story of Billy Pilgrim, a latter-day Everyman, who briefly served in the U.S. army during the Battle of the Bulge, and was sent as a prisoner of war to Dresden, where he manages to survive the blanket-bombing in an underground meat-storage bunker before emerging into the devastated city to help find and burn the bodies of the thousands of victims. After this horrendous experience, Billy goes on to become a fairly successful businessman but finally has a nervous breakdown that makes him “become unstuck in time” such that all past and future moments in his life are always simultaneously present. He gains a new understanding of his own experience of time thanks to the intervention of extraterrestrial agents from a planet called Tralfamadore who have access to another temporality: “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, like beads on a string, and that once a moment is gone it is gone forever” (25). Having been inducted by the Tralfamadorians, Billy Pilgrim starts traveling freely in time. The narrative accordingly shifts associatively forward and back from one moment in his life to another, being “ingeniously” organized from a position that does not discriminate among past, present, and future. Thanks to this conceit, Billy’s experience in Germany in 1945 becomes at some level coeval with his son’s serving in Vietnam, referred to in passing at various points (45, 92, 140).

The state of being “unstuck in time” is reflected in the very stylistic fabric of the narrative: the simple past tense predominates, as does the mode of straightforward assertion. The use of conditionals, futures, or pluperfects is relatively rare, as if Vonnegut had taken to absurd lengths the principle, formulated theoretically by Roland Barthes around the same time, that history-writing has a unique relation to the assertive mode in that it refers to what was actually the case, and not what might or should have been the case. In Vonnegut’s narrative the mode of simple assertion becomes, by sheer repetition, striking and strange. Since events generally appear on the same temporal plane and relate to the non-judgmental observations of the protagonist at specific moments in time, the idea of sequence and logic disappears in favor of an experiential present tense:

The coat that Billy Pilgrim got had been crumpled and frozen in such a way, and was so small, that it appeared to be not a coat but a sort of large black, three-cornered hat. There were gummy stains on it, too, like crankcase drainings or old strawberry jam. There seemed to be a dead, furry animal frozen to it. The animal was in fact the coat’s fur collar.

Billy glanced dully at the coats of his neighbors. Their coats all had brass buttons or tinsel or piping or numbers or stripes or eagles or moons or stars dangling from them. They were soldiers’ coats. Billy was the only one who had a coat from a dead civilian. So it goes. (59)

“The value of narrativity,” according to Hayden White’s well-known formulation, lies in the fact that it provides events with an imaginary coherence that they do not possess as mere sequence. Vonnegut eschews this sort of narrativity by undermining the very notion of sequence, moving forward and back in time along with his main character in a way that breaks down the notion of before and after, cause and effect (he even goes so far at one point as to narrate a bombing raid in reverse sequence ending with the minerals used to make the bomb being put back in the ground [54]). Through the associative shifts between different moments, the narrator creates new connections between events that are neither chronological nor logical, but affective. If one were to reconstruct the chronological sequence of the events related then they would end by Pilgrim’s being murdered by a certain Paul Lazarro, still out to avenge a comrade who died in the war allegedly through Pilgrim’s gormlessness. But in the actual narrative this event is related out of sequence and as part of an exploration of Pilgrim’s state of mind over a longer period. Clearly the reader is not expected to take the Tralfamadorians seriously as being on the same ontological plane as the bombing of Dresden; we are being invited instead to accept the Tralfamadorian fantasy as a way into imagining Billy Pilgrim’s post-traumatic stress and desire for calm. It is worth noting that Vonnegut’s experimental and imaginative way of representing Billy Pilgrim’s being “unstuck in time” predated much recent theorization relating to the difficulties of turning traumatic experience into a linear narrative.

Likewise, its experimentations with alternative views on time anticipate other postmodern explorations of non-linear temporalities as these have been discussed by Ursula Heise among others. Indeed, Slaughterhouse-Five is arguably an

30. Ursula K. Heise, Chronochisms: Time, Narrative, and Postmodernism (Cambridge, UK:
early example of what has come to be known as the genre of “historiographical metafiction,” that is, fictional works that combine a narrative about the past with reflection on the nature of historical representation. In this case, the storytelling opens up alternative views of temporality that are tied to the experiences of his main character: certain past moments continue to persist in the present because they belong to a traumatic past that refuses to become past and, linked to this, because they represent a continuous warning to the present generation about how hellish warfare becomes once it breaks loose. The novel can thus be said to “think” about trauma and about temporali- ties (to echo the title of Nancy Armstrong’s work How Novels Think), but it does so in the mode of imaginative storytelling and not in the mode of philosophical disquisition.

IV. THE VIEW FROM IN-BETWEEN

When Slaughterhouse-Five first appeared, it was at the cutting edge of literary innovation, but it was also recycling some features of the classical model of historical fiction. In being organized around a naïve central figure, for example, the novel recalls its ancestry in Scott’s Waverley (1814), Pushkin’s Kapitanskaia dochka (1836), and Stendhal’s La Chartreuse de Parme (1839), to mention just the most obvious. In all of these works, the author invents a naïve observer to provide a personalized, keyhole perspective on world historical events. In this regard, Vonnegut’s Billy Pilgrim is a latter-day Fabrice del Dongo who strays onto the battlefield of Waterloo in search of the heroic Napoleon, but does not recognize him when he passes by, so insignificant is his physical appearance. Classical historical novels in the Scott tradition use an ingenuous observer-participant as a way of allowing things to be seen afresh by eyes unaware of the dominant norms and undistracted by knowledge of the bigger picture. In such cases, ignorance and naiveté allow one to see more than the informed gaze: a childlike view on things also means liberation from preconceived concepts and interpretive schemata. “Estranging” techniques like these recall Tolstoy’s Kholstomer (1886), as analyzed by Viktor Shklovsky, where the “unknowing” perspective of a horse is used to provide a critique of (in)human notions of ownership. In Vonnegut’s case, Billy Pilgrim’s characteristic passivity, his apparent inability to formulate an opinion for himself, motivates the showing of more detail, or more striking ones, relating to life in the final months of the war. When he arrives at the prisoner of war camp, for example:

33. Shklovsky, “Art as Technique.”
Billy was told to hang the tag around his neck along with his American dogtags, which he did. The tag was like a salt cracker, perforated down its middle so that a strong man could snap it in two with his bare hands. In case Billy died, which he didn’t, half the tag would mark his body and half would mark his grave.

After poor Edgar Derby, the high school teacher, was shot in Dresden later on, a doctor pronounced him dead and snapped his dogtag in two. So it goes. (65)

Billy’s childlike perspective simply records what he sees without imposing a hierarchy of significance, in this case relating to the design of the dogtags and the fact of Derby’s death. The matter-of-fact acceptance of “so it goes” is a way of being neutral (Billy is someone to whom things happen; he never takes things into his own hands), but also a way of heightening the horror by presenting it in its apparent banality and its ineluctable thereness. It is the absence of judgment and the absence of hierarchy that makes the detail of the dogtag, especially the comparison with the salt cracker, so striking.

The innocent, keyhole perspective illustrates the genre’s perpetual shortcomings as an analysis of the larger framework within which political and military decisions were taken—the usual stuff of historiography about which Vonnegut says almost nothing at all. But the use of an “innocent eye” (which is presumably more or less the position that Vonnegut himself occupied in 1945) allows for the inclusion of more personal details than could be accommodated in a historiographical work concerned with the bigger picture. It specifically allows for particular attention to the sensual and experiential aspects of war, to what Lawrence Langer has called the “sense memory” of suffering: the look and feel of gangrenous feet (48, 57); the sight of food after days of fasting (65-67); rotting flesh smelling like mustard gas and roses (53); snow turning the color of sherbet (42); the first “Poo-tee-weet?” sound of a bird in the silence after the bombardment (143). Through such evocative details Slaughterhouse-Five lives up to the longstanding reputation of historical fiction for its ability to show the past in a vivid way—as having been made up of “living men,” as Carlyle put it in his appraisal of Scott, “with colour in their cheeks, with passions in their stomachs.” That a novelist like Vonnegut should focus on such details exemplifies the power of literature, as described by Astrid Erll, to make the past “observable” and hence memorable. The sensual and physical experience of war is something that inevitably tends to disappear from the accounts of those who have the bigger picture, and yet it clearly has a role to play in building an imaginative and empathic bridge between past actors and present readers.

That being said, however, it should also be noted that while Vonnegut evokes striking details, they are relatively scarce when compared to the sometimes excessive detail in classic nineteenth-century novels. Whereas earlier writers of historical fiction used their focus on individual experiences as a platform for giving extensive details relating to the embodied experience of the past, Vonnegut’s fictional world is surprisingly bare. Previous studies of historical fiction have emphasized its ability to accommodate details regarding the embodied experience of the past and to provide a sort of total history (be this in the form of background “local color” or through the incorporation of details of everyday life). But Vonnegut’s narrative seems to call for a different approach. In his aesthetics, it is not so much the plenitude as the scarcity of detail that counts. Indicative of this is the fact that although the novel is known as a book about the bombing of Dresden, we are actually given no account whatsoever of the actual bombing raids, only of their aftermath as experienced by Billy Pilgrim when he emerges from the shelter of the slaughterhouse where he had been held prisoner. Precisely because the narrative is not cluttered with detail, the details that are there leap off the page.

This brings me to what seems to me the most memorable feature of *Slaughterhouse-Five*: its peculiarly minimalist and abstract style.

V. REPRESENTATION AS UNDERSTATEMENT

In his famous “Meditations on a Hobby Horse,” E. H. Gombrich argued for a non-mimetic approach to the representational arts, which is worth recalling here. For a broomstick to work as a hobby horse in the eyes of a child, Gombrich stressed, it is enough that it have some minimal points of resemblance to a horse and, even more importantly, that you can straddle it and ride it. In other words, its success lies in its functionality and in its performativity rather than in its detailed resemblances to a living, sweating, smelly animal. Similarly, caricaturists may succeed in evoking a particular subject in a striking way with a minimum number of brush strokes. They provoke the laughter and catch the attention of viewers, precisely because they leave out detail and dare to make choices. Vonnegut’s work can best be understood on the basis of a “hobby-horse” approach to representation, in which the radical artificiality of all forms of representation is taken as a given and in which the emphasis shifts instead to its functionality: what the story does and allows others to do, not what it refers to. Taking this anti-mimetic approach means bringing his work into line, not with classical realist fiction or with historiography as it has traditionally been conceived along realist lines, but with music, poetry, and, perhaps most germane of all, cartoons. I propose that *Slaughterhouse-Five* can better be compared with the highly stylized work of graphic novelists than with the mimetic work of analogue photography (since Barthes, the most common

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39. The relative paucity of details means that those that are there have the force of a *punctum*, those random details in a photograph that strike the reader as incongruous and troubling. Roland Barthes, *La chambre claire: Note sur la photographie* (Paris: Cahiers du cinéma, 1982).
point of comparison for historiography and realism). Understatement—technically, litotes—is the dominant trope and most salient feature of Vonnegut’s narrative. The reader is struck by the grammatical simplicity of his sentences and the paratactic structure of his paragraphs, in which one simple sentence follows another. These elements are striking because they seem so outrageously inadequate a vehicle for dealing with the moral and political complexities being referred to. Surely this version of events is too simplistic, mutters the reader, surely there is more to be said on this point? There seems to be a structural gap between the gravity of the central event (the bombing of Dresden and its traumatic impact on Billy Pilgrim’s life) and the faux naïve way in which it is represented. This incongruence between subject matter and discursive register is most evident in the inclusion of childlike drawings in the body of the narrative. Vonnegut’s incidental incorporation of visual materials puts him at the beginning of more recent experimentations in intermediality from the combinations of photographs and text in the novels of W. G. Sebald to the combinations of text and drawings in the graphic novels of Art Spiegelman and Joe Sacco.

Below is the drawing of the pendant worn by Billy Pilgrim’s Tralfamadorian lover above her naked breasts:

The drawing is embarrassingly simple. The fact that the familiar words of the Serenity Prayer are displayed in their handwritten form in a printed text heightens their everydayness as a mainstay of self-help groups. It also heightens their fragility as mainstay, as simply words in their most naked form. However, the initial embarrassment caused by the visual presence of a handwritten prayer dangling above the nipples of an extraterrestrial does

41. Barthes, “Le discours de l’histoire”; “L’effet de réel.” The reliance on realism as a model for historiography has been criticized by Hayden White, who argues that a modernist aesthetic as developed by writers like Joyce and Woolf would be much more appropriate to our modernist understanding of history; the terms in which White pursues his critique, however, remain within the mimetic model in that they imply a congruence between the style used and the world represented. Hayden White, “The Modernist Event,” in Figural Realism: Studies in the Mimesis Effect (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 66-86.
make one start having to think about or rethink the distinction between the everyday and the profound, between mere words and their consolatory power, between the egregiously simple and basic truths. The prayer may be handwritten and prepackaged (like all prayers), and hence out of place in a work of literature, but is that a reason for dismissing it? When does anyone know when things could be made different? How does “knowledge” relate to wisdom? And might not wisdom in the present be more important than knowledge about the past, since it feeds into future action? Questions like these—at once banal and absolutely fundamental—seem especially pertinent in a novel where the phrase “so it goes” is repeated like an ever-more preposterous mantra every time the death of any living being is mentioned. In being thus repeated, “so it goes” continuously draws attention away from actual events in the past to the ritualized speech acts of the one now narrating them. “So it goes”: is that indeed ALL there is to be said?

In her *Sublime Desire: History and Post-1960s Fiction*, Amy Elias has called attention to the non-realist dimension at the heart of classical historical fiction, noting among other things the affinity between Scott and the romance tradition. In discussing more recent fiction, moreover, Elias emphasizes the ways in which various authors thematize the unrepresentability of modern history at the same time as their desire to find words to express its “sublime” complexities. Vonnegut is curiously absent from Elias’s line-up. The fact that he thematizes trauma and designs his narrative around Billy’s being “unstuck in time” might seem to justify analyzing *Slaughterhouse-Five* in terms of the “sublime” and hence as an attempt to present the unrepresentable. There is certainly a case to be made for this; earlier I discussed the novel’s experimental and imaginative way of making traumatic experience observable. Yet somehow the notion of the “unrepresentable” or the sublime is not sufficient to catch the peculiar qualities of Vonnegut’s narrative, and it may be for this reason that Elias decided in the end to leave him out of her picture. Another line of approach is needed, and I propose the following: to shift the emphasis away from the matter of representation and (un)representability (how a text refers), to the matter of performativity (what a text does in the here and now). Following what was said earlier about Gombrich’s hobby horse, we should see Vonnegut’s work in terms of the sort of cultural work it does in the present, and not in terms of the degree to which it retrospectively fills in the gaps of history or fails to do so. This means re-anchoring his narrative in the present of its writing and reading rather than in the events of 1945 or their post-war aftermath.

Presenting a story in the form of understatement, especially a story about such serious matters, is not necessarily an admission of impotence and it need not be equated with the expression of powerlessness inherent in the notion of “presenting the unrepresentable.” To Understate may also be an act of provocation. As Luisa Passerini has argued in an interesting series of reflections on the varieties of silence, some types of silence express repression or speechlessness, whereas others signal empowerment and the exercise of choice. Following this line of

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reasoning, I argue that Vonnegut’s minimalism is a defiant one, as strong as the lines of the caricaturist. Like the latter, he withholds information and withholds judgment in order to engage his readers in a reflection on the trivial and the serious, on knowledge and wisdom, on agency and passivity, and on the horrors of war. In this sense the novel is not a representation at all, but a performance directed toward readers. The repetition of the matter-of-fact “So it goes” is less a statement of fact than a displaying of language, with the emphasis lying on what the statement is doing here and now rather than on what it refers to. So it goes: can you, the reader, imagine it differently?

In all of this the question of historical accuracy with regard to events of 1945 is a bit beside the point. More to the point is the question of affect and illocutionary force: through its specifically literary and tongue-in-cheek qualities, the narrative provokes, shocks, amuses, and throughout all of the above, though never in a heavy-handed way, exhorts one to think about future and present wars and question their necessity. In other words, through this novelistic performance, the emphasis shifts continuously from the pastness of the bombing to its continued relevance in the present and future. It is about “history” in the here and now and about the idea of war and destruction, as much as it is about the past as such. The inclusion of Truman’s speech on the bombing of Hiroshima along with passing references to the war in Vietnam, where Billy’s son is serving, support the argument that Vonnegut’s ultimate concern is not with the bombing of Dresden in 1945 in itself, but with the ongoing moral injunction emanating from the sufferings of others in the past to refrain from stepping blindly into present and future wars. In short: the past is not so much an object of knowledge to be re-presented in the form of a truthful account of how it was “then” as much as it is a spectral presence that, like the ghost of Hamlet, demands action in the present and future. It highlights not so much the need for knowledge, as the wisdom to know the difference between necessity and choice, and the will to make the difference.44 Slaughterhouse-Five is an anti-war novel as well as a novel about Dresden, and it is this combination of past events and present relevance that makes this narrative performance very different from a historiographical project.

The crucial difference is partly a matter of evidence, as we have seen. It is also related to the fact that Vonnegut is less concerned with explaining possible differences in the causes and strategic aims of various wars than with zooming in vividly on the bottom-line reality of all wars: their horror. It follows from this that the main thrust of his novel about Dresden and its aftermath is as much exhortative (directed toward energizing) as it is epistemological (directed toward knowledge). The scenes it evokes range widely from the past into the present, and it treats those topics in an engaging and distinctive way—sparkling, comical, provocative—that makes it still highly readable today, almost forty years after it was first published. If anything, the passage of time has increased its literary value, like the patina on an old leather sofa. What it does not do, as we saw in

the beginning, is give a view of Dresden that answers to present-day historical insights into the scale and causes of that event.

VI. SO IT GOES, OR DOES IT?

In trying to pin down Vonnegut's highly eccentric novel I have been concerned with showing its distinctiveness against the background of various traditions within the constantly evolving genre of historical fiction. I have argued that Vonnegut succeeds in writing a memorable book because he combines things in unexpected, idiosyncratic, and ironical ways, and engages the reader in thinking about the limits of fatalism. It may indeed be characteristic of all strong writing that it is one of a kind. But is there any more general lesson to be learned from this particular case about the role of historical novels in the production of cultural remembrance, in the ongoing circulation across different cultural domains of stories about the past?

As I indicated at the beginning, answering this question involves moving beyond the analysis of discrete texts to considering the ways they adapt earlier accounts and give rise to new ones. In the liquid interplay between narratives, versions of the past are picked up, recycled, criticized, and transformed in other works. Within this process, I argue, fiction works both together with historiography, and against it. It is because (freebooting) artists and (disciplined) historians are constantly pulling away from each other that certain topics remain “alive” and feed into public discussions. Such sites of memory remain alive (in Greenblatt’s sense of generating social energieia) not because their importance was established once and for all, and their significance pinned down in an immutable truth, but because they continue to generate discussion about what actually happened, what it is important to know in the first place and, finally, what sort of lessons we can draw from what we do know when we try to deal with contemporary realities. The key point to understand is that it is impossible for any single practice (whether historiography or the arts) to carry out all of this cultural work. This has to be the product of different forms of expression working together and bouncing off one another.

Moreover, as I have argued elsewhere at greater length, literary works themselves can also play a variety of roles in the ongoing production of collective remembrance: as relayers of knowledge established by others, as catalysts that provoke interest in particular topics hitherto left out of the picture, as canonical objects of remembrance that are themselves recalled as cultural icons, and, finally, as benchmarks whose critical rewriting may subsequently be used to express a new interpretation of a particular period or discussion. As this list suggests, literary works do not have the same built-in obsolescence as works of historiography, which by and large overtake one another, and they continue to acquire new meanings as they are read with pleasure by later generations. The reception of

46. For a more elaborate version of this argument, see Rigney, “The Dynamics of Remembrance.”
Slaughterhouse-Five suggests that the novel played all of these roles at different times within American culture and within shifting interpretive frames.

To begin with, the book was arguably the catalyst that helped turn “Dresden” into a site of American memory evoking large-scale and morally-questionable destruction on the part of the Allied forces (which was itself, of course, a 1960s rewriting of the legend of gung-ho American heroism). Slaughterhouse-Five subsequently acquired a canonical status as a masterpiece of 1960s American literature with its re-visioning of the legacy of World War II and as an intervention in the then-current debates on Vietnam. As a legacy of the anti-war movement in the 1960s, moreover, it has subsequently been evoked in more recent discussions of American foreign policy (“so it goes” is popular with bloggers). The fact that the novel can continue to do cultural work even at a point when its factual base has been discredited is testimony in part to the fact that its value is not restricted to the information it offers. If it is still sometimes cited as a source of information on the Dresden bombing itself, then “So it goes.” Or not?

Whether Vonnegut’s novel has actually influenced the course of historical research is a moot point, but it has certainly been invoked as a reference point in discussions on the morality and justification of the bombing. Among its various roles, then, the book has also been the subject of rewritings on the part of historians both in the form of passing comments and more lengthy interventions. Thus the recent book-length account of the Dresden bombing written by popular historian Frederick Taylor explicitly situates itself in relation to Vonnegut’s work and takes it as a benchmark. Taylor’s preface opens with a double invocation of the novel as, on the one hand, an “acidly surreal masterpiece” that cast a spell over a whole generation and, on the other hand, a “figment of the imagination” that, together with the works of Irving and others, had succeeded in creating and perpetuating an idea of Dresden as “the unforgivable thing that our fathers did in the name of freedom and humanity.”

In many ways, the revisionist account offered by Taylor, in which he nuances the strategic thinking behind the bombing without trying to exonerate those who made mistakes, can be seen as a counter-narrative to the “legend” formulated by Vonnegut. History writes back.

It is all the more striking, therefore, that Taylor should himself actually quote extensively from Vonnegut’s novel as a source of insight into events on the ground in Dresden during the cleaning up operations in the days following the firestorm. Even as Taylor rejected the novelist’s overall view of the event, he does incorporate into his own account Vonnegut’s specific rendition of the aftermath of the bombing—interestingly, the part of the novel that was directly based on the writer’s personal experience on the ground in 1945. At this point, the historian’s text and that of Vonnegut’s personal testimony/novelistic fantasy flow into each other, with Taylor using Vonnegut’s words:

Prisoners of war from many lands came together that morning at such and such a place in Dresden. It had been decreed that here was where the digging for bodies was to begin. So the digging began. . . .

ANN RIGNEY

A German soldier with a flashlight went down into the darkness, was gone a long time. When he finally came back, he told a superior on the rim of the hole that there were dozens of bodies down there. They were sitting on benches. They were unmarked.

So it goes. (Taylor 399-400; quoting Slaughterhouse-Five, 141-142)

At the beginning of this analysis I pointed out that Vonnegut got his numbers wrong and that in doing so he contributed to putting Dresden on the map as the “greatest massacre in European history,” a view of the Allied Bombing that has been disputed since then not only for its exaggeration of the actual number of casualties but for its neglect of the strategic reasoning behind the decision to bomb the city (about which there is still debate). It is this misconception and simplification that Taylor among others is trying to combat. Whether his work will succeed in displacing Vonnegut’s is a moot point, given the cultural impact of the novelist’s work aided by its literary qualities and the educational system in which it figures as part of the literary canon. But if Vonnegut himself did not get the figures right, his work can nevertheless be seen as helping to provide reasons for turning the abstractions of casualty figures into the particular sufferings of “everyman.”

The Israeli novelist David Grossman wrote in a recent essay that the cultural work of literature consists precisely in its ability to translate abstractions into individualities. As such it offers the hope of a counterweight to the military powers that dehumanize their targets and turn them into the casualty figures or quantifiable collateral damage. Vonnegut’s literary performance in Slaughterhouse-Five unwittingly commits the error of replacing 30,000 or so victims with about 130,000 and hence eliding the very considerable distinction between these two figures (in this case, there were fortunately almost 100,000 fewer victims than he had estimated with the help of Irving). But at a certain point, we may conclude from his novel that numbers say nothing at all beyond “more or less.” The message Vonnegut brings home through his naive, understated narrative is that every collateral victim may be one too many. Although it itself gets the figures wrong, then, it itself also works against indifference to figures by forcing us to imagine the effect on the ground. This provocation to think about “how it goes” can never be a final truth, for that is the nature of provocations. But it is one that continues to be heard from the pages of Vonnegut’s book, which has survived well beyond its official sell-by date as a source of information.

Utrecht University

49. My argument here is inspired by Nancy Partner’s suggestion that the greatest threat to truth is not from illusion as such, but from indifference; Nancy Partner, “Historicity in an Age of Reality-Fictions,” in A New Philosophy of History, ed. F. R. Ankersmit and Hans Kellner (London: Reaktion Books, 1995), 21-39.