

TRAUMA AND THE FANTASTIC  
IN TWENTIETH CENTURY WAR FICTION

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A Thesis presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School  
University of Missouri

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In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

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by  
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MAY 2010

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The undersigned, appointed by the Dean of the Graduate School, have examined the thesis entitled

TRAUMA AND THE FANTASTIC  
IN TWENTIETH CENTURY WAR FICTION

Presented by Michael Horton,

A candidate for the degree of Master of Arts,

And hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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Professor Samuel Cohen

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Professor Steven Watts

For Tiff, who has supported me through everything.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to recognize my advisor, Samuel Cohen, for the direction and support he provided through all phases of the research and writing process. His numerous readings and rereadings of this project (and what at times seemed like its disparate fragments) were invaluable. Additionally, I would like to thank the other members of my committee, Andrew Hoberek and Steven Watts.

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the relationship between trauma and the literary mode of the fantastic. While the fantastic has historically been understood as an escapist mode or a literature of wish fulfillment, it may also play an important role in how victims of trauma construct their narratives. The fantastic does not simply leave trauma behind or provide pleasant alternatives to actual experiences; rather, it can constitute the acting out of trauma, facilitate working through, and even enable victims to bear witness to the traumatic past.

After a brief overview of both trauma theory and the effects of combat trauma, this study offers readings of Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, John A. Williams' *Captain Blackman*, and Tim O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato* to show that fantastic elements in trauma narratives can be read as responses to and manifestations of trauma. The second chapter returns to O'Brien's novel to examine the fantastic mode as a means of healing. The study concludes with an analysis of the fantastic as bearing witness to real historical events in addition to those that make up the experience of trauma itself.

## Introduction

Of course, these kinds of ailments, in one form or another, have been around as long as war itself. Historical examples date back to ancient Greece where the Spartans called it “fear shedding.” After the American Civil War, the term “soldier’s heart” was used; in World War I they called it “shell shock”; later “combat fatigue”; and in the 1970s, it was known simply as "Post-Vietnam syndrome."

*Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates, October 26, 2009*

As Secretary Gates suggests, both trauma and its now commonly-known and frequently-discussed counterpart Posttraumatic<sup>1</sup> Stress Disorder (PTSD) have been a part of armed combat, and indeed the human experience, for much longer than they have been either articulated in those particular words or understood as they are today. In fact, the American Psychological Association did not recognize Posttraumatic Stress Disorder as a diagnosis until 1980, almost one hundred years after Hermann Oppenheim coined the term “traumatic neurosis” (Lerner 126). In a way, though, this failure to describe or define PTSD in specific terms reflects the very nature of trauma: the traumatic event is precisely that which, for the victim, resists articulation. Just as trauma was (and remains) difficult to outline or pin down, so does the traumatic event defy the sense-making process of narrativization.

Despite this difficulty, novels have long presented readers with narratives of trauma. And they do so, according to Laurie Vickroy, by “go[ing] beyond presenting trauma as subject matter or in characterization; they also incorporate the rhythms,

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<sup>1</sup> In recent literature from the American Psychological Association, the term *posttraumatic* is a single, unhyphenated word, and I adhere to this convention. Some of texts cited in this study, however, use the hyphenated *post-traumatic* instead.



processes, and uncertainties of trauma within [their] consciousness and structures” (xiv). Yet narrativization is one of the novel’s most central operations: it creates stories in language. A novel about trauma or traumatic events thus seemingly, and paradoxically, puts into words the non-narrativizable. This study is at its most basic level concerned with how this happens, that is, with how the events and the emotions of unrepresentable traumatic experiences come to be represented in words. Specifically, through my reading of three war novels—Tim O’Brien’s *Going After Cacciato*, John A. Williams’ *Captain Blackman*, and Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five*—I will argue that the narrativization of trauma is intimately connected to the literary mode of the fantastic, which, for the purposes of this study, I define in both Rosemary Jackson’s more general sense of “the introduction of the ‘unreal’ [into] the category of the ‘real,’” and Tzvetan Todorov’s narrower sense of the reader’s or character’s hesitation between explaining an event by “natural causes or supernatural causes” (4; 26). My analysis of these novels suggests that elements of the fantastic emerge in certain trauma narratives almost by necessity, as if the fantastic is a natural response to or expression of trauma. That is to say, although the fantastic appears in these novels as the result of the authors’ conscious aesthetic decisions, their use of the fantastic performs for the reader a real victim’s actual difficulties in constructing a narrative of traumatic events, difficulties that are overcome in ways that read as or sound like the fantastic. More significantly, however, I contend that the fantastic also serves the dual purposes of enabling a victim to work through their trauma and of allowing any person engaged in retelling a traumatic history (be it the original victim, a novelist, or a historian) to bear witness to it in an ethically appropriate manner. Because this study is so much about the real conditions and experiences of

trauma, my goal, then, is to contribute to scholarship in trauma theory, from which the fantastic has been largely omitted, as much as it is to provide commentary on these novels.

Many critics identify Sigmund Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1922), along with several of his later texts, as the basis for the modern understanding of trauma, though it is worth noting that significant studies do predate those texts, such as Sándor Ferenczi's *Psycho-analysis and the War Neuroses* (1921), to which Freud wrote the introduction, and Hermann Oppenheim's work in the 1880s. Ruth Leys locates the origin of trauma studies earlier still, arguing that it in fact begins with John Erichsen's *On Railway and Other Injuries of the Nervous System* (1867), even if Erichsen mistakenly attributes the effects of trauma in railroad accidents to "shock or concussion of the spine" (Leys 3). Nonetheless, as Samuel Cohen notes, trauma theory as we currently know it really takes shape in two issues of *American Imago* in 1991 and, from there, develops over the course of the 1990s (226). Today the field consists of work from a wide range of disciplines, including psychology, neurobiology, history, and literature, the most prominent of these studies probably being Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996). Although not without its problems,<sup>2</sup> Caruth's text occupies a central position for trauma theorists (and, for that matter, for critics of

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<sup>2</sup> Caruth, like some others, at times makes trauma such an all-encompassing term that it becomes almost useless or, worse, that it undermines the very real, specific traumas suffered by individual people. Perhaps most famously, she claims that history is in fact "a history of trauma," the implications of which—that history is inherently traumatic or that history is perceived like trauma—remain problematic, even if initially quite fascinating (*Unclaimed* 18). If all history is perceived like trauma, why should we care about particular victims' narratives? If all history is traumatic, is everyone a survivor? What then is special about a specific traumatic event? In *Post-traumatic Culture*, Kirby Farrell echoes this idea when he writes of a 1990s "post-traumatic mood [that is] a fairly straightforward response to the slings and arrows of recent history" (5).

contemporary trauma theory, such as Leys) and therefore informs the work at hand to a greater extent than any other single work.

The word *trauma* comes from the Greek for “wound,” which Caruth observes, “originally referr[ed] to an injury inflicted on a body” (*Unclaimed* 4). Only later did trauma come to refer to the mind’s response to witnessing or experiencing events outside of normal experience. According to the dominant views of trauma, such events result in the shattering of the victim’s sense of wholeness and sense of self. In *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, Dominick LaCapra writes, “Trauma brings about a dissociation of affect and representation: one disorientingly feels what one cannot represent; one numbingly represents what one cannot feel” (42). Meanwhile, the events themselves are experienced as gaps: they are so terrible, so absolutely incomprehensible to the victim that they are not experienced as they happen and therefore become unavailable to willful recall. Thus, Caruth observes, trauma is only known at all “in and through its inherent forgetting” (*Unclaimed* 17). And it is through this forgetting that the victim suffers: as the mind tries to understand the event that was never consciously experienced, the event paradoxically returns in the form of literal reenactments, intrusive thoughts, hallucinations, flashbacks, and nightmares.<sup>3</sup> Here, even time seems to break down for the victim: the past refuses to remain *past*, causing the victim to relive the fear and the pain over and over again, even while the event remains unrepresentable because it was never fully grasped in the first place.

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<sup>3</sup> Other clinical symptoms of PTSD include avoidance, emotional numbing, difficulty sleeping, irritability, and emotional outbursts (Hamblen 2). Although none of these responses to trauma is a part of my study, each is significant. If we forget about them, we deny the experiences of those who happen to exhibit these particular, perhaps less-pronounced symptoms. Their trauma is just as real as the traumas that manifest themselves as nightmares or flashbacks.

Despite what I may seem to imply by choosing three war novels to illustrate my points, trauma is by no means something that affects only soldiers or those involved in combat. Indeed, both the American Psychological Association and the United States Department of Veterans Affairs remind us that a number of events, ranging from sexual abuse to serious accidents to natural disasters, may be experienced as traumatic events and thus have serious psychological effects, to include Posttraumatic Stress Disorder.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, the acronym PTSD, and, correspondingly, the popular conception of trauma, is today inextricably linked with war, particularly the Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan wars, due largely to the many thousands of veterans still suffering as a result of their experiences in those conflicts, not to mention the preponderance of media coverage they receive. A simple keyword search for PTSD on *Google*, for example, reveals hundreds of stories from nearly every major news outlet, both television and print. Among them are studies on the long-term effects of combat stress, editorials expressing fear about the inability of United States mental health facilities to deal with the sheer number of affected men and women, and narratives of hardship and crisis, like that of an Indianapolis man, a veteran of two deployments and my longtime friend, who made headlines last year by engaging in an eight-hour armed standoff with police before being subdued by bean bag rounds.<sup>5</sup>

Such occurrences seem almost inevitable, though, when we take into consideration the RAND Corporation's 2008 study *Invisible Wounds of War: Psychological and Cognitive Injuries, Their Consequences, and Services to Assist*

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<sup>4</sup> See Jessica Hamblen, "What is PTSD?"; "Trauma," *APA.org*; and "PTSD," *APA.org*.

<sup>5</sup> My friend is now doing comparatively well, due in no small part to the judge's decision upon a treatment program in lieu of a jail sentence. Nonetheless, this incident remains a significant part of my motivation for writing about trauma.

*Recovery.* The findings, reached through both a study of existing medical literature and a new survey of OIF and OEF veterans, suggest that 14% of the 1.64 million service members who have been deployed since September 11, 2001, or approximately 300,000 men and women, suffer from Posttraumatic Stress Disorder or a related condition (xxi). Distressingly, only 53% of survey respondents reporting symptoms of PTSD had sought psychological treatment within the previous year. The findings also note that the percentage of those receiving quality care is likely less (xxii). And, while violence in Iraq has significantly decreased since the publication of this report, there appears to be little reason to believe trends will improve drastically in the near future, as both the number of US troops and the level of violence in Afghanistan have greatly increased in that same time. Trauma due to combat experiences is thus one of the central issues facing the United States at present, one with far-reaching moral, cultural, and economic implications, and one which we must all try to understand.

By not only telling stories of traumatic events but by performing for readers the composing of those stories, all three of these novels provide a small part of that understanding. O'Brien's National Book Award winning *Going After Cacciato* tells the story of Army Specialist Paul Berlin, who, in turn, is passing time in an observation post in Vietnam by telling *himself* a story. Imagining a series of events that involve over-the-top action and heroism, improbable coincidences, and physical impossibilities (most famously the squad's miraculous escape from a tunnel system by "falling out," which, as many have noted, recalls *Alice in Wonderland*), he tries to answer the question of "what might have happened" if the squad had chased Private Cacciato who, in the beginning of the novel, goes AWOL with intention of walking to the Paris Peace Accords (29).

Interspersed among the two main narrative threads—the Cacciato chase and Berlin’s reflections in the tower—are chapters dedicated to Berlin’s memories, also narrated by Berlin, many of which relate terrifying or gruesome instances sometimes involving the death of a squad mate. Thus, both Tim O’Brien the author and Paul Berlin the character are taking part in narrativizing trauma as well as creating narratives of the fantastic.

John A. Williams and the titular protagonist of *Captain Blackman* have a similar relationship. Within the first few pages of the text, Abraham Blackman is critically wounded in Vietnam. In an attempt to draw fire away from his troops and to direct them away from an ambush, he stands up during a firefight, taking several AK-47 rounds in the process. Afterwards, while fading in and out of consciousness, Blackman lives multiple lives as a Black soldier in every major military conflict in United States history, from the Revolutionary War to the Spanish-American War to World War II. In each of those episodes, he endures the death of friends and sees incredible violence, as much of it carried out by racist allies as by enemy combatants, bringing him face to face with the traumas he previously only knew through history books. Additionally, he frequently encounters the fantastic, occasionally in the form of completely inexplicable or impossible events, but more often in the form of violence so unfathomable that it feels fantastic; neither the reader nor Captain Blackman want to believe such atrocities are really possible. That these narratives are dreams or, by some critics’ accounts, hallucinations makes *Captain Blackman* different from *Going After Cacciato*, as does the suggestion that Blackman is not dreaming but actually travelling through time.<sup>6</sup> Yet, the

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<sup>6</sup> In an interview, Williams’ son Dennis says: “I know [my father] was telling me once how he was trying to work out the technique.... Characters that go through time were going to be treated as ghosts.... It’s sort of like Blackman’s consciousness first goes back and these alter egos are created, they sort of have a life of their own, for they seem to exist for long periods of time in the past” (Cash 161).

straightforwardness of the dreams gives the novel a strong affinity to *Cacciato* as well; the text reads as if Blackman is, along with Williams, relating accounts of past wars and of trauma, accounts that are also about Blackman's current life in the current war.

The layers of narration and of narrativization in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Kurt Vonnegut's "famous book about Dresden," are somewhat more complex (18). Here Vonnegut is both the author and a character (who is also the narrator and, moreover, who as an artistic creation must be understood as distinct from the "real" Kurt Vonnegut), but he is not the protagonist. After the first chapter, Vonnegut-the-character/narrator focuses on the tale of Billy Pilgrim, a chaplain's assistant in the Second World War who "has come unstuck in time" and, as a result, experiences time non-chronologically (23). At seemingly random intervals, he is transported to other moments earlier or later in his own life: his own conception, a New Year's Eve party in the future, a plane crash—of which he is the only survivor—and his abduction by aliens from the planet Tralfamadore. In the main, most linear part of the narrative, Billy is captured by the Germans, taken to a prison camp, and then, like the "real" Vonnegut, sent to Dresden, which is shortly thereafter firebombed by the Allied Forces. Vonnegut appears at several key intervals in these sections of the book to let the reader know that he shares at least this part of Billy Pilgrim's experience, that he shares this trauma. Yet, every time he does so, he refers to himself as "I" to remind the reader that neither Billy nor an omniscient narrator but Kurt Vonnegut-the-character is telling the story. In this way, both the living and fictional Vonneguts are narrativizing trauma, and not just their own, but that of Billy Pilgrim as well.

The insight and understanding provided by these novels cannot be underestimated. In fact, the lack of understanding about trauma is in many ways the root of what may be becoming a public health crisis. Before the APA introduced the Posttraumatic Stress Disorder diagnosis, trauma was generally seen as “an inherent individual weakness” and not as the product of events outside the individual (Friedman). The traumatized person thus becomes a coward or a malingerer instead of a victim. This type of thinking still contributes appreciably to the stigma attached to seeking psychological help and therefore discourages soldiers from reporting symptoms or even acknowledging their trauma. And without this acknowledgment, there can be no hope of ever moving beyond the trauma. James Berger insists that to begin the process of recovery the victim has to bring trauma “to the consciousness through narrative” (27). The event and its pre-narrative returns (nightmares, flashbacks) must be acknowledged and somehow the unrepresentable must be made into a coherent account. Only then can the event be translated into a non-traumatic memory, a memory that is no longer an incomprehensible return.

But, in order for this to happen, writes Mark Heberle, author of *A Trauma Artist: Tim O'Brien and the Fiction of Vietnam*, “The survivor must feel safe to fully share his or her story with others, an audience that will not be incredulous or dismissive or feel threatened by the unspeakable horror that has left the narrator with unresolved feelings of grief, anger, guilt, shame, disgust” (13). For this reason, understanding the relationship between trauma and the fantastic is much more significant than it might at first appear. If we as readers or listeners do not appreciate that the fantastic can tell the story of trauma, as I will argue in my first chapter readings of *Going After Cacciato*, *Captain Blackman*,



and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, then we do worse than simply misunderstand the novels. We are in fact prescribing how actual victims should narrativize traumatic events, implicitly demanding that their accounts be mimetic, that they refer to the real world and events. Sometimes, though, it simply is not possible for the victim to do so, nor is it always ethical. The victim needs to feel free to piece together the traumatic narrative however he or she is able, which, like a novel, may include any variety of narrative modes. As Heberle rightly says, we must not be “incredulous or dismissive or feel threatened” even when the tale is at its most fantastic. If we do not foster a more open discourse, not only returning veterans but thousands of other traumatized people are going to remain unable to render their traumatic memories as narrative, which in turn leaves them unable to overcome them.

## **Chapter 1—Acting Out: The Fantastic as Trauma**

The fantastic traces in that which cannot be said, that which evades articulation.

*Rosemary Jackson, Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*

The recent documentary *Restrepo* by Sebastian Junger and Tim Hetherington examines the lives of fifteen U.S. Army soldiers deployed to a tiny base built mostly from plywood and sandbags in Afghanistan’s Korangal Valley, one of the most dangerous places in the world. Though the film is composed primarily of footage recorded during the soldiers’ year-long tour of duty, it also contains several interviews with them that were conducted after returning to the United States. In one the most

moving yet difficult-to-watch portions of the film, a young sergeant who is speaking about the death of his friend Staff Sergeant Rougle has to stop in the middle of his story, asking the interviewer for a “time out.” But instead of cutting away, the camera remains focused on him, until, after a long silence, he shakes his head and tells the camera he “lost [his] train of thought.” This moment, I suggest, *is* the traumatic gap. It is not solely that the soldier is being overcome by emotion. Rather, even after composing himself, even after preparing himself to begin speaking again, the young man cannot tell the story. There is some core, difficult-to-understand memory that cannot be adequately represented in words. Trying to address the memory directly, through a realistic narrative that supposes a mimetic relationship to the actual events, the soldier cannot speak his trauma.

I maintain that one way the mind bridges this gap between trauma and narrative is through the literary mode of the fantastic. Historically, though, literary criticism has treated the fantastic as escapism or, says Rosemary Jackson, “as an art form providing vicarious gratification” (2). And on the surface, such characterizations can seem somewhat fair. Many novels, especially those found today in bookstores under the heading *Fantasy*, fulfill precisely those functions. As Jackson observes, those texts create worlds which are *compensatory*, which fill up a lack, making up for an apprehension of actuality as disordered and insufficient. These fantasies *transcend* that actuality. Their romance base suggests the universe is, ultimately, a self-regulating mechanism in which goodness, stability, and order will eventually prevail. (173-74)

These definitions, though, apply to only a fraction of the novels containing fantastic elements. They seem largely useless for discussing texts whose stories are rooted in our own world and its logic, and to impose these readings on such narratives is both distorting and reductive. As Jackson notes, it problematically forces us to read Gregor Samsa's transformation in *The Metamorphosis*, for example, as a manifestation of the desire for death, a reading most will identify as, if not wholly *wrong*, then too simple for so rich a novella (178). Moreover, these definitions provide no account for *why* the fantastic enters a narrative at all. If, as Freud contends, "there is nothing arbitrary or undetermined in the workings of the mind," the fantastic must be explainable in more meaningful ways than escape and 'vicarious gratification' because those things can be provided by any number of narrative modes (*Psychopathology* 232). The fantastic, then, must have some greater significance than traditional criticism has ascribed to it.

My emphasis here on what the fantastic is *not*—or at least what it is not limited to—is central to my conception of how traumatic events get translated into stories. My argument, put in the most basic terms, is that in the three novels being discussed the fantastic is a response to trauma. Of course, not all traumatic events get turned into fantastic narratives, nor do all fantastic narratives point back to trauma. But in *Going After Cacciato*, *Captain Blackman*, and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the connection between the two is immediately evident, even if only in a superficial way. In *Going After Cacciato*, several terrifying combat experiences (at least two of which induce Paul Berlin to urinate on himself) and the deaths of several soldiers prompt Berlin to tell an impossible story about leaving the war in Vietnam to go to France. The bombing of Dresden produces a narrative featuring time travel and aliens. Getting shot in Vietnam and facing racial

injustices lead Captain Blackman to dream about living multiple lives in the past. Or, if we read *Captain Blackman* as the story of a soldier actually travelling through time, then Williams' own attempt to write about traumatic events produces a fantastic narrative.

Significantly, these admittedly simplistic readings of the novels are precisely the kinds of interpretations that have prompted critics to identify the fantastic narratives as escapist or as mere wish fulfillment. John Jakaitis, for instance, claims that the point of Berlin's tale is to "to deny [the Vietnam War's] reality through his imagination" (194). Similarly, Jack Slay Jr. writes, "The going-after-Cacciato chapters ... represent an escape; they are a pretending, a chance for Berlin momentarily to forget the war" (80). And of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Charles Harris asserts that the Billy Pilgrim plot simply reveals Vonnegut-the-character's desire to make the war less painful: "By reinventing the nature of time, Vonnegut deprives death of its sting" (238).<sup>7</sup> The problem with these appraisals of the fantastic narratives, and the reason I depart from them, is that they tend to make the novels about trauma in only a very limited sense. This approach takes the trauma out of the fantastic narrative, and the fantastic narrative becomes something that is simply *after* trauma, pointing to traumatic events only to the extent that it tries to leave them behind. But neither Paul Berlin nor the other protagonists are just dreaming events better than those they have actually experienced. Rather, the fantastic narratives in these novels are the products of trauma in that they tell the shattering of self and of narrative engendered by trauma. Even when the fantastic narratives seem to be departures from the original traumatic events, trauma remains a part of their narrative structures and, furthermore, is represented by and *returns as* the fantastic elements themselves.

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<sup>7</sup> I am not deliberately neglecting *Captain Blackman* here. Few critics have written about the novel, and even less discuss its use of the fantastic, except to say that *Captain Blackman* is unique among Williams' writings because of it.

Of the three novels, trauma's influence on the form and content of the narrative is most apparent in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. At the heart of the novel is Kurt Vonnegut's (real) and Billy Pilgrim's (fictional) survivals of the Allied bombing of Dresden in World War II, which, according to Vonnegut's research, killed 130,000 people, almost all of whom were civilians.<sup>8</sup> But, despite the fact that the novel is supposed to be Vonnegut's "famous book about Dresden" (18), neither he nor Billy arrive in the city until almost three-fourths of way through the text, and the destruction itself occupies only a little over two pages. Moreover, in those two pages the story of the bombing is told twice, the main difference between the two narratives being their perspectives, not the raw information they provide. First, we read it as Billy's memory of the event (being narrated to us by Vonnegut-the-character):

He was down in the meat locker on the night that Dresden was destroyed. There were sounds like giant footsteps above. Those were sticks of high-explosive bombs. The giants walked and walked. The meat locker was a very safe shelter. All that happened down there was an occasional shower of calcimine. The Americans and four of their guards and a few dressed carcasses were down there, and nobody else. The rest of the guards had, before the raid began, gone to the comforts of their own homes and Dresden. They were all being killed with their families.

So it goes. (177)

then again as Billy's memory of talking about it:

"Dresden was destroyed on the night of February 13, 1945," Billy Pilgrim began. "We came out of our shelter the next day." He told Montana about

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<sup>8</sup> The BBC reports that a recent study suggests the number is much lower, near 25,000.

the four guards who, in their astonishment and grief, resembled a barbershop quartet. He told her about the stockyards with all the fenceposts gone, with roofs and windows gone—told her about seeing little logs lying around. There were people who had been caught in the firestorm. So it goes. (179)

There is very little in *Slaughterhouse-Five* beyond these two paragraphs that attempts to engage the destruction of Dresden in such a direct way. And even here, the narrative does not focus solely on the bombing itself or its effects. Vonnegut's attention moves from the explosions to the "safe shelter," dwelling there for several lines before moving back to realities of death outside, while Billy can only briefly discuss the aftermath in a manner that draws attention away from the loss of human life. Furthermore, neither narrative contains an overtly emotional response. Indeed, Billy summarizes the whole thing in what might be the most detached way possible: "Dresden was destroyed on the night of February 13, 1945." There are few details, no reaction, and no judgment. It simply becomes a cold fact.

In place of a grand war story telling the military maneuvers that led to and came after Dresden, instead of intense action or battle scenes or lists of details and statistics, Vonnegut gives the reader an account of a meek, bumbling soldier who "has come unstuck in time" and is abducted by aliens several years after the war (23). Because Billy Pilgrim spends large chunks of the novel moving backward and forward in time, the novel devotes fewer pages than would be expected in a conventional war novel—what Jeffrey Walsh calls "the Hemingway-Mailer-James Jones ... line of war fiction" (196)—to the days leading up the bombing, and fewer still to the narrative present (the year

1968). Several subsections of the novel leave Earth altogether: by Billy's own reckoning, he lives for years in the zoo on Tralfamadore with the famous actress Montana Wildhack (nobody at home notices because the Tralfamadoreans use a time warp). Yet, in the first chapter, Vonnegut informs us that his original intention was to write a completely different type of story, one more firmly grounded in reality: "I thought it would be easy for me to write about the destruction of Dresden, *since all I would have to do would be to report on what I had seen*" (2, emphasis added). He continues:

But not many words about Dresden came from my mind then—not enough of them to make a book, anyway. And not many words come now, either, when I have become an old fart with his memories and his Pall Malls, with his sons full grown.

I think of how useless the Dresden part of my memory has been, and yet how tempting Dresden has been to write about. (2)

Later still, he admits that he has written five thousand pages, all of which he has thrown away. He claims even having tried charts and graphs of characters and plotlines, none of which seemed to work. What all of this suggests, then, is that the firebombing of Dresden—or any traumatic event—is not something that can be narrativized in a straightforward way. When Vonnegut tries to stick to "what [he] had seen," nothing comes to him. Charts and graphs imply a logic or structure that simply is not there. The fact is that the memories are too powerful to be made into a realistic, linear, cohesive story; the event itself defies such representation. When his narrative of the traumatic event *can* finally come into being, it can only do so as a fragmentary, fantastic one.

*Slaughterhouse-Five* can be approached in two main ways: either Billy Pilgrim actually travels through time and space or he simply believes that he does. If Billy is really time traveling, then the fantastic is in the manner just described the product of Kurt Vonnegut's (the character/narrator) own trauma. Because trauma renders the normal sense-making process of narrativization impossible, Vonnegut-the-character cannot write a realistic story that refers directly to the event. Instead, he gives us a story conveying the fragmentation and incomprehensibility of trauma, one telling the difficulty of telling, reminding us that "there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre" (19). The novel's splintering of time—the non-linearity of the narrative, its jarring and disorienting leaps forward and backward through Billy Pilgrim's history—relate, in Cathy Caruth's words, "the story of the unbearable nature of an event *and* the story of the unbearable nature of its survival" (*Unclaimed* 7). It breaks up the reader's perception of reality and time just as the narrator's has been broken. The fantastic narrative thus does not simply emerge in place of the traumatic narrative; rather, it *is* the traumatic narrative.

Conversely, if Billy Pilgrim is only mentally unstuck in time, the time- and space travel narratives can also be profitably read as the rather direct recounting of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder as it is experienced by the victim. (It is not, as Lawrence Broer and Jerome Klinkowitz suggest, a depiction of schizophrenia. This interpretation, I think, takes the last part of the subtitle—*A Novel Somewhat in the Telegraphic Schizophrenic Manner of Tales of the Planet Tralfamadore*—a bit too literally). Everything in the text after Billy Pilgrim's brief back story, on this view, takes place in 1968. The sections of the novel that appear to take place in other times or places become



either normal memories or, more often, flashbacks and other traumatic recurrences, all originating in Billy's mind in 1968.

Understood this way, the novel's main action begins with Billy "working on [a] letter in the basement of the rumpus room of his empty house" (27). His daughter Barbara enters his home to check on him, partly because she thinks her father is senile, but also because he has just published an article about the Tralfamadorians in the local paper, which, in turn, causes her to fear for his sanity. In the middle of their discussion about his recent writings, the narrative shifts to the beginning of Billy Pilgrim's account of the war and remains with that plot until he first comes unstuck in time. Over the subsequent hundred pages, Billy relives dozens of moments, including both his life's more mundane episodes (examining a woman's eyes at his optometry clinic, for example) and its more significant ones (visiting his mother in the nursing home, cheating on his wife, and planning the trip during which his plane will crash), returning most frequently to the war narrative. Suddenly, his conversation with his daughter picks back up exactly where it left off, after which she tucks him into bed. He begins moving through time again, awakens in that bed when a repairman comes to fix the heater, and finally spends the rest of the novel unstuck in time.

These returns are significant because they represent one of the few narratives that resumes from the same point at which it last ended. This continuity makes the scenes with Barbara both rare and special among the hundreds of fragmented visions in the text. In fact, the only other thread to maintain such linear coherence is Billy's war story, which, though interrupted by countless other narratives, moves in a chronological fashion from his entering the war to walking through Dresden's charred rubble. I would like to

suggest that this continuity in action also indicates a temporal continuity as well as a stability to Billy's physical presence. The actual time between each of these snippets of conversation is thus mere seconds, even though they are separated by considerable amounts of prose. Billy Pilgrim is not slipping through time physically but experiencing dozens of discrete moments in quick succession while still in the presence of his daughter. The whole text is therefore linear in a sense: it chronicles events in the order that Billy relives them, even though he relives them non-chronologically. When he feels as if he jumps forward through time, the move is only relative: he experiences the future *as future* only by proceeding from an older memory to a newer one or to the present.<sup>9</sup> When the "real" narrative feels like a dream, it is because the images imposing themselves on Billy are so powerful that they make the present seem unreal or like just another stop on his expedition through time.

What seems to Billy Pilgrim to be time travel, then, is a symptom of trauma. As Caruth notes, trauma manifests itself in "the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (*Unclaimed* 11), and the whole fantastic narrative in *Slaughterhouse-Five* can be explained in precisely this way. It continually interrupts his consciousness against his will, displacing any awareness of the present. The reason he lives them, as opposed to simply remembering them, is that, explains Freud, "the [trauma] patient is obliged to repeat the repressed material as a contemporary experience, instead of remembering it as something belonging to the past" (qtd. in van der Kolk 167). It is important to note here that Vonnegut-the-character does

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<sup>9</sup> Significantly, Billy's only 'memory' that actually takes place in the future (after 1968) is his death. That he has imagined his death so vividly that it feels like memory is unsurprising, given the number of times he has been confronted with both his own death and the deaths of loved ones.

not take the stance of an authoritative narrator. The chapter that introduces Billy Pilgrim begins:

Billy Pilgrim has come 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 his 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. He is in a constant state of stage fright, he says, because he never knows what part of his life he is going to have to act in next. (23)

The phrase "he says," repeated three times and emphasized as its own two-word paragraph, puts Vonnegut instead in the position of someone who is relating a story not of his own devising. Billy Pilgrim told it to him, and Kurt Vonnegut is repeating it to us without necessarily vouching for its accuracy. The point, however, is neither to make the reader believe Billy is a real person nor to question the veracity of Billy's account; rather, it is to emphasize for us that Billy's attempt to construct a narrative out of his trauma is what produces the fantastic story. Because flashbacks and "other intrusive phenomena" are perceived as contemporary experience, they make him feel as if he is literally travelling to other moments in his life (Caruth even calls trauma "a break in the mind's experience of time" [*Unclaimed* 61]). The rapidity with which the visions bombard him

creates the sensation of quickly jumping through the space-time continuum or, as Billy phrases it, being “spastic in time.” He tells the story of his trauma, which he does not recognize *as trauma*, as literally and straightforwardly as he can, and it falls upon the listener’s ears (both Vonnegut’s and the reader’s) as the fantastic.

The difficulty with this interpretation, though, is that Caruth, Bessel van der Kolk, and others insist that traumatic memories are “precisely literal” and unchanging (*T:EM* 5). By their formulation, Billy’s visions or experiences—especially the fantastic ones—cannot be trauma because they depart from the real events. However, while this model of trauma is still well-regarded in the humanities, more recent research suggests that it is not entirely correct. Both Ruth Leys and Richard McNally argue that, though traumatic memories might *feel* like literal relivings of the past, they are actually subject to the same distortion and amplification as non-traumatic memories.<sup>10</sup> “One veteran,” McNally observes during a study of PTSD in war veterans, “saw himself killing a Vietnamese woman, who promptly rose from the dead” (115). Moreover, he writes, “The more flashback-like [the] intrusive images were, the more likely the imagery exaggerated the severity of what had actually happened” (116). In other words, the more “real” a traumatic memory feels, the more likely it is to depart from the historical event. Understanding this, even Billy’s abduction by aliens can be plausibly read as a trauma narrative. It is highly distorted, certainly more so than the woman rising from the dead (although this too is the fantastic). Still, the abduction retains some connections to the real world, particularly to his capture and subsequent imprisonment by the German

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<sup>10</sup> See Ruth Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy*, p. 38, 229-297 and Richard McNally, *Remembering Trauma*, p. 105-124.

forces. Even the end of the universe, which the Tralfamadorians reveal to Billy is their fault—they “blow it up”—mirrors his memory of Dresden’s destruction (117).

That most of *Slaughterhouse-Five* transpires in Billy Pilgrim’s head is further supported by the repeated appearance of objects and events across multiple narrative threads. Most noticeably, the details of Billy’s encounters with the Tralfamadorians coincide with those in the science-fiction novels by Kilgore Trout, his favorite author. Billy explains that the Tralfamadorians see in four dimensions, but the truth of his report is called into question when we learn that Trout has written a book titled *Maniacs in the Fourth Dimension*. Similarly, the aliens in *The Gospel from Outer Space*, we are told, are “shaped very much like a Tralfamadorian” (108). Other, more subtle concurrences populate the Vonnegut’s novel as well. The orange and black stripes on the trains in Germany, for instance, match those on the tent in Billy’s backyard in 1967. Billy’s being asked to take off his clothes in the German prison camp reminds him of taking off his clothes on the spaceship. His wife eats a Three Musketeers bar while visiting him in the hospital, and Roland Weary, a soldier captured with Billy, refers to himself and two scouts as “the Three Musketeers” in Billy’s recollection of the war. Taken together, these coincidences and repetitions (along with many others) prevent Billy’s narrative from being read as happening in the real world. Instead, it suggests that what we are reading is, to borrow from Peter Freese, “an imaginative re-processing” (215). There is some central, original event to all of these memories, but they have been distorted and amplified. The recurrent motifs intimate that Billy’s memories have merged with other memories; fantasies, literature, tales overheard, and direct experience are all intermingled. We can thus construe the novel’s fantastic narrative as a faithful depiction of Billy’s

psychological life—that is, of his trauma—but not as an accurate report of his material existence.

In each of these readings of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, combat trauma both produces and is conveyed by the fantastic narrative, particularly through time travel. In a manner reminiscent of Vonnegut's novel, John A. Williams' *Captain Blackman* presents to the reader a protagonist who also travels repeatedly to the past. And, again like Vonnegut's book, *Captain Blackman* leaves open the question of whether the journey through history is literally happening or is only imagined (This is one of the characteristics of the fantastic. By Todorov's definition, a text ceases to be the fantastic once we know one way or the other; it becomes either psychological fiction or the marvelous). After being shot in the opening pages, Abraham Blackman leans against a log, waiting to be rescued. Then, the text suddenly breaks before resuming, "As in a dream he saw them, these men in their wigs" (2). Inexplicably, Blackman is in Delaware in the year 1775, a few days before the Battles of Lexington and Concord. For the rest of the novel, he drifts between Vietnam in 1971 and past American wars, though each set of narratives proceeds chronologically. Blackman fights in the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812, returns to Vietnam still awaiting medical attention, then fights in the Civil War and Indian Wars before finally being rescued, and so on until the past catches up with the present.

The trauma that this novel tells, however, goes beyond a single violent incident (not to imply gunshot wounds are a trivial occurrence). Studies suggest that trauma may also develop over time as the result of numerous smaller shocks, or may be transmitted through stories or pictures to later generations who did not originally experience the

event.<sup>11</sup> And over the course of the novel, we learn that Captain Blackman has been exposed in both of these ways. Out of his desire to teach his soldiers the history of Black men in the U.S. military, he reads every relevant source he can find. During that research, he uncovers almost unbelievable racial violence and injustice.<sup>12</sup> He already knows that African Americans were deceived (or forced) into fighting for less pay than white men, if any pay at all. What he learns, however, is that Confederate soldiers refused to take black prisoners, killing them and mutilating the bodies even if they surrendered; that white soldiers throughout U.S. history went unpunished for killing their black counterparts; and that American military units may have, under orders, executed large numbers of Black men and women. Blackman continues to see racial injustice in his own unit in Vietnam as well: the white colonel in charge of his brigade always assigns Blackman's all Black (except for one Jewish soldier) squad to the most dangerous missions, during which Blackman has seen men under his command injured and killed.

Whether we read the fantastic elements in *Captain Blackman* as a series of dreams or as actual time travel, the novel tells of a past that will not stay past. In both cases, Blackman lives simultaneously in a past and present that are collapsing into one another. As Earl Cash says of the novel, "Time becomes fluid; past and present seem to merge" (120). Moreover, events repeat themselves (Blackman is shot in multiple narratives), and characters reappear across several eras, some of whom, like Blackman's friend Harrison, get killed both in the past and in Vietnam. In this way, the narrative's

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<sup>11</sup> In *Post-traumatic Culture*, Kirby Farrell maintains that trauma "need not be a direct reaction to a massive injury, but may represent the cumulative effect of a number of small by synergistic shocks" (11). For a recent discussion of "postmemory," the process by which traumatic memory is transmitted to the children and grandchildren of victims, see Marianne Hirsch's "The Generation of Postmemory."

<sup>12</sup> This mirrors Williams' own process of writing the novel. The project began as an investigation of the disproportionate number of casualties for black soldiers in Vietnam (Cash 119). But as Williams dug deeper into the historical record, the book evolved into *Captain Blackman*. The atrocities seen by Blackman are all based on Williams' research (Cash 120).

movement between timelines blurs any sense of difference between them, performing for the reader the traumatized individual's inability to construct a narrative that separates past from present. Significantly, Alexs Pate argues the tale comes from "the consciousness of Abraham Blackman" and "a unique, collective omniscience" (ii, vi). That is to say, both Blackman and some other narrator not directly experiencing trauma (the implied author) are narrativizing it as the fantastic; the result, it seems, is the same whether speaking from within or outside of the traumatic narrative.<sup>13</sup> Due to trauma's effects on him, Captain Blackman cannot make his story *not* fantastic; while Williams, in trying to convey the experiences of his protagonist, chooses to write in the fantastic mode because other modes fail to adequately communicate the truth of the traumatic occurrence. That John A. Williams is known almost exclusively as a naturalist writer and that *Captain Blackman* is treated as an anomaly in his oeuvre for its divergence from that strongly support the notion that Williams saw this material as necessitating a special kind of treatment, one that must reject the constraints of the linear realistic novel.

Despite the similarities between *Captain Blackman* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Williams' novel does not merely reveal to us the same relationships between trauma and the fantastic that are illuminated by its predecessor. The most important difference is that Blackman becomes a new Abraham Blackman each time he travels to another historical moment. In Revolutionary War, he initially believes he is dreaming, saying to himself, "Wake up! Wake up!" (4). But by the end of this episode and in every subsequent one,

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<sup>13</sup> Williams, of course, is not entirely outside of the traumatic narrative. Speaking of his own military experience, he writes:

I saw white Marines and black sailors line up for a race riot on Guam. A Chamorro girl told me she had been warned to stay away from black men because they had tails.... I have a pitted face from the dry shaves I got in the Marine brig. I traveled up and down the islands of the Pacific because black hospital corpsmen were not wanted aboard ship, and I wound up with a land force. A white Texan on a dark night in the New Hebrides was a minute away from shooting me. (qtd. in Muller 8)



Blackman has a unique identity (the only constant being his imposing stature) unaware of any other incarnation of Blackman in any other era. In the War of 1812, for example, he is not a professional soldier at all; he is simply a young, somewhat cynical, free Black man in New Orleans who agrees to fight in exchange for land. In the Civil War, he is again young. His career starts with a terrifying battle, the first one *this* Blackman has ever seen, and he is affected much more strongly than the previous Blackmans, “cowering at the whine of hot metal seeking flesh” (40). Still, this Blackman makes the military a career, reaching Sergeant Major while serving in the American west and First Sergeant in the Spanish-American War. He even grows to love the Army so much, he “didn’t know what he’d do once he was let out” (98). When we meet him in each subsequent conflict—World War I, the Spanish Civil War, World War II, and Korea—he is in every instance a different age, rank, and demeanor.

As the result of trauma, then, there can be no single Captain Blackman; instead, there must be several Captain Blackmans. Indeed, argue Robert Neimeyer and Alan Stewart, “The traumatic experience . . . fundamentally challenge[s] the unity of the victim’s selfhood” (362). Once again, the fantastic narrative *is* the traumatic narrative, and not simply because it shows us the violence and the fear involved in trauma, but because in a very literal way it performs the shattering of the ego. Moreover, it does so in an even more radical way than in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. *Captain Blackman* cannot have a single protagonist or be told from a single vantage point because as the result of trauma there is no longer a unified consciousness to form the narrative.

At first, Tim O’Brien’s *Going After Cacciato* seems only to recapitulate the two works of fiction just discussed, at least as far as trauma’s effect on the fantastic narrative

is concerned. Like the other two texts, *Cacciato* is somewhat disjointed: it is comprised of three narrative threads that tend to blur into one another, one of which is presented out of chronological order. However, this apparent similarity is misleading because the fantastic narrative is not what confers the sense of fragmented-ness upon this particular novel. Indeed, the fantastic narrative is simply a story Army Specialist-Four Paul Berlin is telling himself while standing in a guard tower in Vietnam in November 1968. Between midnight and sunrise, he imagines what might have happened had his squad pursued Private Cacciato—a deserter whose name means “the hunted” in Italian—further than the Laotian border across which they let him escape. Although the tale is frequently interrupted by Berlin’s observations and reflections in the present as well as by memories of the war, it ultimately progresses rather straightforwardly from October 1968, when Cacciato actually went AWOL, into a hypothetical future culminating in April 1969. Instead, it is Berlin’s memories, written largely without fantastic amplification or distortion, that cause the novel to feel disordered. The text presents them as Berlin remembers them: short, often context-less scenes, incomplete and without explicit connections to one another. Or, when individual stories do come together to relate larger events, the order in which they are told disrupts the reader’s sense of linearity or causality: the squad avenges Pederson’s death before we are told how dies and, similarly, Bernie Lynn is killed retrieving Frenchie Tucker’s body before we hear the story of Frenchie Tucker’s demise. By comparison, the imagined international trek becomes quite easy to follow.

In fact, once the reader accepts Paul Berlin’s (and O’Brien’s) absurd premises—that a soldier could walk away from Vietnam to reach the Paris Peace Accords, and that a

squad would pursue him all the way to France to bring him back—there are very few incidents in the Cacciato chase that seem fantastic in themselves, even if they push the limits of physical possibility. Yet, the cumulative effect of these highly unlikely episodes *is* fantastic. Along the road to Paris, the squad meets Sarkin Aung Wan, a young Chinese girl who wishes to accompany them and just happens to speak perfect English and French; later, a North Vietnamese soldier who also speaks perfect English and lives inside a secret underground lair, where he has a banquet table prepared for their arrival; in Delhi, an Indian woman who loves the United States and eats beef; and a rather friendly, helpful member of SAVAK in Tehran. Additionally, the squad is rescued from an Iranian jail by Cacciato, whom they had not seen in some time and who provides them with a rifle and a 1964 Chevrolet Impala for their escape. Finally, all of the members of the squad survive an ambush during which they are bombarded from all sides by artillery and small arms fire, the Impala inexplicably materializing safely outside the roadblock. As the narrative continues, the reader becomes less and less willing to believe these events belong even to the realm of possibility, despite Berlin's almost religious devotion to details (which serve to give it an air of reality) and his insurances that "it could truly be done" (48). Thus, although the tale remains generally rooted in the real world, the separate events become fantastic through their relationships to each other.

And it is precisely in these places, in these irruptions of the unreal into the real (or at least into that which Berlin puts forward as real), that his narrative bears the marks of trauma. As in the two other novels, the fantastic elements signify the breakdown of straightforwardly referential narrative. Paul Berlin cannot relate the story he wants to relate, "a smooth orderly arc from war to peace," because, according to the medic's

diagnosis, his “bibles are warping [his] sense of reality” (206, 28). Even though he is able to tell a more linear and unified story than Kurt Vonnegut and Billy Pilgrim or John A. Williams and Abraham Blackman, he *cannot* do so without introducing these impossible things. When he does try to tell a realistic story, one he could repeat as a “true” war story once he returns home, it stalls or threatens to end: either Sarkin Aung Wan must leave, or the squad loses track of Cacciato, or they get sentenced to death in an Iranian prison. Reality demands too much, so the fantastic must enter to keep the narrative moving forward. At the same time, those elements paradoxically disrupt the narrative, spinning it further out of control as it progresses: the descriptions become less precise, the logic less coherent, and the fantastic elements less tethered to reality. In this way, even the story which seems *not* to be directly about trauma is a symptom of trauma; it reflects how the traumatized mind constructs a narrative or, more specifically, how it can no longer articulate an orderly reality.

Paul Berlin’s tale is also doing something different, though. It is not *just* a story produced by a general breakdown of mimetic narrative. *Going After Cacciato* holds a special place in my study because it suggests in more direct way than *Slaughterhouse-Five* or *Captain Blackman* that the fantastic aspects of a story are not random, that particular fantastic elements enter a narrative as representations of specific traumatic events.<sup>14</sup> For example, we learn late in the novel that Sarkin Aung Wan is an analogue for a sick girl he once encountered in a Vietnamese village (Berlin does not admit this

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<sup>14</sup> I do not mean that this mechanism is entirely absent from the other texts. As I suggested earlier in this chapter, Billy Pilgrim’s alien abduction can be read as a parallel to his capture by the Nazis (although it should not be reduced to this). Similarly, the hero in *Captain Blackman* survives a direct hit by a mortar round without a scratch, despite being mostly buried beneath the body parts of the men who were standing around him. This episode too, I think, can be read as a representation of any number of previous battle experiences. Still, neither of these novels foregrounds this transformation of traumatic event into fantastic element as explicitly as *Going After Cacciato* does.

connection during his observations, but the two girl's physical descriptions are nearly identical, including their gold hoop earrings). When he first saw the unnamed girl, she awakened in him feelings of fear and guilt, inspiring him to want to tell her "that he felt no hate [and that] it was all a sad accident," that he did not want to fight or kill but did so out of necessity (261). In a way, then, she became for Berlin a symbol of all the violent acts he had seen or perpetrated but wished he had no part in. Correspondingly, Sarkin Aung Wan, by recalling the sick girl, also indirectly carries reminders of violence and guilt, as well as Berlin's inability to articulate them, throughout his narrative. She thus exists in his fantastic narrative as an embodiment of the trauma caused by the war. Similarly, the ambush in Tehran stands as a fantastic representation of every battle he has fought in, the incomprehensibility of the squad's escape mirroring Paul Berlin's inability to understand having survived combat. Of course, not all of this narrative's characters, objects, and events have direct antecedents in Berlin's traumatic history. Such a reading is far too simplistic and tidy. Still, the number of them that *do* suggests trauma plays a formative role in the specific manifestations of the fantastic in a narrative.

The most significant intrusion into Berlin's narrative, that is, the one most often written about and the one that departs the furthest from reality, is also the title of the tenth chapter: "A Hole in the Road to Paris." And it is exactly what it sounds like. In Laos, as the squad contemplates their next move in the pursuit of Cacciato, "the earth tore itself open" (75). After two chapters pertaining to the other matters, the fantastic narrative resumes with the chapter "Falling Through a Hole in the Road to Paris":

So down and down, pinwheeling freestyle through the dark. Time only to yell a warning, time to snatch for his weapon and Sarkin Aung Wan's hand, and then he was falling.

... The hole kept opening. Deep and narrow, lit by torches that sped past like shooting stars, red eyes twinkling along sheer rockface, down and down. (82)

The fall continues for almost two pages, during which time Berlin urinates on himself. But when they finally land in the complex tunnel system, they are completely unharmed.

Critics have interpreted this scene a number of ways. Many return to the trusty stand-by of escapism. Jack Slay Jr. offers a more meaningful reading. Observing that between "A Hole in the Road to Paris" and "Falling Through a Hole in the Road to Paris" comes a chapter titled "Fire in the Hole" which relates Paul Berlin's memory of the bombing of Hoi An, Slay asserts that the hole serves as a reminder of "the firebombed village [which] becomes 'a hole.'" (81). Similarly, relying on the fact that the chapter immediately preceding "A Hole in the Road to Paris" tells the story of Bernie Lynn getting shot in an enemy tunnel, Mark Heberle claims that "Paul Berlin is ... recapitulating Bernie Lynn's trauma when the entire squad falls into the fantasized enemy tunnel." (134). Yet while both of these are productive readings, they also limit our understanding of the text by defining the originating event too narrowly.

If we want to answer the question of "why a giant hole?" then we should look at the full spectrum of traumatic events in Paul Berlin's history. The strongest indicator that this moment is connected to trauma is that he wets his pants while falling down the hole; the only other times he does so is during combat and when he believes he is about to be

killed by a landmine. Conspicuously, holes and tunnels form the core of many of Berlin's traumatic memories. Before Frenchie Tucker got shot in the tunnel, Bernie Lynn was killed in that same tunnel. But before Frenchie Tucker went to retrieve Bernie Lynn, everyone was trying to dodge the duty, leaving Berlin the opportunity to go down the hole. Instead, Berlin simply "stood alone.... He was careful not to look at anyone" (90). In the narrative present, he regrets not volunteering, referring to the moment repeatedly as "almost winning the silver star." However, this memory represents more than a moment of regret. He did not only see a squad mate die but, had he been a quicker to act, he would have been the one killed. Thus, although Berlin lives, or more precisely, *because* he lives, he carries a double burden of survival: witnessing the death of comrade and having faced his own near-death. Moreover, the hole recalls the death of the squad's previous commander, Lt. Sidney Martin, whom they fragged while he was in a tunnel. Although Berlin never tells who threw the grenade, he admits having agreed to the conspiracy, which nonetheless affects him in a profound way. The combination of these things, I would like to suggest, is the reason that such an enormous hole opens and that it stands as such a substantial deviation from the nature of Berlin's narrative to this point. These traumatic memories compound until they produce the narrative's most substantial irruption of the unreal into the real.<sup>15</sup>

Throughout this chapter, I have tried to illustrate that the fantastic elements in *Going After Cacciato*, *Captain Blackman*, and *Slaughterhouse-Five* can be read as responses to and manifestations of trauma. The traumatic memory shapes not only the plot or the representation of discrete events but the very structure of the narrative and the

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<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, though perhaps coincidentally, Dominic LaCapra claims, "Trauma is a disruptive experience that ... creates holes in existence" (41).

perspective from which it gets told. It impacts the narrator's ability to make sense of the world and therefore the way he constructs a story. However, that trauma disrupts narrative in these ways is not purely negative. The fantastic is not merely a wound or a symptom, nor are the stories revictimizing. Todorov maintains, "The fantastic permits us to cross certain frontiers that are [otherwise] inaccessible" (158). Similarly, Gerhard Hoffman writes that the fantastic "manifests that which has been excluded from rational knowledge, displaced by the ego" (229). Although neither theorist is intentionally or directly speaking about trauma, they are pointing towards a productive use for the fantastic in relation to it. Working through, that is, the process of healing, cannot begin until the victim can translate traumatic memory into narrative. By manifesting that which has been excluded, by giving victims access to previously unavailable memories, the fantastic can be useful in helping the victim face their histories and overcome their trauma. Nowhere is this more evident than in *Going After Cacciato*; so, in order to explore this more productive aspect of the fantastic, I will again take up O'Brien's novel in the following chapter.

## **Chapter 2—Working Through: Recovering the Past**

"The main thing," Doc Peret once said, "is to find what works. That's real science—what works. Witchcraft, sorcery, I don't care what name you give it, if it works, it's good science."

*Tim O'Brien, Going After Cacciato*

If trauma gets turned into the fantastic in victims' narratives (whether or not those narratives are attempts to speak about the traumatizing event), then the fantastic must on



some level be viewed as ‘acting out’ or as a form of symbolic repetition. The fantastic elements are evidence, as Freud says of all manifestations of trauma, “not [of] a matter belonging to the past, but [of] a force operating in the present” (“Remembering”). However, a traumatic intrusion is never merely a symptom; rather, contends Cathy Caruth, it is an “attempt to master what was never fully grasped in the first place” (*Unclaimed* 62). At the same time that it points to the incomprehensibility of the occurrence and the inaccessibility of the memory to conscious recall, the intrusion (as dream, flashback, or other repetition) also represents the mind’s efforts to understand, to know what happened. The fantastic is therefore simultaneously a manifestation of trauma and a means of working through it.

Thus, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, *Captain Blackman*, and *Going After Cacciato* each participate in not only representing traumatic histories and memories but coming to terms with them. That coming to terms, however, does not entail working through trauma in order to forget it. Working through involves recovering the traumatic memory and translating it into something that can be integrated into the self, something other than an utterly incomprehensible event that constantly imposes itself upon the victim. It means, explains Dominick LaCapra, that “one is able to distinguish between past and present and to recognize something as having happened to one (or one’s people) back then which is related to, but not identical with, here and now” (66). And, as LaCapra, James Berger, and others insist, this is achieved through narrativization. The narrative need not (in fact, should not) make sense of everything, nor must it completely close the wounds. Rather, it begins the process of healing by providing some distance from the original event. It allows the victim to say, “Those things did happen to me then. They affect who I am

now, but they are not still happening to me.” As a result, the past can once again be confined to the past as memory instead of being relived in the present as traumatic intrusion, and the victim can finally begin to live more fully in the actual present.

*Going After Cacciato*, more so than the other two novels, demonstrates how the fantastic helps the victim to narrativize the traumatic past and integrate it into normal memory. Of course, *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Captain Blackman* can be read as attempts to work through trauma as well; but because they act out more than work through they are also less successful attempts. Most significantly, neither Abraham Blackman nor Billy Pilgrim reaches a point where he is able to separate the past from the present. To be sure, *Captain Blackman* uses time travel to render historical traumas in a realistic mode, translating them into comprehensible narratives, thereby filling not only traumatic gaps in memory but also gaps in the historical record. Nonetheless, the novel’s temporal instability coupled with Blackman’s inability to maintain a single consciousness or identity imply that the traumas have not yet been worked through. Additionally, whether we take the narrative to be constructed by Blackman or the author, the novel’s conclusion—a revenge fantasy in which Blackman leads a takeover of the world’s nuclear facilities by Black American soldiers—can be read as still another symbolic manifestation of trauma and, moreover, a denial of the present. Similarly, Billy Pilgrim, like Blackman, is able to speak about his traumatizing event (even if he only describes the firebombing very briefly and in a detached manner), which perhaps suggests that the fantastic narrative has prepared him to face his past. However, that he continues to time travel after this point in the novel, taken together with his refusal to believe that people do indeed die (an idea given to him by the Tralfamadorians), signifies that he remains a

severely traumatized individual. I am not implying that these conclusions denote any moral failures on the parts of the characters or the novels. They are expressions of trauma and demand our attention and empathy. Moreover, as LaCapra observes, “acting out may well be a necessary condition of working through,” and these novels simply represent characters and narratives at different stages of the healing process (70). But because they are at those earlier stages, they do not illustrate how the fantastic can be a productive means of working through trauma as overtly or as completely as O’Brien’s novel does.

Still, the question of whether Kurt Vonnegut-the-character is successfully working through his trauma in *Slaughterhouse-Five* is not quite so easily dismissed. Like Billy Pilgrim, he is only briefly able to face the historical event. And by putting the descriptions of it in Billy’s mouth, by doing so while Billy is time travelling, and by presenting them as Billy’s memories rather than direct experience, Vonnegut puts the destruction of Dresden at an even further remove than his protagonist does. Furthermore, although Vonnegut puts himself in Dresden—“Somebody behind him in the boxcar said, ‘Oz.’ That was I. That was me”—he cannot place himself in the scenes depicting the bombing or even those immediately before and after it (148). Together, these methods of distancing suggest that Vonnegut is unable to integrate the event into his own memory. The bombing remains something that happened, a historical fact, but not a personal experience.

In spite of this, it is significant that in the beginning of the novel he admits remembering nothing about the destruction of Dresden, even after discussing it with old war buddies. In an interview with David Standish, Vonnegut elaborates:

The book was largely a found object. It was what was in my head, and I was able to get it out, but one of the characteristics of this object was that there was a complete blank where the bombing of Dresden took place, because I don't remember. ... There was a complete forgetting of what it was like. There were all kinds of information surrounding the event, but as far as my memory bank was concerned, the center had been pulled right out of the story. (94)

That he is able to narrativize the Dresden bombing at all, then, implies that some working through takes place. Vonnegut recovers *something*, even if he relates it through several layers of narration. I argued in my previous chapter that he could not do this through a straightforward, realist novel. He is only able to retrieve the traumatic event because he tells the story in the fantastic mode. It provides him with what he needs to not only transform the event into language but also to look at the event critically. For instance, the comical repetition of the phrase "So it goes," a Tralfamadorian saying which appears in the text over a hundred times, indicates that Vonnegut is actually rejecting Billy Pilgrim's fatalism by highlighting the sad ridiculousness of it. Unlike Billy, he can see the event without being numbed or reduced to inaction; rather, he retains an identity not completely consumed by the event and achieves personal agency, most visibly in the 1967 trip to Dresden that bookends the novel, a physical return that seems to preempt traumatic reenactments and that stands in stark contrast to Billy Pilgrim's unwished-for returns. My point is not whether Vonnegut does or does not overcome his trauma through the novel (although it is worth noting that he refers to writing as "therapy" [*Playboy* 109]). Instead, I merely want to show that the fantastic narrative allows him to *begin* the process of

working through. As Peter Freese notes, the “center of his novel is endlessly circumnavigated but never fully encountered” (221). Yet it is only through the endless circumnavigation, which is the fantastic narrative, that Vonnegut is able to narrativize the events at Dresden in any capacity.

Still, except to the extent that the construction of a fantastic narrative eventually leads to the narrator’s recounting of the traumatic event, *Slaughterhouse-Five* does not fully illustrate the process by which the fantastic aids in working through trauma. That is to say, the book first presents the reader with the fantastic narrative and then the bombing, without necessarily showing a causal relationship between the creations of the two. But *Going After Cacciato* does. The novel begins with Specialist-Four Paul Berlin listing the traumatic experiences of his first five months in the Vietnam War:

It was a bad time. Billy Boy Watkins was dead, and so was Frenchie Tucker. Billy Boy had died of fright, scared to death on the field of battle, and Frenchie Tucker had been shot through the nose. Bernie Lynn and Lieutenant Sidney Martin had died in tunnels. Pederson was dead and Rudy Chassler was dead. Buff was dead. Ready Mix was dead. They were all among the dead. (1)

Here, Berlin is not yet able to verbalize the events in any way other than as bare fact. He can neither craft stories nor provide many details. For the last several men in the list, there are not even any action verbs. Pederson, Rudy Chassler, Buff, and Ready Mix are not *killed*; they are simply “dead.” Furthermore, Berlin’s memories of the deaths are so fragmented that he cannot put them in chronological order or relate them to one another, apart from the observation that both Bernie Lynn and Lt. Martin die in tunnels. And even

this is factually wrong. According the later memory chapters, Martin and Frenchie Tucker are the ones who actually die in tunnels, whereas Bernie Lynn survives for a short while after being dragged out of one. Over the course of the novel, though, Berlin gains the ability to narrativize each of these events, except for the fragging of Lt. Martin. (It is the one memory too terrible and too powerful to deal with; the reader only learns that someone throws a grenade into a tunnel while Martin is searching it.) By working through his trauma, which happens largely in the fantastic narrative, Berlin is able to render the stories with a high degree of detail and to explain the circumstances of each occurrence, placing himself at the scenes of the events while maintaining some critical distance.

In trying to understand how or why this happens, it is important to return again to the general structure of the novel. Everything within the pages of *Going After Cacciato* takes place while Paul Berlin is in a guard tower between midnight and sunrise. Although it always written in the third person, Paul Berlin is the focalizer. In other words, while he does not speak as if “I did this” or “I saw this,” the entire book is told from Berlin’s point of view, filtered through his consciousness. In a sense, then, *Going After Cacciato* happens entirely in his mind. We read the events in the order that he thinks about them. The eleven “Observation Post” chapters represent the narrative present; they depict his current actions (which are quite limited, being on guard duty) and provide commentary on the other two narrative threads. The Cacciato chase (the fantastic narrative) is imagined by Berlin while staying awake in the tower all night. The memory chapters depict Berlin’s real experiences since arriving in Vietnam, many of them traumatic. Although they seem to appear in a haphazard order, each of them—especially the ones

depicting trauma—are prepared for by the fantastic narrative. The imagined Cacciato chase allows Berlin to look at the traumatic memories in less immediate, less direct ways that then enable him to confront and narrativize each *real* event. The order in which he presents the stories is critical, so the following outline is provided to show which narrative thread each chapter belongs to and what their major events are.<sup>16</sup>

1	M	Cacciato actually leaves	24	M	Call home during stand-down
2	OP	Midnight	25	M	Marching into battle
3	CC	Fantastic narrative begins	26	CC	Delhi
4	M	Arrival in Vietnam	27	CC	Train to Ovissil (memory of Ready Mix's death)
5	OP		28	OP	
6	CC	Meet Sarkin Aung Wan, Stink kills buffalo	29	CC	Tehran, sharing war stories
7	CC	Laos	30	OP	
8	OP		31	M	Billy Boy's death
9	M	Bernie Lynn shot in tunnel	32	OP	
10	CC	"A Hole in the Road"	33	CC	Tehran, sentenced to death
11	M	"Fire in the Hole," retaliation for Pederson's death	34	M	Plan to kill Lieutenant Martin
12	OP		35	M	"World's Greatest"
13	CC	"Falling Through a Hole"	36	CC	Escape, drive to Turkey
14	M	F. Tucker killed in tunnel	37	OP	
15	CC	"Tunneling Toward Paris"	38	CC	Izmir to Athens
16	M	Rudy Chassler, land mine	39	M	Promotion board
17	CC	Mandalay	40	CC	Athens to Luxembourg
18	CC	Mandalay	41	M	Buff's death
19	OP		42	OP	
20	M	Pederson killed	43	CC	Luxembourg to Paris
21	CC	"The Railroad to Paris"	44	CC	Paris
22	M	Several characters' histories	45	OP	
23	CC	Delhi	46	CC	Find Cacciato in Paris (real memory of his escape)

Although Dennis Vannatta claims that "the recollected war chapters have no ordering principle," this chart reveals that the traumatic memories do not emerge

<sup>16</sup> This chart is adapted from Dean McWilliams' "Time in O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato*" with slight modifications to suit my purposes. M = Memory chapter. OP = Observation Post chapter. CC = Cacciato chase (fantastic narrative).

randomly (243). All of the recollections involving tunnels or holes, with the exception of Lt. Martin's murder, are centered around "A Hole in the Road to Paris." Additionally, the several most recent events—Ready Mix being shot, the plot to frag Lt. Martin, and finding Buff's body—all come to Berlin in chronological order near the end of the night. The only memory in the entire second half of the novel that is not in its proper position is the one repeatedly referred to as "The Ultimate War Story": Billy Boy Watkins's death. Billy Boy actually dies of shock after losing his foot to a landmine during Berlin's first patrol, but the memory of it affects him so strongly that he must wait almost until sunrise before he can think about it. Thus, although it is not immediately apparent, Berlin is in fact deliberately structuring the episodes according to *some* logic. The memory chapters therefore cannot be "traumatic intrusions," as Mark Heberle insists, or "unbidden," as Vannatta argues; rather, Berlin's managing of the traumatic intrusions *in the fantastic narrative* enables him to willfully recall the events as normal memories (135; 243).

The first traumatic memory that Berlin speaks about directly is "How Bernie Lynn Died After Frenchie Tucker." The chapter begins after both men have already been shot in the tunnel and subsequently pulled out of it by their squad mates, Frenchie Tucker dead already and Bernie Lynn going into shock, repeating over and over, "Just like that, *bang!*" (66-67). Berlin is composed enough in his narration to dedicate a significant amount of description to the dying soldier without being consumed by the moment. He also recounts the other men's fear, Stink Harris' reluctance to help with Bernie Lynn's IV, Lieutenant Martin's insistence on looking up the codes to call for the medivac helicopter (instead of giving unencrypted coordinates over the radio), and Oscar's anger at the lieutenant. What this all suggests, then, is that this memory is being or has been



worked through. Berlin does not confuse it with the present in the same way that he blurs the distinctions between the guard tower and the Cacciato chase narratives. “He was in control,” he tells us, “he was calm” (63). The event remains squarely in the past, brought to the present only in language.

Berlin chooses to deal with this memory first because it is the least formidable. All of the others loom much more imposingly because they remind him that dying in war is often simply a case of “bad luck” and therefore that he is powerless to ensure his own survival (40). Rudy Chassler and Billy Boy Watkins are fine one minute, then step on landmines and die (The randomness of such events and a soldier’s complete inability to prepare for them is highlighted by a Heller-esque training scene early in the novel. Soldiers new to Vietnam walk through “a make-believe minefield” where the training officer simply yells “Boomo!” whenever he feels like it, declaring the trainee dead [38]). Likewise, it is purely by chance that Frenchie Tucker is the one assigned to search the tunnel with an enemy waiting inside. But in the case of Bernie Lynn’s death, everyone in the squad has a choice. Bernie Lynn chooses to retrieve Frenchie Tucker knowing that an armed enemy is waiting for him. Correspondingly, Paul Berlin is able to choose not to die. Of course, the event remains traumatic and Berlin remains full of guilt and regret for “almost winning a silver star.” But, this particular memory becomes more manageable because nobody is robbed of their agency.

That the incident is more manageable psychologically does not imply that Berlin can tell the story without difficulty. He needs to be able to face violence, blood, and death before he can put Bernie Lynn’s demise into words. Two chapters earlier, the fantastic narrative helps him do precisely that when Stink Harris kills a water buffalo:

The first shots struck the closest animal in the belly. There was a pause.  
The next burst caught the buffalo in the head, and it dropped.

That fast. Every time, that fast.

Someone was screaming for a cease-fire but Stink was on full automatic. He was smiling. Gobs of flesh jumped off the beast's flanks.

Paul Berlin, sprawled out now in the center of the road, had the rare courage to peek. (50-51)

The gunning down of an animal undoubtedly has a much different emotional impact than the death of a human being, but that is the point. Despite his tremendous attention to detail throughout all the narrative threads, Berlin rarely describes blood or gore. Indeed, he is only able to depict the scene in this way because the victim is *not* a person. More importantly, though, he is able to do so because it happens outside of a realistic context. The buffalo does not enter the story until the squad leaves Vietnam (a movement which also symbolizes the narrative's break from reality) and is pulling the cart upon which Sarkin Aung Wan, the beautiful English- and French-speaking refugee, and her two moaning, ghostlike aunts ride. By translating this imagined occurrence into language, it prepares him speak about other bloody and violent occurrences, the ones that really happened. The fantastic narrative thus begins the process of working through by first letting Berlin narrativize episodes that share key characteristics with traumatic memories in a less intense context. Having "the rare courage to peek" at this atrocity gives him the courage to search his own memories for other events he previously could not face. The immediate result is that he can begin to speak about what happened to Bernie Lynn when he was shot in a tunnel. At the same time, as the first violent incident in the novel, it

provides an entryway for dealing with the other traumas that he will eventually work through by the book's conclusion.

The episode that follows Berlin's memory of Bernie Lynn's death is "A Hole in the Road to Paris," which, as I indicated in the first section, is a manifestation of trauma. At the end of the chapter, the enormous hole spontaneously enters Berlin's narrative, carrying with it memories of people killed in holes and tunnels and disrupting the logic of what had been to this point a generally realistic war story. In "Falling Through a Hole in the Road to Paris," the squad (predictably) begins a long, tumbling freefall. When they land safely on floor of deep chasm, the text continues:

Mercifully, the roar in [Berlin's] ears ended. Succeeded by silence.

Succeeded by the sound of someone laughing. It was an eerie, echoing sound. He sat up, shivering and hugging himself, looking for the source of the laughter....

"It's okay," Doc whispered. "Quiet down, man. It's over now."

But Paul Berlin couldn't stop giggling. Like when Billy Boy took it, dead of fright. He couldn't stop.

"Easy," Doc purred ... "Grab hold now. Up we go." (83-84)

After a few more words of comfort from Doc Peret, Berlin gathers himself and the men begin their exploration of the tunnels. This response to falling down the hole mirrors several key moments in the memory chapters of the novel: twice during combat, Berlin falls on the ground and shakes uncontrollably; and the night after Billy Boy Watkins dies, Berlin is seized by a fit of laughter during which he loses awareness of the present, by turns retreating into more pleasurable memories, having flashbacks of Billy Boy's bizarre

reaction to the landmine, and imagining conversations with his father. The giggling here, it seems, signifies a similar loss of control. The hole affects Berlin in the fantastic narrative in the same way those traumatic events did when they actually happened. In this instance, though, Berlin is narrativizing the fit of laughter, not physically having one. Moreover, he stays in the moment: he sticks with the single narrative thread all the way through the freefall and its effect on him. In contrast to when Billy Boy died, Berlin does not retreat into happier memories or fantasies, nor does he experience any moment as a flashback. Rather, he asserts mastery over himself and the narrative by consciously controlling the loss of control.

On the subsequent page, the novel briefly returns to the guard tower, where Berlin says to himself, “The fear was gone.” However, he is not only referring to the fear within the fantastic narrative. Beyond that, he is speaking about the fears related to everything the hole represents: the deaths of Bernie Lynn and Frenchie Tucker and the fact that he too would have died had he gone down the tunnel. (Moreover, I would like to suggest that this portion of the tale is also the first necessary step in coming to terms with his role in the death of Lieutenant Martin). By learning to deal with the hole in the fantastic narrative, by learning to translate the hole and his response to it into language, it helps him begin to do the same with the real traumatic events. As Dominick LaCapra writes, “When language functions to provide some measure of conscious control, critical distance, and perspective, one has begun the arduous process of working over and through trauma” (90). This is the reason that, in the following chapter, Berlin is able to tell a complete, coherent narrative that starts with Frenchie Tucker’s death, moves on to Berlin’s decision not to retrieve Tucker’s body, and finally concludes with Bernie Lynn’s

entering the hole and hearing a bang. The very element of the story that entered his narrative as a traumatic intrusion is the same thing that allows him to begin the process of healing by bringing trauma to the consciousness as narrative.

The fantastic narrative prepares Berlin to face the other traumatic memories in parallel ways. Before he is finally able to turn Billy Boy Watkins' death into a complete story, the Cacciato chase must first go to Tehran, where he witnesses a beheading, and then to an Iranian discotheque (the most unlikely of settings for a novel ostensibly about the Vietnam War), where members of his squad swap stories about combat with a member of SAVAK. The combination of the two—the execution of a scared young Iranian soldier and the telling of war stories—then allows Berlin to tell himself “The Ultimate War Story,” the story of how a young American soldier “died of fright on the field of battle” (217). Similarly, when in the fantastic narrative the squad is sentenced to beheading by the Iranian government, it gives Berlin a chance to contemplate, and therefore to work through, his role in the squad's sentencing Lieutenant Martin to die. By dealing with the issues of the real traumatic memory in the fantastic narrative, which portrays the trauma indirectly and in an antirealistic context, Paul Berlin is able in the ensuing chapters to tell the story of how the men planned to frag Martin, even if he never quite gets to a point where he can really talk about the day the lieutenant was killed.

By the end of the novel, Berlin has told himself nearly all of the stories he could not face at the beginning, the ones that he could previously describe with no more than one or two simple words. To a certain extent, he has managed to establish a chronology as well: he begins to remember who was killed before whom and who died where and in which month. Yet the process of overcoming trauma is not quite so easy as he has (or

perhaps I have) made it seem. As LaCapra notes, “The process of working over and through the past is itself repeated and subject to remission” (91). It is therefore probable that Specialist-Four Paul Berlin goes through some version of this routine often. Indeed, in the final Observation Post chapter, he declares, “Those were all facts, and he could face them squarely. The order of facts—which facts came first and which came last, the relations among the facts—here he had trouble, but it was not the trouble of facing facts” (323). At the end of the night, then, some of his work is already coming undone. The reader has already seen him make sense of what can be made sensible. Likewise, the reader has seen him put the events in order. But because of the nature and power of trauma, his working through must begin again. This return, however, is different than the disruptive traumatic return. It is not a going back to the point of origin or a complete re-experiencing. Each time Paul Berlin transforms a traumatic memory into narrative, he learns more about the experiences and, correspondingly, more about how to deal with them. These willed returns, LaCapra writes, “are crucial for laying ghosts to rest, distancing oneself from haunting revenants, renewing an interest in life, and being able to engage memory in more critically tested senses” (90). In other words, they stem “the compulsively repetitive, full reliving of the past” and place the victim in full possession of their life, little by little (LaCapra 91).

The fantastic, I must reiterate, is only one means among many that a person can work through trauma. Nonetheless, it is also a particularly interesting one because it is simultaneously bound up with the trauma itself. At the same time that the fantastic emerges in or restructures a victim’s narrative as a product of trauma, it provides the victim with a way of facing traumatic histories in new contexts and in less oppressive

scenarios, thus defusing some of the power of flashbacks and other intrusions that impose themselves upon victims as literal relivings. By enabling the victim to speak about their trauma at all, even if indirectly and in narratives that reject mimetic relationships to the real world, the fantastic helps them begin to gain critical distance from the event, convert it into narrative memory, and eventually make it a part of a more unified self. Yet, as traumatic memory is translated into narrative, a new difficulty arises, as Cathy Caruth puts it, “the unremitting problem of *how not to betray the past*” (27). Once a victim (or, for that matter, a novelist or historian) begins narrativizing a traumatic experience for others to read or listen to, the issue ceases to be finding the right words to tell a story. Rather, it becomes telling the right story in the right way, a way that does not betray loved ones or other victims or the sheer incomprehensibility of the event. In my closing chapter, I will more fully explore this problem and argue that the fantastic not only speaks trauma and facilitates working through, but finally that it allows both victims and non-victims to ethically bear witness to traumatic events without betraying the past.

### **Chapter 3—Bearing Witness: The Fantastic as History**

If the Greeks invented tragedy, the Romans the epistle, and the Renaissance the sonnet, our generation has invented a new literature, that of testimony. We have all been witnesses and we all feel we have to bear testimony for the future.

*Elie Wiesel, “The Holocaust as Literary Inspiration”*

Regardless of who constructs the narrative, giving an account of a traumatic event presents an array of problems. As Cathy Caruth asserts, a victim who is able to compose

such a narrative for himself may still be unwilling to relate it to others, as if it were “a betrayal of the one[s] who died, with the one who is alive and listens” (*Unclaimed* 27). Guilt and fear, as well as more complex feelings that words fail even to approximate the essence of the traumatic event, compound and disrupt the communication of the narrative. However, in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, Dori Laub maintains that “it is essential for this narrative that *could not be articulated*, to be *told*, to be *transmitted*, to be *heard*” (85, emphasis in original). In order to move forward in the healing process, the victim needs to bear witness to the things he or she has seen or experienced, that is, not only to their trauma but to the historical events that triggered the traumatic response. Moreover, non-victims choose (or feel compelled) to bear witness as well—reporters, novelists, and historians all participate in making a traumatic history heard, whether they do so on the basis of research, interviews, or personal experience. The difficulty here arises from the public nature of their discourses: the manner in which members of these professions depict an event shapes how society comes to know it. Historian Dominick LaCapra thus argues, along with Laub, trauma scholar Shoshana Felman, and director Claude Lanzmann, that sensitive, responsible narratives of traumatic occurrences should *not* make complete sense of them. In reference to the Holocaust and his process of directing the documentary film *Shoah*, Claude Lanzmann writes, “There is an absolute obscenity in the very project of understanding. . . . I clung to this refusal of understanding as the only possible ethical and at the same time only possible operative attitude” (204). LaCapra echoes this sentiment, observing that “there is something dubious in the attempt to make certain problems easy or deceptively simple and accessible” (4). In writing about trauma, then, even style becomes an ethical



dilemma. Additionally, he goes on to say, narratives relating traumatic histories should not seek to harmonize with or be incorporated into larger narratives, such as national narratives or myths of progress. The traumatic history certainly needs told, but in a way that allows it to be known only for itself and not as a part of something—or someone—else. A narrative that represents the traumatic event as too easily explained, rationalized, or meaningful both betrays the victims and survivors and, as Tim O’Brien says in “How to Tell a True War Story,” makes the listener “the victim of a very old and terrible lie” (68-69).

I would like to conclude this study by arguing that the fantastic mode is an effective means for both victims and non-victims to overcome these difficulties and bear witness to the traumatic past. At the same time that the fantastic can be a form of acting out or a method of working through, even as it seems to depart from “real” events, it may tell a history. What this means is that when we hear or read accounts like those given by Kurt Vonnegut-the-character in *Slaughterhouse-Five* (the only character from the three novels who is consciously bearing witness to historical events for an audience) narrated by actual victims, we must not explain away everything as solely the products of a traumatized mind or the stepping stone to a more “real” narrative. Vonnegut-the-character’s narrative in *Slaughterhouse-Five* speaks his trauma, it is an attempt to work through that trauma, but it is also an account of the very real destruction of Dresden. It is true that such a narrative may include factual inaccuracies (in addition to the time travel and aliens). Vonnegut greatly overestimates the number of deaths in Dresden and may have misunderstood what the designation “Slaughterhouse Five” actually stood for.<sup>17</sup> But

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<sup>17</sup> While teaching English at the Technische Universität Dresden, Julie Hibbard wrote the essay “In Search of Slaughterhouse-Five” in which she chronicles her attempts to find the building where Vonnegut was

as Laub says of an Auschwitz survivor whose story miscounted the number of chimneys blown up during an uprising, Vonnegut is testifying “not to the number ... but to something else, more radical, more crucial: the reality of an unimaginable occurrence.... The number mattered less than the fact of the occurrence.... [H]e testified to the breakage of a framework. That was the historical truth” (60). And because it does so indirectly, the fantastic narrative escapes many of the pitfalls victims face in straightforward narration. By telling a tale that seems barely “about” Dresden and by distancing Dresden itself through several layers of narration, Vonnegut-the-character avoids the guilt bound up with betraying the ones who died. He never supposes that his words can adequately tell their stories or that he can sufficiently represent them in language. And yet, the bombing always seems just beneath the surface of the text. His narrative is always telling us about Dresden, even when it tries not to, perhaps *because* it tries not to.

But more to the point, I contend that novels like *Going After Cacciato*, *Captain Blackman*, and *Slaughterhouse-Five*—those that employ elements of the fantastic—may be some of the best models for bearing witness to traumatic histories. Of course, that fiction conveys information about the past is by no means a new idea. Indeed, notes LaCapra,

Narratives in fiction may ... involve truth claims on a structural or general level by providing insight into phenomena such as slavery or the Holocaust, by offering a reading of a process or period, or by giving at least a plausible ‘feel’ for experience and emotion which may be difficult to arrive at through restricted documentary methods. (13)

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held. However, the responses she got from living Dresdeners suggest that *Slaughterhouse Five* was a group of buildings, not one particular building (139).

The fantastic, however, is often regarded as a less serious literary form and is therefore generally excluded from being understood in this way. Its deliberate departures not only from documented occurrences but also from the rules that govern reality as we know it, taken together, seem to void any purchase it might have on history.

Yet, this assumption seems to be overlooking one of the central purposes of the fantastic in these novels. Authors make use of the fantastic, according to Rosemary Jackson, “as an art of estrangement, resisting closure, opening structures” (175). In other words, it is doing precisely what LaCapra and the others say responsible *history* should do. The inclusion of time travel, aliens, holes in the road, multiple selves, and Iranian discotheques is (obviously) not to posit these things as real, but to open up the narratives, to prevent them from making too much sense, to ensure they resist having meanings imposed upon them. The individual episodes in *Captain Blackman* still bear witness to the traumas suffered by Black soldiers throughout the history of the United States; but the fantastic narrative, the way the text refuses to explain that narrative as time travel, dreaming, or something else entirely, precludes a closed meaning for the novel.<sup>18</sup> *Going After Cacciato*’s insistence on keeping the reader uncertain “about what is present, past, and dreamed, what is the book’s fiction, and what is its reality” likewise disrupts the reader’s understanding of the narrative, even as it conveys truths about the combat experience in the Vietnam War (Bonn). Finally, as Todd Davis explains, “The time shifts in *Slaughterhouse-Five* are exactly what prevent the writer and the reader from developing causes and effects, from creating meaning based on a metanarrative; there is a staunch refusal to try to explain how the bombing of Dresden could be justified” (70).

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<sup>18</sup> For a similar argument on time travel in Octavia Butler’s *Kindred*, see A. Timothy Spaulding’s *Reforming the Past: History, the Fantastic, and the Postmodern Slave Narrative*, p. 43-44.

The fantastic is in each of these cases a way of framing the historical knowledge to present it to the reader in the most effective and most ethically responsible manner.

What *Going After Cacciato*, *Captain Blackman*, and *Slaughterhouse-Five* show us through their representations of trauma is that the fantastic is far from being the escapist mode it has long been accused of being. Elements of the fantastic can speak a victim's trauma, revealing much to us about his or her psychological life. Furthermore, the fantastic mode can serve as a means of working through, aiding a victim's recovery by enabling the retrieval of the memories of the traumatizing experience. And finally, fantastic narratives can tell histories of traumatic events in appropriately intellectually-disrupting ways. Once we as readers or listeners understand these things, we go a long way towards fostering open lines of communication through which victims of trauma can heal.

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