

Oskar Schell “Has Come Unstuck in Time”: Trauma in  
*Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*



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**Abstract**

This paper analyses the intertextuality between *Slaughterhouse-Five* by Kurt Vonnegut and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* by Jonathan Safran Foer; a subject still relatively unexplored in academic considerations. By reading *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* through the lens of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, this paper will argue that Foer's postmodern literary devices that are often discarded as gimmickry or ornamentation should be seen as a conscious effort to uphold the conventions of the trauma genre partly established by writers like Vonnegut. By highlighting the unspeakable nature of trauma and the constraints of language as a mode of representation, combined with their departure from realism both in content and form, these novels stay true to the fragmented experience of trauma.

**Key Words:** Trauma, The Unspeakable, Postmodernism, Foer, Vonnegut.

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### **Introduction: A Theoretical Overview of Trauma**

More than seventy years ago, the allied forces performed a series of air raids which resulted in the destruction of the German city Dresden. An estimated twenty-five thousand people lost their lives in the bombing (Neutzner et al. 17). Many have since criticised the attack, as Dresden did not have any military significance, and view it as a wilful attempt to claim civilian lives (Overy 123). Some, like German historian Karl Dietrich Erdmann, even argued that the bombing of Dresden was as much a war crime as the Holocaust itself: “[n]ext to the names of Belzec, Treblinka and Auschwitz as symbols of horror ... stands the name of Dresden” (qtd. in Overy 125). Only few writers have written about the air raids, which W.G. Sebald attributes to the establishment of a taboo on the subject (10). The firebombing of Dresden does, nevertheless, lie at the heart of trauma in both *Slaughterhouse-Five* by Kurt Vonnegut and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* by Jonathan Safran Foer. This intertextual link between the two novels is, however, not limited to their exploration of Dresden or other superficial plot similarities. Rather, these connections are deepened by the similar use of postmodern strategies to portray the devastating nature of trauma.

The twentieth century has been called the “century of trauma” (Felman 171). As a result, it saw the emergence of trauma studies, which has been a rapidly expanding field of research for several decades. Trauma theory and literature are intimately connected as theorists have often turned to literature to support their theories (Caruth; Felman; Freud, “moses”; Lacapra). Cathy Caruth asserts that literature’s ability to reconcile the comprehensible with the incomprehensible makes for a “crucial link between literature and theory” (3). There is still some debate on the definition of trauma itself. Roger Luckhurst defines it as “a piercing or breach of a border that puts inside and outside into a strange communication” (3). Shoshana Felman describes it as “a shock that creates a psychological split or rupture” (171), while Kalí Tal characterises it as “a life-threatening event that

displaces [one's] preconceived notions about the world" (15). Despite the many different definitions, scholars seem to agree that trauma is a disruptive event after which nothing is the same as it was before.

Responses to traumatic events are often described using Sigmund Freud's distinction between melancholia and mourning. Dominick Lacapra reintegrated mourning, or working-through, and melancholia, or acting-out, in the field of trauma studies which since underpins "the theoretical groundwork for examining trauma in literature" (Bardizbanian 316). Freud, whose psychoanalysis still lies at the basis of trauma theory, was the first to use the distinction between mourning and melancholia as a reaction to loss. Freud describes mourning as "the reaction to the loss of a lost person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as fatherland, liberty, an ideal, and so on" ("Mourning" 153). Melancholia is, similarly, a state of grief; a response to the loss of someone, something or an abstraction. Mourning is the desired and healthy way to respond, while melancholia is an abnormal state. Both reactions may not only be inspired by the same event, but also induce similar symptoms. The melancholic and the mourner exhibit overall sadness, apathy, loss of interest in the world around them, and loss of the capacity to love ("Mourning" 153). Melancholia, however, also involves "lowering the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches, and self-revilings, and cumulates in a delusional expectation of punishment" ("Mourning" 153). Additionally, while mourning is only a temporary and conscious state, melancholia is not. Freud explains that it is "universally observed that man never willingly abandons a libido-position, not even when a substitute is already beckoning to him" ("Mourning" 154). In mourning, someone is still eventually able to detach him or herself from the lost object and thus let go of the grief, because one is conscious of the loss. The melancholic is not completely aware of the loss and is thus not able to abandon the libido-position. Subsequently, the melancholic, unable to understand the loss, attributes it to his own

character in the form of self-criticism (“Mourning” 155). Painful experiences are unconsciously repressed which causes the compulsive resurfacing of said experiences. Freud concludes that “in [mourning] the world becomes poor and empty; in melancholia, it is the ego itself” (“Mourning” 155). Freud’s influence endures, as the idea that trauma is largely unconscious, which in turn makes it unrepresentable, is still cemented in theory today.

In the field of trauma theory, there is much discussion on the nature of trauma, especially about the notion of the unspeakable and traumatic amnesia. Joshua Pederson draws a distinction between first- and second-generation trauma theorists.<sup>1</sup> Among the first wave theorists are Geoffrey Hartman, Shoshana Felman, and “most importantly”, Cathy Caruth (334), all of whom developed their theories in the nineties, and “subscribe to an understanding of trauma as unspeakable” (338). The idea that traumatic memories are always absent from the survivor’s consciousness and that trauma is, “always characterised by a temporary or permanent latency period of amnesia,” is still prevalent amongst the first-generation theorists, and originates from Freud’s psychoanalysis. Caruth claims that the experience of trauma is always belated and that it can only be experienced “in and through its inherent forgetting” (17). Like Freud she is interested in the way literature can describe traumatic experiences because it explores “the complex relation between knowing and not knowing” (3). Caruth views these experiences as incredibly distressing, so much so, that they defy understanding, language and expression. Caruth focuses specifically on Freud’s idea that trauma is largely unconscious and that memories of horrible events are able resurface and haunt their victim. She writes that trauma “is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor” (4). Traumatic events are, in Caruth’s view, so incomprehensible that they are experienced as blank spaces. In effect, because the events

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<sup>1</sup> This is unrelated to the distinction between first and second-generation trauma sufferers.

are not fully known, they cannot be incorporated normally into memory (Vickroy 12). The repetition and involuntary reliving of the traumatic event is an attempt to “master what was never fully grasped in the first place” (Caruth 62). Yet, for victims to be able to let the past be past and move on, the memory of the event must be brought to consciousness, as some suggest, through narrative (Caruth; Berger). “[t]rauma is suffered in the psyche precisely, it would seem, because it is *not* directly available to experience” (Caruth 61). Caruth contends that the experience remains “unclaimed” until it is acknowledged through articulation.

Since the nineties, however, much research has been conducted on trauma and its manifestations in the brain. Studies examining the connection between memory and stress or trauma have been especially abundant. Many of these studies challenge this view of traumatic amnesia and find that the opposite is true: stressful stimuli command more attention than neutral ones, and events that arouse a stress response are remembered better (Kalat & Shiota 123; McNally). Within trauma studies, however, the idea of traumatic amnesia still dominates most theories. Richard McNally points out that “[i]t is ironic that so much has been written about the biological mechanisms of traumatic psychological amnesia when the very existence of the phenomenon is in doubt” (182). Joshua Pederson argues that “[a]s the science of trauma changes, the literary theory of trauma must change too” (334). Pederson sees himself one among a second generation of theorists. This second wave agrees that many common notions within trauma studies are outdated, and try to invalidate these, among which is the unspeakable. Pederson uses Richard McNally’s review of newer clinical studies, which he calls the “skeptics’ bible” (336), to construct a new model of literary trauma theory. His theory states that “trauma victims can both remember and describe their traumatic past in detail” (338) and that these memories are “both memorable and speakable” (338).

The current thesis combines insights from the first and second-generation trauma theorists: troubling memories are not erased from the mind, but are more detailed and more

prominent than others. The unspeakable, however, can still be a distinctive feature, because the availability of these memories does not necessarily entail immediate comprehension. The events that cause these memories are experienced too unexpectedly to immediately make sense of. Trauma is not the presence of disturbing memories but the absence of understanding. Narrating or speaking about troubling experiences can serve as ways of filling in a gap where words are needed to understand what happened. Language, however, might not cover the extent of the experience. Recovering, then, becomes about representing the unspeakable, replacing the absence with presence. The simultaneous need for articulation and impossibility of expression is what makes trauma inherently paradoxical. Novels that try to portray it, otherwise known as trauma fiction, become a kind of paradox as well since they attempt to narrativize what is essentially unrepresentable.

Trauma fiction is still a field that has yet to take definitive shape. Anne Whitehead affirms that it is an “emerging genre” (4). Both Caruth’s and LaCapra’s theories have greatly influenced the genre (Collins 6), which is usually characterised not only by its content, but also by its disintegrated form. Whitehead writes that “[i]f trauma is at all susceptible to narrative formulation ... it requires a literary form which departs from conventional linear sequence” (4). Caruth’s influence is very visible here: because trauma is something that is unrepresentable through language, the novelist must use different strategies to convey it. Similarly, Laurie Vickroy argues that these narratives should also incorporate “the rhythms, processes and uncertainties of traumatic experience within their underlying sensibilities and structures” (88). The literary movement that is often used in novels that explore trauma is postmodernism, which is characterised by a myriad of narrative techniques such as fragmentation, non-linearity, repetition, multiple narrators or point of views, metafiction and language manipulation (Ataria et al.; Berger; Gibbs; Morrissey). Postmodern fiction is a reaction against the “utopian project” (Ataria et al. 4), and the “all-encompassing, redemptive



unity proposed by modernism” (7). Language is no longer seen as “mechanism of redemption” in postmodern literature. Instead, “it is depicted as a tool of oppression” which corresponds to the notion of the unspeakable (Ataria et al. 4). Postmodern fiction is also characterised by the use highly imaginative or fantastical passages which often “attempt to recreate traumatic events by simulating the overwhelming affects that prevented their narrativization in the first place” (Arva 61). Far from serving only an escapist function, fantasy “is a necessary part of the human capacity to bridge the imaginary and the real” (Haaken 1082). Many scholars have noticed that postmodern literary devices seem suitable to represent the disruptive nature of trauma. Vickroy observes these “stylistic innovations ... have proved effective in approximating for readers the psychic defences that pose obstacles to narrating and recovering from trauma” (xi). Alan Gibbs also affirms their strong affiliation and argues that postmodernist techniques became conventional within the genre, so much so, that these devices are no longer effective because the reader is “over-familiar” (36) with them.

A novel famous for incorporating the disruptive quality of trauma within its structure by using postmodernist techniques, and which is regarded as a “twentieth-century precursor” to trauma fiction is *Slaughterhouse-Five* by Vonnegut (Gibbs 41). Many scholars agree that Vonnegut’s novel in which the protagonist Billy Pilgrim “has come unstuck in time” (Vonnegut 23), is not a mere reconstruction of the Dresden bombing, but, to a greater extent, the story of the psychological toll of this event on Billy. The discourse on *Slaughterhouse-Five* has always been permeated by a psychological vernacular: Billy has been diagnosed with PTSD by Suzanne Veas-Gulani and Kevin Brown, with schizophrenia by Lawrence Broer and with childhood-trauma by Barbara Lupack. Broer suggests that “[p]robably no characters in contemporary fiction are more traumatised and emotionally damaged than those of Kurt Vonnegut” (3). Interestingly enough, *Slaughterhouse-Five* was written more than a decade before Post Traumatic Stress Disorder was even officially added to the American Psychiatric

Association diagnostics manual, as many scholars have noted (Collado-Rodríguez, “Approaching”; Kucmin et al.; Wicks). Yet, despite the absence of the medical discourse for PTSD, Vonnegut’s novel is still regarded as a “foundational text” within American trauma narratives, and has helped to establish various conventions in how literature deals with the representation of trauma (Gibbs 41). Amanda Wicks even argues that despite it being written in the 1960s, *Slaughterhouse-Five* still provides “a valuable insight into the experience of traumatic memory” (330).

*Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*<sup>2</sup> is also famous for portraying trauma using postmodern literary techniques. Roger Luckhurst asserts that the novel is “a new development in trauma fiction ...[that] show[s] every sign of becoming canonical” (87). The central events in the novel are the 9/11 attacks on the Twin Towers. For a few years after, the subject became taboo: “even for some years after the attacks, many people did not want to face the facts, as if by avoiding talking, writing or filming about the massacres they would exorcise them” (Collado-Rodríguez, “Trauma” 51). Kalí Tal stresses that authentic representations of trauma “can never be achieved without recreating the event since, by its very definition, [it] lies beyond the bounds of ‘normal’ conception” (15). This is perhaps an explanation for the backlash that Foer, and other writers, like Susan Sontag and Don DeLillo, received in response to writing about 9/11<sup>3</sup>, as it was still a fresh wound in the collective American consciousness. Caruth’s vision on trauma could explain why people preferred not to talk about or be confronted with texts on 9/11. The attacks were perceived as such senseless acts of violence

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<sup>2</sup> From here on I will abbreviate *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* to *Extremely Loud*.

<sup>3</sup> Foer, like other writers who wrote novels about 9/11, was accused of capitalizing on the attacks (Pozorski 5). Michiko Kakutani, a reviewer at the *New York Times* wrote: “What is the line between preserving our historical memory -- ensuring that ‘we will never forget,’ as the banner erected over ground zero pledged -- and cashing in on a terrible event, between remembering and exploiting the dead?” (“The Information Age Processes a Tragedy”). She ultimately condemns fiction writing on 9/11 concluding that “it will be a long time before the events of Sept. 11 can be absorbed by our collective imagination and a long time before they can be assimilated into our fiction” (“The Information Age Processes a Tragedy”).

that they were incomprehensible and thus unspeakable. Confrontation with the memories of the attacks would perhaps only serve to highlight their incomprehensibility.

*Extremely Loud* attracted both wide acclaim and brutal criticism. Jonathan Safran Foer, like Vonnegut, departs from a realist literary tradition and uses some of the same strategies. The novel's narrative is at times interrupted by various photographs and letters, shifts between multiple narrators, and often departs from conventional realism. It is precisely these strategies that Foer is both praised and criticised for. David Gates calls Foer's typographical deviations "gimmickry", adding that great literature does not need these kinds of "special effects". Annabel Lyon calls the novel's deviations "merely twitchy" and contends that Foer "pulls out a lot of postmodernist tricks to keep the surface of the novel bright and busy". Caudia La Rocco concludes that Foer uses "dazzle over substance" and wishes that "Foer had used words, instead of design, to convey his point". Yet, if trauma does not lend itself to normal expression, the use of these postmodernist tricks may be exactly the point that Foer was trying to convey. This thesis will argue that these strategies are, rather than tricks or embellishments, a conscious decision on Foer's part to deviate from a realistic mode of representation. Foer adopts these techniques not only to situate his own novel within the paradigm of trauma texts, but also to represent trauma in a way that is most faithful to the experience itself.

Despite the many similarities between *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Extremely Loud*, little attention has been devoted to the intertext between these two novels. Those who have focused on the similarities have either branded it as "cribbing" (Hill) on Foer's part, or have merely mentioned the intertext in passing without analysing it (Codde 251; Saal 466; Sørensen 103; Vanderwees 188). Magali Cornier Michael is one of few scholars who explores connections between the two novels. She too argues that Foer's novel echoes *Slaughterhouse-Five*. According to Michael, by "rewriting" *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Foer positions *Extremely Loud*

within a tradition of American anti-war literature from a twenty-first century perspective (14). She concludes that “Foer’s novel updates for the twenty-first century the kind of anti-war stance so brilliantly enacted by the narrator of Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five*” (Michael 28).

*Extremely Loud* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* are not only tied together by their exploration of arguably the most traumatic events in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century, but also by their use of similar strategies to depict the devastating nature of trauma. Foer uses, perhaps deliberately, many of the same postmodern strategies Vonnegut uses to capture the disturbing nature of a traumatic experience. Yet, rather than a simulation, the techniques Foer uses in *Extremely Loud* should be seen as a continuation of those employed by Vonnegut. In Foer’s novel the constraints of language and retreat into fantasy serve to highlight the unsettling and disruptive nature of trauma which is established through both form and content.

### “The Silence Overtook Me Like a Cancer”: Speaking the Unspeakable

Every word is like an unnecessary stain on silence and nothingness  
 – Samuel Beckett

Both *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Extremely Loud* explore the interesting relationship between the simultaneous impossibility of speech and writing to capture trauma, and the necessity of speaking out in order to move past it. In both novels, the unspeakable does not result from traumatic amnesia, but because language is flawed when it comes to representing unimaginable experiences. The use of multiple narratives and the insertion of various images is, in both *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Extremely Loud*, an attempt to overcome the constraints of language. The character’s attempts to use language and narrative highlights the concurrent difficulty and necessity in rendering the unspeakable describable, but also that language might not be the right mode of representation for traumatic experiences.

The problem with traumatic memories is that they repeatedly present themselves in the mind of their host, which causes them to remain stuck in the past. The unnamed narrator who only appears a few times in *Slaughterhouse-Five* seems to struggle to write his “famous Dresden book” (Vonnegut 4), and to leave the experience behind him. The introductory chapter revolves around the narrator’s search for the right words. This paradoxical balance between the impossibility and necessity of expression is first touched upon in this first chapter. The narrator describes that he thought “it would be easy for [him] to write about the destruction of Dresden, since all [he] would have to do would be to report what [he] had seen” (2). Later he admits that his initial attempt to narrativize his experiences failed, because the words he wanted to write did not present themselves to his mind: “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” (2). Later on, the narrator acknowledges that “people aren’t supposed to look back”, and that, since he has finished his “war book”, he will not look back anymore (22). Ironically, when the narrator tells the story

of Lot and his wife who leave Sodom, he says that he loves Lot's wife for looking back anyway, "because it was so human" (22). The narrator thus acknowledges the paradoxal nature of the unspeakable: people should not look back on the past, yet the past needs to be dealt-with before moving on to the future. That horrible experiences do not easily lend themselves to verbalization is also touched upon by the unnamed narrator as he writes in a letter to his editor: "there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre. Everybody is supposed to be dead, to never say anything or want anything ever again. Everything is supposed to be quiet after a massacre, and it always is, except for the birds" (19). Finding the words might not be the problem when dealing with trauma; finding the right words, the intelligent ones, to comprehend what has happened might be the most difficult endeavour. Even though the narrator seems able to move forward and stop looking back, he still calls his book "a failure" (22), because there are no intelligent words to capture trauma; language fails to be able to make sense of the experience.

Billy similarly struggles to put his trauma into words. On their honeymoon, his wife Valencia questions him about the war: "I look at you sometimes ... and I get a funny feeling that you're full of secrets ... you must have secrets about the war. Or, not secrets, I guess, but things you don't want to talk about" (121). Billy is very unresponsive to her questions and only gives her one-word replies. Valencia asks if he would talk about the war if she wanted him to, to which Billy answers: "[i]t would sound like a dream" (121). After Valencia asks Billy about Edgar Derby's execution, Billy again gives her only one-word replies, says "[e]xcuse me" (123), leaves the room, and travels back in time again. The reader does not discover Billy's feelings or thoughts about his traumatic experiences. The unnamed narrator has purposefully written Billy's story in a much more impersonal third-person narrative. In this sense, Billy cannot speak the unspeakable because he is denied a testimony by the writer. While the narrator at the beginning says people are not supposed to look back, Billy feels like

he is incapable of doing so. On the planet Tramalfadore, a guide tries to explain what time looks like to earthlings. He says that it is like humans have their heads “encased in a steel sphere which [they] could never take off. [With] only one eyehole through which [they] could look, and welded to that eyehole were six feet of pipe” (115). Billy feels trapped in the metaphor and feels like he is “strapped to a steel lattice which was bolted to a flatcar on rails, and there was no way he could turn his head or touch the pipe” (115).

The structure of the *Slaughterhouse-Five* further reinforces the idea of the unspeakable by shifting viewpoints. The story cannot be fully told by the unnamed narrator himself, nor can it be told entirely by Billy, as the unnamed narrator interrupts the story several times. The narrator adds the phrase: “I was there” (Vonnegut 67, 212), after certain passages and at one point, he also injects “a personal note” (146), and shares one of his memories revisiting Dresden with one of his war buddies (211), as if to remind the reader that the events are not fictional, but that “all this happened, more or less” (1). Susanne Veas-Gulani also comments on these intrusions, and argues that they are a testament to the horrific nature of the Dresden bombing. The interruptions and multiple narrators serve to illustrate that the events “are too far removed from normal experience to be easily reported” (Veas-Gulani 180). These personal intermissions disrupt the narrative flow which also serves to show that even the narrative struggles with the unspeakable. The two narratives are, however, still connected by various repeated expressions. In the first chapter, the unnamed narrator says that when he is drunk, his breath smells like “mustard gas and roses” (4). This expression is mirrored in Billy’s narrative when he sees a drunk soldier and describes that he “could almost smell his breath-mustard gas and roses” (73). Similarly, the corpses in the holes under the rubble are also said to have the same smell (214). These intrusions are not the only disruptions to the narrative: there are also three drawings, all of which have words written in them. Vonnegut could just as easily have written what it says, for example, on the drawing of the gravestone, but he does not. He

chooses to make it into an image rather than just a sentence which further demonstrates that language is sometimes just not enough. By inserting the images Vonnegut presents the reader with more than one semiotic approach, making his narrative multimodal. The images also serve an additional function: they offer the readers a look in Billy's mind. The drawing of the latrine sign and Montana Wildhack breasts are images that Billy is looking at when they are shown in the novel, and the readers thus see what Billy sees at that moment. The image of the tombstone has an additional significance because it is not explicitly referenced like the other two images. Billy has a crazy thought "[t]he truth of it startled him. It would make a good epitaph for Billy Pilgrim – and for me, too" (121). Without the image itself, the reader would not have known what Billy meant and it thus helps explain Billy's train of thought.

Like Vonnegut, Foer plays with the tension between the need and difficulty to express trauma. The main narrative in the novel is that of nine-year-old Oskar Schell who is on something resembling a treasure hunt in New York City, looking for the lock which fits the key he found in his dead dad's bedroom. Oskar hopes that by finding the lock, he will be able to move on from his dad's death: "the whole point was to stop missing him" (Foer 255). Oskar is as unable to communicate about his experience as Billy Pilgrim. Oskar cannot talk about 9/11; not even the name itself can be expressed as he refers to the event as "the worst day" throughout the novel (11, 12, 68, 104, 235, 288, 326). Oskar struggles with his desire to tell his story, but also feels like he cannot. "Of course I wanted to talk to Mom that night I decided to go hunting for the lock, but I couldn't" (51). Later, he again says that he cannot talk to anyone: "I couldn't talk to Mom, obviously, and even though Toothpaste and The Minch were my best friends, I couldn't talk to them either" (234). The desire to tell his story anyway prompts Oskar to make his mother a bracelet with his dad's last words beaded into Morse code (35), "with the vague hope that his mother will be able to decipher his desperate call for attention" (Codde 247). When Oskar unknowingly meets his grandfather for the first



time he asks him, “[c]an I tell you my story?” (238). For Oskar, language just is not enough, and after he tells his story, he leaves to get the phone with the last five messages from his dad and plays them to the renter. Even after he revealed these messages he has kept secret since “the worst day” he still cannot sleep at night: “all I wanted was to fall asleep at night, but all I could do was invent” (258). Oskar is unable to express his trauma using language and thus instead of writing or speaking, he uses other means of expression. Oskar makes, for example, a scrapbook which he calls “*Stuff That Happened to Me*” (42). This is a visual diary that helps him “to express what he cannot put into words” (Siegel). The photographs in *Extremely Loud* are meant as a brief glimpse into Oskar’s mind. “In *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* images are necessary as insights into Oskar’s traumatized mind. Different photos of locks and doorknobs that show Oskar’s need to “‘unlock’ his own trauma represent his quest” (Baelo-Allué 188). Foer, like Vonnegut, interrupts his narrative by inserting various images, that serve the same purpose: to not only illuminate the limitations of language in the characters’ testimonies, but in the narrative itself as well. Both novels also use these images as a way to see into the minds of their protagonists.

The other main narrators in *Extremely Loud* are Oskar’s grandparents, who tell their stories through the medium of letters. In these letters, Foer again plays with the relationship between the necessity and impossibility of language in representing trauma; the balance between nothingness and somethingness. The grandparents, who both suffered the same loss in the Dresden bombing talk for hours with each other, but are always just “repeating those same things over and over,” (Foer 81) while “never talk[ing] about the past” (83). They refuse to acknowledge their previous life in Germany: “[y]our mother and I never talk about the past, that’s a rule” (108). After their marriage, they even abandon their native language German and never use it again (85). In the “Nothing” places in their shared apartment, Oskar’s grandmother begins to write the story of her life. Oskar’s grandfather first suggests that she

should attempt to express herself on the paper, in compliance with the common notion within trauma theory that narrativizing an experience helps overcome it: “I thought maybe if she could express herself rather than suffer herself, if she had a way to relieve the burden ... I told her there’s nothing to know, just let it come out, she put her hands on the typewriter, like a blind person feeling someone’s face for the first time” (119). So, grandmother starts typing her story. When she finally presents the stacks of pages to Thomas Schell Sr., they turn out to all be completely blank (120-23). She later admits that she only pretended to write: “I hit the space bar again and again and again. My life story was spaces” (176). Grandmother’s story cannot be represented by language, and so she uses none.

Oskar’s grandfather is the embodiment of the paradoxical nature of trauma as he is literally not able to speak, yet feels the need to write long letters to his estranged son, and, simultaneously, to his unborn child who died in the Dresden bombing. He carries around blank books which he “fill[s] with all the things [he] couldn’t say” (Foer 18). Unlike grandmother, grandfather does find words to tell his story. These words are, however, still not capable of transferring his experiences. Grandfather even feels he would not have enough words, even if he were to write books absolutely stuffed with them.

I have so much to tell you, the problem isn’t that I’m running out of time, I’m running out of room, this book is filling up, there couldn’t be enough pages, I looked around the apartment this morning for one last time and there was writing everywhere, filling the walls and mirrors, I’d rolled up the rugs so I could write on the floors, I’d written on the windows and around the bottles of wine we were given but never drank, I wear only short sleeves, even when it’s cold, because my arms are books, too. (132)

In the last letter that grandfather writes to his son, the words on the pages slowly move closer together, until finally, all the letters blend together. The last three pages, the same amount of grandmother’s blank pages, are completely illegible because the letters continue to converge

until the pages are entirely black (282-84). Pederson uses the same passage to argue that Thomas Senior's trauma is not unspeakable at all because "can write at length of his own traumatic experience" (348). Grandfather may be able to write extensively about his experience, but his words are never enough to completely capture it, and so he wants "an infinitely blank book and the rest of time" (281). He contemplates whether sharing his trauma could lead to leave the Dresden bombing behind him: "[s]ometimes I think if I could tell you what happened to me that night, I could leave that night behind me" (208). He decides, however, that this would not help, because "that night has no beginning or end, it started before I was born and it's still happening" (208). This passage reminds of the Tralfamadorian vision of time in which everything in a person's life is always happening at the same time since time is circular, not linear. Just like Billy Pilgrim then, grandfather cannot leave Dresden behind him because the experience was so traumatic that in his mind, it has detached itself from time, haunting him ever still. Thus, like his grandchild Oskar, Thomas Schell sr. desperately clings onto other forms of communication. When Thomas sr. returns to grandmother, he wants to tell her "everything: why [he]'d left, where [he]'d gone, how [he]'d found out about [his son's] death, why [he]'d come back, and what [he] needed to do with the time [he] had left" (269). Again, like Oskar, he leaves her a coded message: he breaks his life down into letters by pressing the numbers on a phone dial, yet, again, like Oskar, the recipient will not be able to understand the message. Language thus turns out to be incapable of depiction either way. The absence and abundance of words; both extremities of language are ineffective in portraying trauma.

### **“I’m always inventing”: Imagining the Unimaginable Through Fantasy**

Illusions commend themselves to us because they save us pain and allow us to enjoy pleasure instead. We must therefore accept it without complaint when they sometimes collide with a bit of reality against which they are dashed to pieces.

– Sigmund Freud

Traumatic experiences may be unspeakable, yet not unrepresentable. Caruth believes that if trauma is susceptible to representation at all, then the mode of representation must mirror the way it operates (87). Many others have also argued that if language is to represent trauma, the narratives should divert from convention in order to truly capture it (Whitehead; Vickroy). LaCapra asserts that “[t]rauma brings about a dissociation of affect and representation: one disorientingly feels what one cannot represent; one numbingly represents what one cannot feel” (42). According to Laurie Vickroy, writers have a number of narrative strategies that they can use to portray trauma: “textual gaps (both in the page layout and content), repetition, breaks in linear time, shifting viewpoints, and a focus on visual images and affective states.” (29). Both *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Extremely Loud* depart in their structures from conventional realism and use postmodern literary techniques to try and represent the disruptive nature of trauma. The characters in the novels similarly take their departure from realism and retreat into fantasy and use their imagination in order to make sense of something that does not make sense.

In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, like Billy Pilgrim, the reader also becomes “unstuck in time” (Vonnegut 23), as the novel does not follow a linear or logical structure. The experience of reading the book becomes as fragmented as the nature of trauma itself. The jumps in time appear random, and what the point is exactly remains unclear, because after trauma, reality is not clear anymore. The way the book is structured is mirrored by what the Tralfamadorians say about literature:

there isn’t any particular relationship between all the messages, except that the author has chosen them carefully, so that, when seen all at once, they produce an image of life

that is beautiful and surprising and deep. There is no beginning, no middle, no end, no suspense, no moral, no causes, no effects. What we love in our books are the depth of many marvellous moments seen all at once. (88)

Similarly, the readers see the plot all at once as they are told the beginning and ending before the second chapter even starts: “[i]t begins like this: Listen: Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time. It ends like this: Poo-tee-weet?” (22). The narrator even gives away the climax of the novel by saying it will be the execution of Edgar Derby (5). This is, however, not the initial outline of the novel as the narrator says: “[t]he best outline I ever made, or anyway, the prettiest one was on the back of a roll of wallpaper ... [o]ne end of the wallpaper was the beginning of the story, and the other end was the end, and then there was all that middle part, which was the middle” (5). He chose, however, not to use the prettiest version, but one with no linearity. Matheson argues that if Vonnegut had used a chronological narrative, it would have given the reader “an illusion of logic and meaning by virtue of the apparent causal pattern therein” (233). There is not a logic to the structure of the novel, because there are no sensible things to say about massacres, and so the reader merely tags along on the “spastic” (23) journey through Billy’s life. Besides the interruptions in the form of images and the narrator’s personal additions which serve to fragment the narrative, Vonnegut also uses repetition in his novel to stay true to the experience of trauma. Specifically, he uses the phrase “so it goes”, which in total appears 99 times in the novel. Traumatic memories that cannot be understood remain in the victim’s subconscious and “manifest themselves belatedly in a repetitive visualisation of the event in the form of nightmares, flashbacks, hallucinations” (Uytterschout 62-3). Repetitions in the structure of the novel thus also reinforce the experience of trauma.

The phrase “so it goes” is in *Slaughterhouse-Five* used by Billy in order to make sense

of something that does not make any sense to him: war. His trips to Tramalfadore become a way for Billy to explain the continuous invasion of his past memories. Billy retreats into fantasy in order to cope. The novel describes that “Kilgore Trout became Billy’s favorite living author, and science fiction became the only sort of tales he could read” (Vonnegut 128). At one point, he remembers reading one of Trout’s novels in the veteran’s hospital. “It was about an Earthling man and woman who were kidnapped by extra-terrestrials” (201). Billy is so “tormented and haunted by the burden of the past that he finds it necessary to ‘reinvent’ his own reality” (Simpson 148). He does this by constructing Tramalfadore. Billy attempts to make sense of death, but instead of facing the truth, he becomes apathetic. Whenever death is mentioned in the book, it is immediately followed by Billy’s new life motto: “so it goes”, which is the Tralfamadorian way of saying that even though someone might die at some point, they are alive in other moments which are all happening simultaneously. ““When a Tralfamadorian sees a corpse, all he thinks is that the dead person is in a bad condition in that particular moment, but that the same person is just fine in plenty of other moments”” (27). Billy’s reaction to traumatic experiences becomes this phrase that distances itself from understanding. He retreats into the fantasy of Tramalfadore where ironically the phrase of Edgar Derby’s tombstone is applicable: “everything is beautiful and nothing hurt” (122), because if time is circular, even death does not matter anymore. Even though “so it goes” is an active way of resisting understanding, the philosophy still serves a purpose: it is something to fill the absence left by loss. “So it goes” actively undermines working-through by denying that there is anything to understand at all: it is just the way it is. For Billy, it is a way to replace the nothingness of death with words that denies its meaning. There is no need to question anything according to the Tralfamadorian philosophy, events just occur because they do, and spending time focused *on* something that you do not understand is a waste of time. As one of the Tralfamadorians says to Billy: “[o]n other days we have wars as horrible as any

you've ever seen or read about. There isn't anything we can do about them. We ignore them. We spend eternity looking at pleasant moments" (117). Fantasy ultimately helps Billy to make sense of something that does not make sense, even if it is only a temporary solution.

*Extremely Loud's* narrative is, like *Slaughterhouse-Five's*, non-linear. Oskar's chapters follow a linear track but are interrupted by the different letters written by his grandparents. Grandfathers letters are also linear as can be seen from the dates he includes beneath the titles. Only one letter from grandmother is dated, but these letters also seem to run linearly as she ends the last one with: "[h]ere is the point of everything I have been trying to tell you, Oskar" (314). Foer alternates between the different narratives which creates a non-linearity as Oskar's 2003 chapters are sometimes followed by grandfather's letters written before Oskar was even born. The pictures that were mentioned in the previous section also distort time as some images foreshadow certain passages, while others point to earlier descriptions. The paper airplane included in Oskar's diary, for example, refers to a memory Oskar has of his dad: "once Dad and I spent a whole afternoon trying to design a paper airplane that we could throw from our apartment into [grandma's]" (70). The photograph of Steven Hawking refers back to a passage in which Oskar mentions that *a Brief History of Times* is his favourite book.

Oskar Schell, like Billy Pilgrim, suffers from repetitive compulsions because of his trauma. "Typical reactions to trauma comprise ... to try to fit it [the event] into a coherent whole" (Uytterschout & Versluys 216). The gap in Oskar's trauma comes from the fact that he does not know how his father died. It causes him so much pain that Oskar begins to search for meaning where there is none. He actively tries to fill the gap of his understanding using fantasy.

I want to stop inventing. If I could know how he died, exactly how he died, I wouldn't have to invent him dying inside an elevator that was stuck between floors, which happened to some people, and I wouldn't have to imagine him trying to crawl down the

outside of the building, which I saw a video of one person doing on a Polish site, or trying to use a tablecloth as a parachute, like some of the people who were in Windows on the World actually did. There were so many different ways to die, and I just need to know which was his. (257)

All his inventions are related to trauma in the sense that almost all of his inventions could have saved his father from his untimely death: “[w]hat about parachutes in fanny packs ... what about skyscrapers made with moving parts, so they could rearrange themselves when they had to, and even open holes in their middles for planes to fly through” (258-59). Fantasy does not, however, satisfy his understanding because it still gives him no certainty.

Ultimately, he tries to find another way of filling in the absence, since both language and fantasy fail to do so. Oskar attempts to fill up the nothingness. He expresses, in an exchange with his mother, his hatred of the fact that his dad was buried despite the absence of his body to fill the coffin, he shouts: “‘Dad isn’t even there!’ ‘Excuse me?’ ‘His body was destroyed.’ ‘Don’t talk like that.’ ‘Talk like what? It’s the truth. I don’t understand why everyone pretends he’s there.’ ‘Take it easy, Oskar.’ ‘It’s just an empty box.’” (Foer 169). At the end of the novel, Oskar thinks of a solution to his “impossible problem” (321). He decides that he is going to dig up his dad’s coffin. When the renter asks him why, he tells him: “‘[b]ecause it’s the truth, and Dad loved the truth.’ ‘What truth?’ ‘That he’s dead’” (321). When the renter asks him what they are going to do once they would open the coffin, Oskar replies: “‘We’ll fill it, obviously’” (321). Trauma is a void that needs to be filled in order to be able to move on. So too, does Oskar feel the need to fill the coffin in an attempt to put his dad’s death behind him.

Oskar’s problem with the empty coffin is that it is illogical, which he also tells his mother in their fight: “[j]ust because Dad died doesn’t mean you can be illogical, Mom” (169). It does not make sense to bury someone if there is nothing to bury, nor does it make sense to



Oskar that one day his dad was there, and the next he was literally gone; every bodily trace of him. Eventually, fantasy thus tries to make sense of something the victim cannot accept.

Oskar cannot accept what happened, and this is shown by the last scene that directly mirrors a scene from *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Billy Pilgrim watches a war film in reverse so that “bombers opened their bomb bay doors, exerted a miraculous magnetism which shrunk the fires, gathered them into cylindrical steel containers, and lifted the containers into the bellies of the planes” (74). He goes even farther back than the images that are shown in the movie, and imagines the bombers putting the minerals used for the bombs back into the ground “to hide them cleverly, so they would never hurt anybody ever again” (74). Oskar’s grandmother imagines almost the exact same scene in a dream: “[t]he fire went back into the bombs, which rose up an into the bellies of the planes whose propellers turned backwards” (307). Her dream does not stop there and she goes even further back in time than Billy does: “[a]t the end of my dream, Eve put the apple back on the branch. The tree went back into the ground. It became a sapling, which became a seed. God brought together the land and the water, the sky and the water, the water and the water, evening and morning, something and nothing. He said, Let there be light. And there was darkness” (313). Similarly, Oskar reverses the pictures of the Falling Man, who he suspects is his dad: “I reversed the order, so the last one was first, and the first was last. When I flipped through them, it looked like the man was floating up through the sky” (325). It becomes a reversed kinoscopic display. Like Billy and his grandmother, Oskar extends his fantasy beyond the images he sees. He imagines that the man is his dad, who flies back into the building, walks backwards to their home and tells Oskar the story about the Sixth Borough backwards. He ends with “we would have been safe” (326), which, just like the end of the backwards motif in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, offers no closure to the reader, nor to Oskar but it stays true to the nature of trauma.

## Conclusion

Trauma is the phenomenon by which people experience something so unexpectedly that they cannot make sense of the experience. The trauma will leave a gap of understanding and until survivors are able to make sense of what happened to them, they will not be able to move forward. Both *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* attempt to capture the disruptive nature of trauma by highlighting its unspeakable quality and the necessity of filling in the gaps in understanding. The notion of the unspeakable is omnipresent in both novels as Foer and Vonnegut have their characters behave, and talk, and write in such a manner that highlights the difficulty and simultaneous necessity of representing their experience and the limitations of language as a mode of representation, but also by using multiple narratives to show that language itself is not enough to conquer trauma. So too do the characters in the novels all fail at their attempts of using language to work through their experiences. Both novels depart from conventional realism and use postmodernist literary techniques to capture the nature of traumatic events. This is again mirrored by the characters in the novels who also often withdraw themselves from reality into fantasy in order to try to make sense of something that does not make sense. The novels themselves absorb the paradox of trauma as the characters struggle with the inability of language to capture something that is deemed unspeakable, while the novels simultaneously use language to represent it. Similarly, the departure from realism and use of fantasy serve only to create a more faithful and realistic representation of trauma. Even though many first-generation theorists contend that articulation is the key towards resolving or working through haunting experiences, both novels suggest that articulation or narrativization is an almost impossible task in and of itself. The void that needs to be filled in order to move past trauma might remain empty, there might be no lock to fit the key, in which case the idea that trauma disrupts to a point that nothing can ever be the same as it was before is very fitting. *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Extremely Loud*

offer the readers no neat ends or logical conclusions, staying true to the disruptive and illogical nature of trauma. By paralleling 9/11 with Dresden, and using the same postmodern strategies made conventional because of writers like Vonnegut, Foer really did manage to create a *Slaughterhouse-Five* for the twenty-first century. These strategies should therefore not be seen as gimmickry or pointless, but as a testament to the experience of trauma.

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