

## Misadventures of a "filthy flamingo:" *Slaughterhouse Five* as a mock -prisoner of war narrative

András Tarnóc

### I

Kurt Vonnegut's novel, *Slaughterhouse Five* (1969) is mostly noted as one of the leading examples of black humor within postmodern literature. A frequently researched aspect of the novel is the author's use of science fiction motifs, primarily in the form of time travel. My essay focuses on a different feature of the given work, namely its potential interpretation as a prisoner of war narrative, in other words a postmodern parody of the genre. In line with Jean Francois Lyotard's recognition of the incredulity towards metanarratives, Vonnegut questions such absolute values as duty, loyalty, and patriotism while conveying an all-powerful anti-war message. Demonstrated by the description of Billy Pilgrim as a "filthy flamingo" and highlighting the depraved mentality of the military brass and that of the average fighting man, the author subverts the respective concepts both in the physical and metaphysical sense. The less than flattering portrayal of the appearance, activities, and personal mindset of the American soldier coupled with challenging the official reasoning behind the bombing attack on Dresden undermine the image of the military and question its principal function. Relying on a theoretical apparatus of Robert C. Doyle's cyclical content model, Jean-Francois Lyotard's criteria of the postmodern condition, Ihab Hassan's notion of self-unmaking and indeterminance, and Brian McHale's concept of ontological uncertainty, my primary objective is to retrace Vonnegut's steps in destabilizing the given POW narrative and reconstructing it as the parody of the original version.

### II

#### Theoretical apparatus

In describing the postmodern perspective I utilize the views of three leading critics, Jean Francois Lyotard, Ihab Hassan, and Brian McHale. Lyotard emphasizes the incredulity to metanarratives implying a legitimization crisis related to social justice and scientific truth since "the old poles of attraction represented by nation-states, parties, professions, institutions, and historical traditions are losing their attraction" (14). Lyotard's other claim that "the narrative function [...] is losing its great hero,

its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal” (xxiv) is also relevant to the topic at hand. In Hassan’s view postmodernism is driven by the impulse of self-unmaking and can be best described by the self-coined phrase of indeterminance. The term fuses indeterminacy and immanence implying ambiguity or discontinuity and self-representation through abstractions via interplay and interdependence respectively. According to Brian McHale postmodernism is characterized by ontological uncertainty, or the denial of “ontological grounding” as the author raises the question: Which among the several possible worlds is this? Which of my several selves will best respond to it?

My analysis is indebted to Robert Doyle’s cyclical model of the POW narrative’s plot and his categorization of the respective narratorial selves as well. Generally seven stages can be discerned in the accounts of captive soldiers: Precapture, Capture, Removal, Landscape (either during the journey or that of the POW camp) Resistance, Release, Lament (297). The four versions of self-representation are the Beleaguered self expressing fear and intimidation at the beginning of the POW experience, the Fortunate self viewing captivity in a positive light due to being removed from direct danger presented by the frontline, the Detached self maintaining a metaphysical distance from the actual ordeal, and the Soldierly self emphasizing the heroic stance made in the face of physical and psychological abuse (10).

Consequently, I will use said theoretical models to demonstrate how a postmodern parody of the POW narrative genre appears in the novel. My leading principle is the unmaking of the self. I use the concept of the self in an extended sense. Thus the unmaking or subversion of the self applies to the genre implying content and form, and naturally to the protagonist, but also to the military in a broader context. As far as genre is concerned, I advance the notion of the indirect POW narrative as compared to the generic version. Following Doyle’s model I explore whether Billy’s story contains all the components of the given theoretical scheme. I also look at the description of other soldiers while I examine the manifestation of postmodern principles, primarily Lyotard’s incredulity and Hassan’s indeterminance.

Yet, Vonnegut’s book also poses a modernist question: “Do other subjects perceive the world the same way as I do?” Naturally, this question becomes applicable in the concept of time in *Tralfamador* or in the author’s description of the British in the prisoner of war camp. The work also has a specular metafictional edge. Vonnegut’s description of his own writing process allows the reader to see the construction of a text, and at the same time it is performative as the author challenges the reader with excessive fabulation shown by the description of Valencia’s death, or the overload of data about the bombing of Dresden.

## Unmaking of the genre

The novel's main section, the account of the POW experience of Billy Pilgrim, follows, yet at the same time deconstructs or unmakes the POW narrative genre. The given account reflects or contains the components of Doyle's cyclical interpretation. The writer provides scant, yet essential information on the Pre-capture stage. We learn about Billy's childhood primarily filled with traumatic experiences including the sink or swim method of learning how to swim, the "ghastly crucifix" (21) hanging over his bed, not to mention the death of his father in a hunting accident during World War Two.

It is also unique, that unlike the traditional POW narrative suggesting a predestined or straight career to the military, Billy had no intention to join as he was drafted to serve in an actually unmilitary or unsoldierly capacity as a chaplain's assistant. The immediate events before Capture contain the details of the physical and metaphysical ordeal, among them, his exclusion from the "Three Musketeers" and the almost deadly conflict with Roland Weary. The Capture in its bizarre aspects, as Billy is saved by German soldiers, suggests the fortunate self motif espoused by Jacobus Capitein's slave narrative. The principle implying that on the whole slavery was beneficial for slaves because it paved the way toward salvation by extension can be applied to Billy as the POW experience saved him from being kicked to death by a fellow American.

The Removal stage details the horrible conditions on the POW campbound freight train and the grotesque arrival in the camp amid the "guards, who cooed like doves" (39). As a demoralized and totally disillusioned captive Billy has neither opportunity, nor inkling to submerge into the surrounding scenery. Thus, unlike as discernible in case of Indian captivity narratives, the protagonist does not turn his attention outward as illustrated by the lack of any landscape depiction during the Removal stage. An additionally unique aspect is the non-existing Resistance stage as the less than flattering description of the American soldiers indicates. Information is also provided concerning the Release as Billy is taken to a therapeutic site to recover after the war and the protagonist's efforts to cope with the at-that-time undiagnosed Post-traumatic Stress Disorder comprise the final Lament phase.

Both the structure and the plot of the novel reflect an attempt to meet the criteria of the prisoner of war narrative. The Precapture stage sees the author's persona Billy Pilgrim helplessly wandering with a motley group of defeated American soldiers. It is at this stage, where he is identified by Vonnegut as a "filthy flamingo" (18), an individual violating the standards of the military both in appearance and behavior with his preposterous look and almost ridiculous apparel. His defeatist attitude is represented by his resignation to death, and giving "another chance to the enemy

marksman" (19). The text not only commemorates Billy's fate, but that of his military counterpart reveling in sadism, the anti-tank gunner Ronal Weary as well. Although Weary is the arch opposite of Billy regarding discipline, appearance, and commitment, his careless quest for glory during which he singlehandedly tried to destroy a German tank led to the demise of his whole unit. The capture of Billy and Weary is equally bizarre as German soldiers save Billy from being kicked to death by Weary. The fact that Weary physically turns on Billy indicates the moral crisis of the army as well.

The account of Billy's misadventures can be considered as an indirect POW narrative. The other leading forms of confinement accounts, the Indian captivity narrative and the slave narrative both present examples for indirect narration. In case of an indirect narrative the story of captivity is not told by the actual victim, either the white female captive of Indians or the slave him or herself, but by the representative of the colonial elite or the dominant society. Cotton Mather in *Decennium Luctuosum* (1699) recounts the captivity and violent self-liberation of Hannah Dustan, while William Lloyd Garrison relates the ordeal of Henry Clay's slave in his book length letter attacking Lajos Kossuth<sup>1</sup> for his refusal to condemn slavery during his visit to the United States in 1851. The fact that in this instance the actual events are not told by the protagonist and Billy's story is embedded in a novel fulfils the criteria for an indirect narrative. Furthermore, while in case of generic or traditional POW narratives the narration takes place immediately upon release or after a relatively brief period following captivity, Vonnegut recalls the events considerably later, that is, 23 years after the given incident.

## Manifestations of the postmodern

As for the postmodern characteristics of the novel, I would emphasize the following: the mistrust of the grand narratives, the fragmented structure, and the idea of the deconstruction of the self.

In line with Hassan's emphasis on the unmaking of the self it can be concluded that Billy's life has been a postmodern existence from the beginning. Explored from another angle, the incredulity to metanarratives proposed by Lyotard appears all the more applicable. The skeptical attitude to religion is suggested by the "ghastly crucifix" over the protagonist's bed, while the concept of education and training is subverted by his father's "sink or swim" approach demonstrated at the YMCA. Likewise, the institution of marriage is challenged by Billy's affair

---

1 Letter to Louis Kossuth concerning Slavery & Freedom in the United States in behalf of the American Anti-Slavery Society.

and such ideals as patriotism and sense of duty are undermined by the acerbically critical descriptions of the American soldier.<sup>2</sup> The British officer's admission of the ultimate senselessness of the war and his invocation of the concept of the Children's Crusade (50), provides another blow to the metanarrative of military duty.<sup>3</sup>

The postmodern impulse of the unmaking of the self is in full force in case of Billy. In fact his early childhood represents a lack of agency whose most potent indication is the near-death experience during the male parent-delivered "swimming lesson" in the YMCA pool. His resignation to his potential fate and annihilation in the aftermath of the Battle of the Bulge is another apt illustration of the alienated and unmade self.

As Hassan argues the postmodern can be described by such features as continuity and discontinuity. The main aspect, especially because of the erratic time travel and the fractured, fragmented temporal perspective is discontinuity. Accordingly, being thrown about in time and various life stages implies the lack of completion and conclusion to any life period. Another aspect of discontinuity is the concept of *la manqué*, implying incompleteness, expressed by Billy's lack of will to live: "Billy didn't really like life at all" (48), or him being deprived of agency, "among the things Billy Pilgrim could not change were the past, the present, and the future" (30).

Being "unstuck in time" (14) at the same time severs Billy from the option of achieving control over time. The erratic time travel at the same time liberates him from the confines of the POW camp. Being "spastic in time" (14) also means being exposed to time. The lack or inability of control over time is indicated by the following quote: "Billy is spastic in time, has no control over where he is going next and the trips aren't necessarily fun" (14)

Another symbol of Billy's removal from time is the movie seen in backwards. Although the episode takes place two decades after the actual bombing attack, in Billy's suburban home, the recapitulation of war images in reverse deconstructs time itself. Also, the imaginary return to Adam and Eve represents an effort to right the horrendous errors all humanity had made.

The author's management or treatment of time suggests the applicability of Heidegger's views holding that "to be human is to occupy not only a particular body in space, but also to occupy a certain amount of time in a certain way" (Gannon).

---

2 "weak, smelly, self-pitying-a pack of sniveling, dirty thieving bastards" (60).

3 You know we've had to imagine the war here, and we have imagined that it was being fought by aging men like ourselves. We had forgotten that wars were fought by babies. When I saw those freshly shaved faces, it was a shock "My God, my God-" I said to myself. "It's the Children's Crusade" (60).

Heidegger urges liberation from empty time (chronos) to Kairos (now time), that is, useful, sensible, worthy time spent in or focusing on the present, instead of the “mechanical passage of time” (Gannon). The fractured nature of postmodernism is reflected in the broken up concept of time. In fact Billy is hovering between chronos and Kairos. Ironically, he is never able to achieve the state of Kairos mentally. Physically he can be considered to be there, but in Heidegger’s words he never occupies or uses that certain amount of time allocated to him. His attitude in the POW camp best described by the concept of the detached self also means a certain extent of separation from the events along with the fatalistic, resigned attitude to suffering.

### **Unmaking of the self/selves**

Naturally the text contains the various forms of the self, with Billy as the obvious manifestation of the detached self, yet him being saved against his will represents the fortunate self. Roland Weary and the exaggerated description of British soldiers displaying mental and physical fitness, “the Englishmen had also been lifting weights and chinning themselves for years. Their bellies were like washboards. The muscles of their calves and upper arms were like cannonballs” (45) suggest the soldierly self. Thus while the novel displays primarily the formal conventions of the given POW narrative plot, just like the original text itself, the line of action is fragmented as the given components have to be assembled by the reader. Also, while a POW narrative is presented from first person singular angle, in this case the events are recalled from a rather impersonal and objective third person singular perspective.

The POW narrative’s traditional version commemorates the heroism of the fellow soldiers as part of the compulsion of “duty memory” (11) identified by Pierre Nora. The same obligation is suggested by the subtitle of the novel, “A Duty-dance with Death.” The novel, however, is virtually devoid of any heroes, as the only character possessing and displaying personal and soldierly values is Edgar Derby. The other captives Paul Lazarro or Ronald Weary are a petty yet extremely violent criminal and a sociopath respectively. The same goes for the official military establishment represented by the stubbornness and hypocrisy of Bertram Copeland Rumfoord, the army historian who refuses to acknowledge or authenticate Billy as a credible source despite him directly experiencing the bombing of Dresden, “He bores the *hell* out of *me!*’ [...] ”all he does in his sleep is quit and surrender and apologize and ask to be left alone [...] I could carve a better man out of a banana.” (84). An equally troubling character is Howard W. Campbell, the Renegade, who turned on his home country and generated anti-American propaganda, which

undermined and subverted such iconic cultural markers as the American Dream and the Star-spangled Banner.<sup>4</sup>

Billy's physical appearance, his preposterous stature with the arm that can be held by the camp doctor's thumb and middle finger and the self-generated question, "what sort of an army would send a weakling like that to the front?" (40) further undermines the objectives outlined by the American military establishment.

The narrative focuses not only on one person as it introduces several members of the American POW community. As mentioned earlier Billy's resignation represents the detached self. Edgar Derby with his opposition to Campbell, displaying physical fitness and an overall rectitude represents the soldierly self. It is a cruel irony that the only person who would act according to the expectations of the military is executed after being court martialed. The beleaguered self reflecting fear, or intimidation usually appears at the beginning of the captivity experience. It is noteworthy, that such stage is not applicable to the present narrative. Thus while the traditional POW narrative retraces the progress from the beleaguered self to the soldierly self, it is the resigned, fatalistic perspective of Billy that neutralizes fear.

Billy as a typical antihero is just pushed around in his life by larger forces than him. He purposely unmakes himself as it is demonstrated by his preposterous appearance<sup>5</sup> during the war and his oft-demonstrated reluctance to shape his fate suggested among others by his lack of resistance against Weary during their almost deadly fight. The description of the other American soldiers suggests the unmaking of the military self, in other words, the Code.<sup>6</sup> Ronald Weary reveling in sadistic fantasies, the most shocking one implies his ruminations over the cruelest punishment in the world, suggests the dehumanizing impact of the war and that of the military machinery. An equally appalling aspect is the absolute lack of camaraderie as he views Billy not as a fellow soldier, but an obstacle to realizing his ultimate goal, the attainment of the Bronze Star and considers him a bothersome nuisance to the unity of the haphazard unit, known as the Three Musketeers. It is

---

4 Blue is for the American sky, [...] 'White is for the race that pioneered the continent, drained the swamps and cleared the forests and built the roads and bridges. Red is for the blood of American patriots which was shed so gladly in years gone by (74)

5 Last came Billy Pilgrim, empty-handed, bleakly ready for death. Billy was Preposterous-six feet and three inches tall, with a chest and shoulders like a box of kitchen matches. He had no helmet, no overcoat, no weapon and no boots. On his feet were cheap, low-cut civilian shoes which he had bought for his father's funeral. Billy had lost a heel, which made him bob up-and-down, up-and-down. The involuntary dancing up and down, up and down, made his hip joints sore (18).

6 The Code of Conduct for Members of the Armed Forces of the United States primarily confirming the identity and commitment of the American soldier during captivity came into effect after the Korean War (1950-53) in 1954.



also noteworthy that the identity of the other two soldiers of the respective unit and their attitude to Billy are not revealed.

Weary's brutal attempt to kick Willy to death thereby to vent his frustration on his comrade-in-arms and not the enemy reveals a further distortion of his personality. He turns on him after feeling let down partly by Billy's resigned attitude and also by the other "two Musketeers" abandoning him. The unmaking of the military self and by extension, the subversion of the goals of the military leadership or brass are reflected in the actual description of the enemy as well. The "angel faced" (27) private helping the prostrate Billy on his feet or the "cooing" guards (39) along with the senseless and strategically unjustified Allied bombing of Dresden all reinforce this contention.

Another equally discomfiting figure is Paul Lazzaro a small-time thief displaying shockingly violent impulses. A non-existent comradeship is also obvious in his case. Not only that, Lazzaro even surpasses Billy's preposterous appearance with the worst body. His description is a counterexample to the seeming physical fitness of the American soldier. While Billy is ridiculed due to his weak body, he appears to be in relatively good health. His main affliction is primarily a depressive and fatalistic outlook. Lazzaro swearing to revenge Weary's death, however, "is tiny with rotten bones and teeth," not to mention a "disgusting skin" (40). He also steals cigarettes from fellow captives. His distorted values are reflected in his statement: "Anybody ever asks you what the sweetest thing in life is [...] It's revenge" (65).

Edgar Derby "mournfully pregnant with patriotism and middle age" (69) is basically the only American soldier described in a positive manner as substantiated by his physical fitness and his volunteering to fight in the war despite advancing beyond drafting age. He was fully committed to democracy and the cause of the American government in the war as even his 22 year old son was fighting as a Marine in the Pacific. His fate, being executed for taking a teapot in an attempt to rescue it from the carnage of the bombing, represents the senselessness of the war. He is continuously being referred to as "poor old Edgar Derby" (68) and as a senior to others he is elected "head American" (68) to command the POWs going to Dresden. Furthermore, his commitment "to get home everyone safely" (68) along with looking out for Billy during his morphine-induced hallucination, or cradling the dying Weary's head, or defending the American democracy and way of life in response to Campbell's Nazi propaganda provide ample demonstration for the presence of the soldierly self.



### III

It can be concluded that Vonnegut in an effort to convey an antiwar message fully unmakes or deconstructs the POW narrative genre. The deconstruction process takes place in content, function and form. While the text itself contains almost all components or phases of Doyle's cyclical model, the given stages reflect a subversive intent. Billy's life trajectory is not pointing toward an expected or anticipated glory, and his actions and attitude make the text a counter POW narrative. Another difference is that while most narratives are written from a first person singular angle, in the present case as an indication of the author's indifference, alienation and distancing from the very subject, the story is related from third person singular.

Unlike in traditional POW narratives, Vonnegut's goal is not to commemorate the heroism and sacrifice of fellow soldiers, or comrades, but to highlight the senselessness of all wars and demonstrate the dehumanizing effect of the military machine. Although in a true postmodern sense the novel providing a longer frame to the POW narrative portrays a virtually total unmaking of the self, the birdsong heard at the end offers a faint hope for humanity in the desolate "moonscape" of the bomb-scarred Dresden.

### WORKS CITED

- Doyle, Robert C. *Voices from Captivity: Interpreting the American POW Narrative*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994.
- Gannon, Matthew. "Kurt Vonnegut Has Come Unstuck in Time." *The Vonnegut Review*. <http://www.vonnegutreview.com/2013/05/kurt-vonnegut-has-come-unstuck-in-time.html>
- Hassan, Ihab. "Toward the Concept of Postmodernism." *The Postmodern Turn*. 1987
- Lyotard, Jean-Francois. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. Manchester University Press 1982
- McHale, Brian. *Postmodernist Fiction* Routledge, 1987. [https://books.google.hu/books?id=ec2HAgAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&hl=hu&source=gbs\\_ge\\_summary\\_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.hu/books?id=ec2HAgAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&hl=hu&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false)
- Nora, Pierre. "Between Memory and History" *Representations No. 26 Special Issue: Memory and Counter-memory*. (Spring 1989):7-24.
- Vonnegut, Kurt. *Slaughterhouse Five*. 1969. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2928520>