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## Dismantled Time in *Slaughterhouse-Five*:

### Is Billy Really Traveling in Time?

Kyohei Yoshizu

#### Introduction

In this paper, I will discuss a unique time concept, spastic time travel<sup>1</sup> in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, written by Kurt Vonnegut in 1969. This novel is said to belong to the genre of science fiction probably because Billy Pilgrim, the main character of the novel, comes and goes between past and future. In previous research, Billy's spastic time travel has been considered an element of science fiction<sup>2</sup>. However, the interpretation of Billy's time travels in terms of science fiction does not exhaust the richness of Vonnegut's novel. For instance, how can a science fictional interpretation of *Slaughterhouse-Five* account for the importance of war in the novel or Pilgrim's psychological condition? To answer this question, this paper construes time shifts as a symptom related to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder caused by Billy's exposure to traumatic events during the Second World War<sup>3</sup>, and considers them in terms of his unconscious. To be more precise, it is my contention that Billy's psychological condition, which I identify as PTSD, modifies the way he experiences time. In that sense, Billy Pilgrim's time travels are subjective experiences reflecting the dislocation of his experience of time.

My purpose is first to suggest that Billy has PTSD. The second part aims at determining the characteristics of Billy's time travel and reveals how it differs from traditional depiction of time travel in science fiction. In the third part, I examine how PTSD relates to Pilgrim's dislocated experience of time. Finally, the fourth part is an attempt to regard Tralfamadorian conception of time as an unconscious response to Billy's dislocated experience of time.

#### I . Billy has PTSD.

Because Billy's experiences of the war are painful and unspeakable, they are unconsciously repressed. Nevertheless, these memories, supposed to be repressed, emerge from his unconscious many times, and come back to haunt him like ghosts. His repeated temporal visits to the war scenes of his past can be construed as a symptom of PTSD<sup>4</sup>.

PTSD, which stands for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, is originally a common presenting symptom for returned military personnel who served in the Vietnam War. According to *History and the Trauma*, which was published in 2000 by Michiko Shimokoube, PTSD was officially-registered for the first time in *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (Third Edition, DSM-III), published in 1980 by the American Psychiatric Association. After that, its revised edition came out in 1987 as DSM-III-R, and in 1994, DSM-IV was newly published. It indicates diagnostic criteria for PTSD as follows.

#### Figure 1 Diagnostic criteria for 309.81 Post-traumatic Stress Disorder

- A. The person has been exposed to a traumatic event in which both of the following were present:
  - (1) the person experienced, witnessed, or was confronted with an event or events that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of others.
  - (2) the person's response involved intense fear, helplessness, or horror.
- B. The traumatic event is persistently reexperienced in one (or more) of the following ways:
  - (1) recurrent and intrusive distressing recollections

of the event, including images, thoughts, or perceptions.

- (2) recurrent distressing dreams of the event.
- (3) acting or feeling as if the traumatic event were recurring (includes a sense of reliving the experience, illusions, hallucinations, and dissociative flashback episodes, including those that occur on awakening or when intoxicated).
- (4) intense psychological distress at exposure to internal or external cues that symbolize or resemble an aspect of the traumatic event.
- (5) physiological reactivity on exposure to internal or external cues that symbolize or resemble an aspect of the traumatic event.

C. Persistent avoidance of stimuli associated with the trauma and numbing of general responsiveness (not present before the trauma), as indicated by three (or more) of the following:

- (1) efforts to avoid thoughts, feelings, or conversations associated with the trauma
- (2) efforts to avoid activities, places, or people that arouse recollections of the trauma
- (3) inability to recall an important aspect of the trauma
- (4) markedly diminished interest or participation in significant activities
- (5) feeling of detachment or estrangement from others
- (6) restricted range of affect (e.g., unable to have loving feelings)
- (7) sense of a foreshortened future (e.g., does not expect to have a career, marriage, children, or a normal life span)

D. Persistent symptoms of increased arousal (not present before the trauma), as indicated by two (or more) of the following:

- (1) difficulty falling or staying asleep
- (2) irritability or outbursts of anger
- (3) difficulty concentrating
- (4) hypervigilance
- (5) exaggerated startle response

Drawing from the previous characterization of PTSD, it is now possible to understand in what respect

PTSD can aptly describe Billy's condition.

To begin, we will examine the symptoms described in parts A and B of figure 1. While Billy's existence is threatened several times during the war, the Dresden bombing can be identified as the root of his traumatic experience leading to the symptom described in the first item of part A.

In chapter 2 of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, when Pilgrim is drunk at a party in 1961, he snaps himself back to World War Two:

Now somebody was shaking Billy awake. Billy still felt drunk, was still angered by the stolen steering wheel. He was back in World War Two again, behind the German lines. The person who was shaking him was Roland Weary. Weary had gathered the front of Billy's field jacket into his hands. He banged Billy against a tree, then pulled him away from it, flung him in the direction he was supposed to take under his own power.

Billy stopped, shook his head. "You go on," he said.

"What?"

"You guys go on without me. I'm all right."

"You're what?"

"I'm O. K." (47-48)

Such intrusive and uncontrollable travels backward to the time of the war are often experienced by Billy and match the depiction of the first item of part B. Moreover, these flashbacks are so vividly experienced by Billy that they trigger him to react as if he was actually "acting or feeling as if the traumatic event were recurring" (third item, part B). Consequently, Pilgrim meets two conditions among the third described in part B. In addition, Billy's response to Road Weary involves "helplessness" (second item, part A). Therefore, Pilgrim fulfills the condition of A.

Then, let us consider the symptoms identified in part C. Firstly, as expressed in the second item of part C, the individual affected by PTSD tries to avoid situations or people liable to remind him of the traumatic experience. In that way, the episode in Tralfamadore might reveal an unconscious desire to escape real situations and people because they are liable to bring back painful memories. This applies to symptom in the

second item 2 of part C. Secondly, according to the third item of part C, the individual suffering from PTSD is unable “to recall an important aspect of the trauma” (Item 3, part C) and this is exactly what is happening to Billy who has no memories of this exact moment of the bombing of Dresden. This point is given more attention in the third section of this paper. Thirdly, Billy cannot express his emotions precisely.

Billy had to miss his wife’s funeral because he was still so sick. He was conscious, though, while Valencia was being put into the ground in Ilium. Billy hadn’t said much since regaining consciousness, hadn’t responded very elaborately to the news of Valencia’s death and Robert’s coming home from the war and so on—so it was generally believed that he was a vegetable. (190)

Here, we notice that Billy loses his emotions. This lack of response is described in C (6).

Drawing upon the strong similarity of Billy’s condition and the symptoms of PTSD as described by William T. Noble, it can be said that Billy Pilgrim suffers from PTSD.

## II. Characteristics of Billy’s time travel

The first noticeable characteristic of Billy’s spastic time travels is that they are experienced by Billy alone. The interpretation of Billy’s time travels as a subjective experience is strengthened by their exclusive character: both the arrival of the flying saucer in 1967 and the jumps through time are witnessed by no other characters. The following quotation is an excerpt of a conversation between Billy and his daughter Barbara taking place after he publishes the narration of his adventure in the newspaper:

“What is it about my letter that makes you so mad?” Billy wanted to know.

“It’s all just crazy. None of it’s true!”

“It’s all true.” Billy’s anger was not going to rise with hers. He never got mad at anything. He was wonderful that way.

“There is no such planet as Tralfamadore.”

“It can’t be detected from Earth, if that’s what

you mean,” said Billy. “Earth can’t be detected from Tralfamadore, as far as that goes. They’re both very small. They’re very far apart.”

“Where did you get a crazy name like ‘Tralfamadore.’” (29-30)

This conversation reveals that even his daughter does not believe what he says.

The second characteristic of Billy’s time travels is that they occur at random. The dismantlement of time is made clear from the beginning of the novel:

Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time...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)

He apparently travels at random in time, for example going to sleep and awakening on his wedding day, or walking through a door in 1955 and coming out of another one in 1941. His next destination is not certain. He says that he has seen his birth and death many times and pays random visits to all the events in between. Billy’s time shifts often occur when he blinks, closes his eyes, or falls asleep in the story. For example, “he blinked in 1965, traveled in time to 1958” (45), “Billy closed his eyes. When he opened them, he was back in World War Two again” (58), or “Shortly after he went to sleep that night, Billy traveled in time to another moment which was quite nice...” (118). Contrastively, works that belong to science fiction often depict time travel as a technological prowess involving a character’s free will. For example, in H. G. Wells’ *The Time Machine*, the navigator is able to select the date he wants to reach. Similarly Ray Bradbury’s *A Sound of Thunder* and Robert Zemeckis’s *Back to the Future* are also concerned with the possibility to control time travel. Interestingly, in Vonnegut’s novel, Billy goes back to scenes in his past regardless of his own will. While in traditional science fiction works time shifts are usually the result of a character’s will, in *Slaughterhouse-Five* they seem to occur randomly.

Furthermore, it is crucial to notice that when Billy travels through time, he visits only moments of his

life. This is a unique characteristic of time travel as experienced by Billy. This last observation casts a doubt on the actuality of Billy's time travels. Are we to take them literally or perceive them instead as metaphoric indications that his experience of time is dislocated?

For all these reasons, it appears appropriate to treat the phenomenon as a subjective experience whose roots are to be found within Billy's unconscious.

In the next part I show that Billy does not really travel in time; instead, it is time which is dissolved within him.

### III. Relation between PTSD and Billy's dislocated experience of time

Even if Billy represses his own painful memories, he is brought back to them over and over again by jumps in time. This peculiar psychological phenomenon reminds of the following description of trauma given by Shimokoube:

One of the remarkable symptoms of PTSD is that past experiences are relived one by one, at random, in the same way sensorial memories are experienced. "Repetition compulsion," as Freud named it, describes the phenomenon by which sensorial memories such as visual, aural, tactual feeling are experienced repeatedly, and without mediation of the will. Irrespective of the meaning, patients suffering from PTSD find themselves performing a past shocking event repeatedly in the place of his or her own body. (Shimokoube, 23)

This symptom is relevant to B (1) of figure 1, and closely corresponds to B (3). The intrusion symptoms are characteristic phenomenological feature of PTSD, and Pitman mentioned that these are "unwanted memories of the traumatic event, in the form of intrusive recollections, nightmares or flashbacks." (Pitman, 221) Moreover, Allan Young comments about the relation between the dismantlement of time and PTSD in the following way:

PTSD is a disease of time. The disorder's distinctive pathology is that it permits the past (memory)

to relive itself in the present, in the form of intrusive images and thoughts and in the patient's compulsion to replay old events. The space occupied by PTSD in the DSM-III classificatory system depends on this temporal-causal relation: etiological event symptoms. Without it, PTSD's symptoms are indistinguishable from syndromes that belong to various other classifications. (Young, 7)

Young's explanation stresses the impossibility for patients who suffer from PTSD to realize the temporal-causal relation that exists between traumatic event and their effects. Together with the lack of causal understanding, vivid intrusions of past images and thoughts result in an experience of time in which the normal flow is replaced by a discontinuous series of scenes from the past.

Taking into consideration the fact that *Slaughterhouse-Five* is semiautobiographical, it is noteworthy that Vonnegut comments about the Dresden bombing of the novel's main theme as follows:

...one of the characteristics about this object [*Slaughterhouse-Five*] was that there was a complete blank where the bombing of Dresden took place, because I don't remember, either. They didn't want to talk about it. 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 blank was concerned, the center had been pulled right out of the story. (Wampeters, Forma & Granfalloon, 262)

Vonnegut's confession of the lack of core memories in the Dresden bombing here applies to the symptoms described in C (3) in figure 1 and can be considered as a form of repression of Pilgrim's traumatic experience. Though he visits war scenes on many occasions, he never witnesses that fatal event at the core of his psyche: the bombing of Dresden.

In this third section of the paper, I reveal that two aspects of Billy's dislocated experience of time. The first aspect is the spastic "quality" of his time travels due to intrusive recollections and flash-back related to PTSD. The second aspect is Billy's inability to organize temporality based on causality. I reveal that both

aspects have their roots in PTSD, which indicates that Pilgrim's dismantlement of time is a symptom of PTSD.

How can we relate Tralfamadorian conception of time to Billy's peculiar experience of time? In the following section, Tralfamadorian philosophy is regarded as Billy's unconscious response to PTSD.

#### IV. Tralfamadorian conception of time: how to live with an omnipresent past

Billy's spastic time travel is increasingly complicated by the arrival of a flying saucer from Tralfamadore. After being captured by the Tralfamadorians one night in 1967 and brought to Tralfamadore, Billy comes to know their philosophy. When Billy asks them, "Why me?" they answer: "That is a very *Earthling* question to ask, Mr. Pilgrim. Why *you*? Why us for that matter? Why *anything*? Because this moment simply *is*." And they eventually claim that "There is no *why*." (76-77) Although we naturally tend to assume that there is some kind of reason for him to have been chosen by the Tralfamadorians, they do not offer any explanation. They also tell him that there is no relation between cause and effect in the world and even deny the question of the origin: the "Why" typical of "earthlings." In addition, he learns their unique theory about time in the following dialogue:

"Where am I?" said Billy Pilgrim.

"Trapped in another blob of amber, Mr. Pilgrim. We are where we have to be just now—three hundred million miles from Earth, bound for a time warp which will get us to Tralfamadore in hours rather than centuries."

"How-how did I get here?"

"It would take another Earthling to explain it to you. Earthlings are the great explainers, explaining why this event is structured as it is, telling how other events may be achieved or avoided. I am a Tralfamadorian, seeing all time as you might see a stretch of the Rocky Mountains. All time is all time. It does not change. It does not lend itself to warnings or explanations. It simply is. Take it moment by moment, and you will find that we are all, as I've said before, bugs in amber." (85-86)

The Tralfamadorian conception of time presents two salient characteristics: 1) the absence of causality, and 2) the possibility to regard time as "a stretch of Rocky Mountains" (85-86). On Tralfamadore, the Tralfamadorians give Billy the following advice: "hat's one thing Earthlings might learn to do, if they tried hard enough: Ignore the awful times, and concentrate on the good ones." (117) How should we consider such a peculiar philosophy? Whereas it is regarded as a feature of science fiction, some critics claimed that it is real for Billy Pilgrim. James Lundquist mentioned about the Tralfamadorian philosophy that:

...there is the pragmatic value of his vision—it enables him [Billy Pilgrim] to deal with the horror of Dresden...*Slaughterhouse-Five* [, ...] shows us at the very least how it is possible to gain a sense of purpose in life by doing what Billy Pilgrim does—he re-invents himself and his universe. (82)

Furthermore, William T. Noble interprets Billy's travel to Tralfamadore in the following way:

He could escape the traumatizing routine of a mundane life and the memories of a horrendous war experience by living in a cage on a distant planet. (William T. Noble, 57)

That is, the Tralfamadorian philosophy enables Billy to escape from memories by "ignor [ing] the awful times, and concentrate on the good ones." It becomes possible, because time is like "a stretch of the Rocky Mountains" and because all the events of Billy's life exist. Therefore, Tralfamadorian conception of time is a solution to trauma. To put it in other words, the Tralfamadorian philosophy could be a way for Billy to unconsciously objectify his dislocated experience of time.

#### Conclusion

As we have observed in the preceding sections, several elements can be adduced that indicate that Billy Pilgrim's time travels can be regarded as subjective experiences reflecting the dislocation of his experience of time. I suggested that this condition is related to Billy's PTSD by providing clinical analysis of the way

PTSD influences time perception. Then, I showed that Tralfamadorian philosophy could be construed as Billy's unconscious attempt to objectify his subjective time – travel experiences. Indeed, through its negation of causality and its view of time as a solid – compared to a “stretch of Rocky Mountains” – the Tralfamadorian conception of time may be capable to enable Billy to accept the horror and absurdity of the bombing of Dresden, as well as to cease being worried about the meaning of his life.

In this paper, I have tried to establish a connection between PTSD and Billy's specific perception of time. Interestingly, Fredric Jameson famously analyzed the schizophrenic's perception of time in the light of Lacan's breakdown of the signifying chain and claimed that the schizophrenic “is reduced to an experience of pure material signifiers, or, in other words, a series of pure and unrelated presents in time” (Jameson, 26-27).

For further research, it would be interesting to investigate the possible relationship between schizophrenia and the dislocation of the experience of time in *Slaughterhouse-Five* and Philip K. Dick's *Martian Time-Slip*.

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## Notes

- 1 Billy jumps back and forth between his birth and his death in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. The adjective “spastic” expresses the peculiar nature of his time travels.
- 2 Karen and Charles Wood refer to science fiction in *Slaughterhouse-Five* as follows:
 

*Slaughterhouse-Five* is structured in terms of Billy Pilgrim's ability to travel in time. The time-travel theme extends back into science fiction to H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine*,... (153)
- 3 The term “Trauma” originally stands for a scar not mental but physical. According to Shimokoube, it is Freud who started to use the term with the meaning of emotional shock following a stressful event or a physical injury. I use the term as his mental injury of the Second World War.
- 4 Koichi Suwabe indicates that Billy's time travels are likely symptoms of PTSD in “Poetics of Trauma”.

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## Dismantled Time in *Slaughterhouse-Five*: Is Billy Really Traveling in Time?

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*Slaughterhouse-Five* was written in 1969 by Kurt Vonnegut. It depicts a unique form of time travel called spastic time travel experienced by the main character Billy Pilgrim. Although, in general, time travels are considered an element of science fiction, an interpretation of Billy's time travels in terms of science fiction does not seem to account for the importance of war in the novel or to relate to Pilgrim's psychological condition. Are we to take Billy's travels literally or perceive them instead as subjective indications that his experience of time is dislocated? It appears that Billy does not really travel in time, instead, it is time which is dissolved within him. In this paper, I interpret this unique time concept as a metaphor of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder's symptom, and interpret the other element of science fiction, the Tralfamadorian philosophy, as Billy's unconscious response to PTSD.

My purpose is first to provide elements supporting the claim that Billy has PTSD. The second part aims at determining the characteristics of Billy's times travel and reveals how they differ from traditional depiction of time travel in science fiction. In the third part, I examine how PTSD relates to Pilgrim's dislocated experience of time. Finally, the fourth part is an attempt to regard Tralfamadorian conception of time as Billy's unconscious response to his dislocated experience of time.