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“Just violet light and a hum:” Approaching Death in Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969) and in Medieval Chansons De Geste

The massive critical interest in Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five* owes a lot to the unique way of handling time and space proper to the novel. Permeability, the possibility and experience of omnipresence—all these are characteristic of the Vonnegutian type of space-time continuum (which is present also in *The Sirens of Titan* of 1959). Such a system by nature holds an approach to death thoroughly different from that of our current society or the societies of the 1950s or 1960s. This aspectual discrepancy may be grasped through the application of Philippe Ariès’ terms *la mort apprivoisée* and *la mort interdite*, i.e. ‘tamed death’ and ‘forbidden death.’ Ariès employs these terms besides other instances in the lectures he delivered at Johns Hopkins University in April 1973, in which he considered Western society’s ever-changing approaches to death from the Middle Ages on. The former is meant to characterize the way of approaching death that is broadly proper to people living between the beginning of the Middle Ages and approximately the end of the seventeenth century, while the latter may correspond to the rapidly and drastically altered attitude toward death common within the society of the second half of the twentieth century.

In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Billy Pilgrim’s account on the planet Tralfamadore, its inhabitants, and his newly acquired understanding of time have been in discussed extensively by critics. Josh Simpson for example argues that Billy was “so tormented and haunted by the burden of the past that he finds it necessary to “reinvent’ his own reality” (148), and Susanne Vees-Gulani refers to Billy’s “fantasies [which] seem to be the result of memories of particularly traumatic events, and a vivid imagination which he employs as a ‘sense-making’ tool to deal with his war trauma” (163). Martin Coleman points out that

Vonnegut’s narrative strongly suggests that when Billy Pilgrim travels in time, physically he remains in the environment that prompted the experience of coming unstuck. The opening narration includes the expression “he says” three times, suggesting skepticism about Billy’s account. Accounts of Billy’s time travel show that he goes nowhere. [...] Billy Pilgrim’s experiences need not be interpreted as experiences of time travel; rather one might suspect that he cannot make sense of temporal relations. (685)

The questions whether Billy Pilgrim really has been kidnapped (or abducted) by aliens or not, or those concerning the nature and origin of his experiences (if considered *his* experiences at all), are really interesting ones, however they are not within the scope of this paper. I regard Tralfamadorians as existent, because for Billy they *do* exist, and what Billy says and does is in manifold ways determined or at least influenced by this existence.

According to Ariès, medieval people, in the course of almost a thousand years, had got entirely used to the proximity of the living and the dead and considered death a mournful yet natural event. In contrast to this, contemporary society has rendered death forbidden, rejected, and turned into a taboo, a process that occurred ungraded, parallel to the “freeing” of sexuality (24-25; 92-93). Naturally, the consideration of the recent tabooing of death is beyond the scope and subject of this paper. The “death taboo” of the 20th century has inevitably left its signs and burn marks on the systemization of time and space in Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the operation of which one may experience, and hopefully understand, through Billy Pilgrim’s character. This paper, however, is focused instead on emphasizing, on the basis of Ariès’ lectures, the similarities of the attitude toward death seen in Vonnegut’s novel and in medieval epic poems *chansons de geste*. The fact that *chansons de geste* are considered to have “deeply influence[d] subsequent literary forms, including the novel” may further justify such a comparison (Whitman 2006: 132). Besides the novel’s subtitle “the children’s crusade” itself recalling the world of knights and the Middle Ages, the generic approach to death in the novel resembles at many points that present in medieval romances.

The first point of intersection of the two approaches may be the presence of some kind of prescience, the foreknowledge of death. In medieval *chansons de geste*, knights are hardly ever surprised by death. They are usually forewarned through an inner certainty of a kind that their lives have come to an end. “I know now very well / That here to die we’re bound [...]” (CXLIV), says Roland the Franc hero of *La Chanson de Roland* upon viewing around the battlefield, seeing the bodies of his fallen comrades, and realizing he is not leaving that battle alive. Oliver, after being stabbed in his back by his desperate and frustrated fellow, can also sense that his end is near: “Oliver feels that he to die is bound” (CXLVI), “Oliver feels that death is drawing nigh” (CXLVII). Ariès brings up additional examples in his lectures, besides another section of *La Chanson de Roland* he mentions the death of Sir Gawain, Ban, and Tristram, and their *pre mortem* certitude, as well as similar premonitions certain monks have had (3-4). Such prescience, presentiment,

certitude are what seem to differentiate the death of medieval knights from the death of ordinary men. A death like this is, on the one hand, undoubtedly sorrowful, on the other hand however, it is not fearsome, as one forewarned by anticipation has time and (as it is to be pointed out later) means to prepare for and welcome fate.

In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Billy Pilgrim's state of being is reasonably similar to that of medieval men-at-arms. The peculiar permeability of the novel's space-time continuum is represented. Pilgrim's travels, his "coming[s] unstuck in time," and the same provides him with the capability of humbly accepting the idea of death and, consequently, his own personal death. As read, Pilgrim has acquaintance concerning his death well before it actually occurs. His fellow ex-POW Paul Lazzaro, a car thief by trade, will get Pilgrim murdered, for he had promised Roland Weary so, who "was my [Lazzaro's] buddy on the boxcar" (Vonnegut 1969: 122) and laid the blame for his death on Pilgrim.

Billy Pilgrim says now that this really is the way he is going to die, too. As a time-traveler, he has seen his own death many times, has described it to a tape recorder. [...] *I, Billy Pilgrim*, the tape begins, *will die, have died and always will die on February thirteenth, 1976.* (123)

Pilgrim, in a manner quite similar to that of the heroes of medieval romances, openly and publicly announces, as it were, enunciates that he bears unflinching knowledge of the proximity of his fate, and this announcement-enunciation is indeed reminiscent of the atmosphere of the divinations of death met with in medieval texts, save for certain matters of style and form.

"Many years ago," he said, "a certain man promised to have me killed. He is an old man now, living not far from here. He has read all the publicity associated with my appearance in your fair city. He is insane. Tonight he will keep his promise." (123)

On the surface, such foreknowledge is of course, at many points, diverse from the sense of certitude exhibited by medieval knights, essentially, however, the two agree, since in both cases, the dying person *knows* when death is to come. It may be objected that Pilgrim's foreknowledge, which involves time-travel and seeing death ever and again, is too direct as compared to presumptions and mysterious inner certitude of knights. Nevertheless, should the sources of foreknowledge be considered, one finds that in

both cases, such certitude is ultimately gained out of the dying person's own self, experience, thought, and senses.

Ariès in his lectures highlights as an important characteristic of the attitude toward death mirrored in *chansons de geste* the fact that those forewarnings occasionally appear in the form of natural phenomena, but most often as some kind of inner conviction and not through supernatural or magical admonitions (4). Therefore, the question may rise whether Billy Pilgrim's recurring time-travels can be considered non-supernatural and non-magical elements in the novel. Travelling in time and the theories addressing it are frequently occurring topics in both science and popular culture, still actual time-travel is to our present knowledge not possible for human beings. Therefore, as Pilgrim makes sure of the time of his death through an element of the toolkit of fiction, which neither does exist in reality, nor is feasible, as of now at least, it is justifiable to claim that he obtains his knowledge by supernatural means. However, such claim is based on the presumption that the time-travels Billy Pilgrim experiences are "ordinary" time-travels one may meet with when reading many fictional works of literature, which I think they are not. In popular culture, the aim of time-travel is usually altering the past or the future or hindering such an alteration. In contrast to this, in Vonnegut's novel neither the past nor the future may be altered, one can merely relive particular moments and episodes in life. This is made strikingly clear when Pilgrim, after learning that the end of the Universe is to be brought forth by a Tralfamadorian test pilot's pushing a button, proposes another "very Earthling question to ask:"

"If you know this," said Billy, "isn't there some way you can prevent it? Can't you keep the pilot from pressing the button?"

"He has *always* pressed it, and he always *will*. We *always* let him and we always *will* let him. The moment is *structured* that way." (Vonnegut, *SH5* 101)

Also we learn that "among the things Billy Pilgrim could not change were the past, the present, and the future" (52). Moments structured that way are therefore inalterable, thus it is more proper to conceive Pilgrim's trips in time as strange forward and backward reminiscences rather than as actual time-travels. Besides this, the argument for supernatural acquisition of knowledge in Vonnegut may be countered by a peculiar interpretation of the famous equation $E=mc^2$ of Einstein's general theory of relativity. It is lucidly worded by Robert L. Nadeau in connection with *The Sirens of Titan* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*. He writes that

if all the configurations of matter existing in what we term past, present, and future are manifestations of energy represented in the equation $E=MC^2$, and if all that energy can be said to fully exist in the now, then [it] is in some sense correct [...] that 'everything that has been always will be, and everything that will be always has been' [...] Since energy is never lost but merely transferred, the universe is perpetually full and can never be anything but itself. (Nadeau 123)

In reference to *Slaughterhouse-Five*, this concept may be further elaborated by assuming that

[if] the energy represented in the equation $E=MC^2$ contains within itself all possibilities for the configuration of matter, then it is conceivable, although certainly not likely, that other aspects of its being configured as other moments in time could be somehow known to us. (127)

The idea that Pilgrim's trips in time may not peremptorily be considered supernatural elements does not necessarily contradict proceedings of modern natural science. On this basis it can be said that Billy Pilgrim did not gain his foreknowledge on the time of his death by supernatural or magical means, just as heroes of *chansons de geste* representatively do not come certain about their oncoming death through sorcery or magic.

In the early Middle Ages, other important elements in the rites of the preparation for death are the expression of sorrow felt for life's coming to an end in the form of short commemoration of beloved things and beings, the granting of forgiveness to those surrounding the moribund, as well as penitence and intercession. *Slaughterhouse-Five* in fact contains passages that may agree to such stages of preparation for death.

The first stage, that of remembering things beloved by the dying person is apprehensible in such a way as if heroes of romances had followed the sole advice the Tralfamadorian may provide humanity with: "Ignore the awful times, and concentrate on the good ones" (Vonnegut, *SH5* 102). Billy Pilgrim keeps making the scene in various moments of his life and as he came to peaceful terms with both his life and death, he can afford concentrating only "on the good ones" when "nothing hurt" (106).

The succeeding stage is the granting of forgiveness. Ariès mentions the case of Oliver and Roland as an example of the rite of pardoning (9). The blinded Oliver wounded Roland, who had just arrived to his call, as he could not see who approached him. Upon hearing Roland's voice he realizes what he has done, and asks his comrade for forgiveness, which Roland certainly lends him: "I pardon you, before God's Throne and here" (*LCR* CXLIX). In

Vonnegut's novel, there is a sentence that would make a perfect example for the phase of forgiveness, and it is the epitaph proposal already half-quoted, "EVERYTHING WAS BEAUTIFUL, AND NOTHING HURT" (Vonnegut, *SH5* 106). As Pilgrim (and the author, too) proposes this sentence for an epitaph, it may be considered a retrospection on and a reconciliation with the whole of human life. With this sentence, Pilgrim in fact grants forgiveness to the entire world, his own life, himself, and everyone else for everything. He reconciles himself to the horrors of war and the suffering they cause, to the mediocrity of his marriage and his wife's death, to his daughter's conduct towards him, to life and to death.

The third stage, that of penitence and intercession, is problematic with *Slaughterhouse-Five* as, in contrast to a large portion of *chansons de geste*, the way Vonnegut's novel depicts God and faith is far too complex and disillusioned to lend space to penitence in a medieval Christian manner. Even the very establishment of penitence as such is queried, suffice it to quote the words of Ira C. Eaker, Lieutenant General, U.S.A.F., retired: "I find it difficult to understand Englishmen or Americans who weep about enemy civilians who were killed but who have not shed a tear for our gallant crews lost" (161).²¹ On grounds of what he wrote, Ira C. Eaker does even not feel a shadow of guilt for the Allied Forces having slaughtered around 135, 000 unarmed civilians and destroyed one of Europe's most beautiful cities for no good reason.²² In such an environment, penitence is not an established practice. The sole prayer in the novel is that of a supplication:

GOD GRANT ME
THE SERENITY TO ACCEPT
THE THINGS I CANNOT CHANGE,
COURAGE
TO CHANGE THE THINGS I CAN,
AND WISDOM ALWAYS
TO TELL THE
DIFFERENCE. (52)

This prayer, or rather the realization of the supplication incorporated in it, is what results in Pilgrim's reconciliation with life and death.

²¹ Coincidence or not, the first name of Ira C. Eaker—the person somewhat representing the lack of guilt in the novel—is the Latin equivalent of "anger" and "wrath."

²² Although it has been said that "Dresden was destroyed for a good purpose: 'to hasten the end of the war' (*Slaughterhouse-Five*, 155)" (Morse 79), I tend to read both Vonnegut's and Donald E. Morse's point as ironic.

In the coming paragraphs a few minor or problematic parallels are to be touched upon. The first of these is the simplicity of accepting death. The way medieval knights prepared for death, their custom-controlled rites are considered in remarkable detail in *Ariès*, also I have alluded to them shortly, therefore I want to emphasize, and focus attention on, the simplicity of the ritual.

In *chansons de geste*, the common attitude toward death in the era is faithfully mirrored by the rites executed and conducted by the moribund. Knights are in no hurry, they are not in dread of having forgotten something, they do not engage in scenic wailing over the arrival of the end of their lives. To the contrary, they accept and welcome their fate in a simple and natural manner, a feature owing to accurately regulated rites and the viewing of death as innate concomitant of human life. *Ariès* keeps emphasizing the simple way of accepting death from time to time (6, 7, 28), and the next-to-offensive frugality of verbal reaction triggered by death, the mantra of “so it goes,” has become a kind of hallmark of this novel of Vonnegut. The situation immediately preceding Billy Pilgrim’s death is constructed after a similar manner: “It is time for you to go home to your wives and children, and it is time for me to be dead for a little while-and then live again,” he says uncloudedly to police officers offering their protection, in the subsequent moment he is dead (Vonnegut, *SH5* 124). Vonnegut in fact surpasses romances, as in his novel not only Billy Pilgrim’s acceptance of death but death itself is simple: “It is simply violet light and a hum. There isn’t anybody else there. Not even Billy Pilgrim is there” (124).

A daring yet interesting similarity between medieval epic poems and *Slaughterhouse-Five* may be the possible presence of martyrdom. Death of knights, as sung in poetry, is usually eventuated in the midst of defending or practicing nobleness, honor, and other predominantly Christian virtues of the era. If considering the Tralfamadorian view of the Universe a non-dogmatic religion, then the fact that Billy Pilgrim, as a prophet of some kind, preaches to others about this religion prior to his death may be interpreted as him becoming the first martyr of this new religion he introduced to Earth.²³

As a conclusion, it can be said that although it is not likely that Vonnegut intended to make his novel in any way similar to medieval *chansons de*

²³ And it can be done, since the idea that pleasant and joyful moments of life never in fact cease existence may provide relief and consolation, which is one of the chief tasks of religion. Besides such reasoning I have shown elsewhere that “a Geertzian approach to religion can be applied significantly well to Tralfamadorian thought as seen in *Slaughterhouse-Five* [...] and a carefully applied approach can refer “Tralfamadorianism” to the ranks of fictional yet scathingly intelligent religions procreated by Vonnegut’s creative genius” (Bogár 55).

geste, the Vonnegutian handling of life and, principally, of death lends space for the drawing of such parallels. The medieval knights' natural acceptance of death, reduced to rituals, and the approach to the end of life developed by inhabitants of Tralfamadore and adopted by Billy Pilgrim as well, although rooted in considerably diverse grounds, may be reconciled with one another, and Philippe Ariès's terms and views provide a very useful framework for the interpretation of such a reconciliation.

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