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Representations of the Void, or, The Language of Silence in the Fiction on the Strategic Bombing of Germany

Nil Santiáñez[1]

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Abstract This article explores the function and meaning of the void in novels on the strategic bombing of Germany written by Hubert Fichte, Kurt Vonnegut, and Louis-Ferdinand Céline. Instead of directly narrating the catastrophic event, the selected novels omit it, thereby producing a formal void. This paper claims that the narrative voiding of the traumatic event relates to two intersecting phenomena: (1) the psychic void in acute trauma, and (2) the difficulty of representing warfare—air raids in this case.

Keywords Aerial bombing and literature · The void in literature · Second World War and literature · Trauma and literature · Aerial bombing of Germany in literature · Hubert Fichte · Louis-Ferdinand Céline · Kurt Vonnegut

The Narrative Void and the Void of Trauma

In the last section of his 1977 novella *Der Luftangriff auf Halberstadt am 8. April 1945* (The air raid on Halberstadt on 8 April 1945), Kluge writes about a survey conducted by the American armed forces in Halberstadt just after the Second World War. Soon the person in charge of interviewing the inhabitants of Halberstadt realized that, while people were more than willing to share with him their "experiences", whenever they narrated the bombing of their town they invariably resorted to clichés and empty statements, similar, if not identical, to the ones that he had already heard from the surveyed citizens of Nürnberg, Würzburg, Frankfurt, Wuppertal, and other bombed-out German cities (2008, 87). Apparently, the true experiences, feelings, and memories of the catastrophic event had been erased from

✉ Nil Santiáñez
nil.santianez@slu.edu

[1] Saint Louis University, St. Louis, MO, USA

the minds of those Germans interviewed by the American officer. The narrator recapitulates the thoughts of the officer on this score with the following words: "it seemed to him as if all those people… had lost their ability to remember within the destroyed plains of the city" (2008, 89).[1] From the episode narrated by Kluge, one may draw the conclusion that the bombing of Halberstadt was in fact a traumatic event that had severely impeded the survivors' capacity to witness, process, feel, remember, and express the aerial bombing that they had undergone. [2] On account of their use of clichés and empty phrases, as well as their lack of emotion, it is plausible to presume that the inhabitants of Halberstadt had either repressed the event or been numbed by it.[3] In short: a *void* had been formed in the minds of those Germans interviewed by the American officer—a void that was *embedded* also in their narratives on the bombing.

The inscription of a void in the psyche of the traumatized individual is a phenomenon widely known by medical practitioners and theorists of trauma alike. In his summary of different scholarly works on the mental disorders suffered by survivors of the Nazi genocide of the European Jews, Krystal claims, for instance, that for survivors "the nature of what is experienced … is so incompatible with the survival of the self that it is 'destroyed'. No trace of a registration of any kind is left in the psyche; instead, a hole is to be found" (1991, 114). Krystal illustrates this voiding of the traumatic event with a patient of his who had been deported to Auschwitz when he was 12 years old. Later in life, this patient of Krystal's would volunteer to give talks on his camp experience in high schools and at a local Holocaust Memorial Center. But only after many years of psychotherapy was it discovered that this camp survivor had no personal memory of what had happened to him in Auschwitz. "Everything that he knows and re-tells so well", Krystal reports, "was told to him many times over by his [Auschwitz] friends and protectors *after the liberation*" (1991, 114; emphasis in the original). In a similar line of inquiry, Laub has pointed out that "Massive trauma precludes its registration" because "the observing and recording mechanisms of the human mind are temporarily knocked down" (1992, 57). Even though there is abundant historical evidence of the event that constitutes it, "the trauma—as a known event and not simply as an overwhelming shock—has not been truly witnessed yet, not been taken cognizance of" (1992, 57). "A record", Laub concludes, "has yet to be made" (1992, 57). Theorist of trauma Caruth—to give one last example—maintains in like manner that in all traumatic experience one can find "the inability to witness the event as it occurs, or the ability to witness the *event* fully only at the cost of witnessing oneself", adding that, central to the immediacy of such experience, there is a "gap that carries the force of the event and does so precisely at the expense of simple knowledge and memory" due to the collapse of the cognitive tools used for

[1] All translations into English are mine.

[2] See, also, Alfred Döblin's comments from 1945 on the detached and unreflective attitude of many Germans vis-à-vis the ruins of their cities (in Enzensberger 1995, 188–191)—an attitude that may be symptomatic of trauma.

[3] I am using a distinction suggested by Lifton (1967) between the responses of psychic "numbing" (or blocking of the traumatized individual's feelings) and "repression" (by means of which the traumatized person excludes or forgets an idea or event) to trauma.

understanding experience (1995, 7). According to Caruth, "The historical power of trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all" (1996, 17). Given the fact that the traumatic event is inscribed as a void in the psyche of the traumatized individual, as something that resists memory and comprehension while claiming, simultaneously, its continued presence in the life of the patient, the transmission of trauma may be ultimately characterized as the transmission of a gap.[4]

This void must have been experienced by victims of aerial bombing all throughout Germany.[5] Although there are no systematic and comprehensive epidemiological studies of the psychological effects of the strategic bombing of Germany during the Second World War,[6] it is generally acknowledged that the massive bombardment of German cities in 1940–1945 had a traumatic effect on many Germans. This must be particularly true of the men and women who survived the horrific bombings and ensuing firestorms of Hamburg (24 July–3 August 1943), in which approximately 45,000 people died, and Dresden (13–14 February 1945), which claimed 25,000 lives. Even Sebald, ever so critical of the Germans' alleged silence in regard to the systematic bombing of their country, acknowledges that "The death by fire within a few hours of an entire city … must inevitably have led to overload, to paralysis of the capacity to think and feel in those who succeeded in surviving" (2005, 32–33). The data that we have on the catastrophic damage inflicted by the Allied air raids on Germany seem to confirm these inferences: in addition to the enormous destruction of urban space, between 410,000 and 500,000 civilians perished under the bombs dropped by British and American squadrons, 900,000 men and women were injured, and 7.5 million Germans became homeless. It has been estimated that a total of 20 million Germans experienced aerial bombing. After examining these data and opinion polls conducted in the wake of the war, Förster and Beck (2003, 27–29) suggest that probably a high number of Germans suffered from post-traumatic stress. Certainly, the otherwise obvious proposition that many Germans suffered because of the Allied air raids over their country does not minimize in the least the culpability of Germans for supporting or acquiescing to a murderous regime, nor does it equate at all the victims of the air war to the victims of the Nazi extermination program.[7] But it does indeed add an element of complexity to the assessment of postwar German culture and society.

In this article, I aim at exploring a particular *formal* refraction of the void of trauma associated to the Allied air war against the Third Reich. Specifically, I will center on the inscription of a void upon the fiction written on the strategic bombing of Germany. Indeed, there is a remarkable "family resemblance"—to use

[4] For a clear and authoritative description of trauma, see Herman (1997).

[5] On the bombing of Germany during the Second World War, see, among other general works, Friedrich (2002) and Overy (2013, 237–485).

[6] Förster and Beck's study (2003) is an exception to the norm. See also Vees-Gulani's splendid book (2003b) on "trauma and guilt".

[7] Ever since its *Wiedervereinigung* in 1990, there has been in Germany a controversial reassessment of German suffering and victimhood in the last world war. On this score, see Assmann (2006, 183–204), Niven (2006) and Schmitz (2007).

Wittgenstein's notion—of a significant number of novels devoted, one way or another, to narrating the air war against Germany that largely has gone unnoticed: I am referring to the striking fact that several novels *void* the representation of the bombing, either in the mind of certain characters, or else within the narrative discourse. When they choose the former device, the narrator may represent the bombing; what happens is that some of the characters cannot recall it due to their being traumatized by the event. When the latter is the case, the novel eschews altogether the direct depiction of the bombing. In contrast to work done—for instance—on Holocaust literature,[8] this is an issue that has not been addressed by the increasing number of scholars devoted to studying the cultural representations of the Allied aerial raids on Nazi Germany.[9] One of the main goals of this article lies in contributing to such body of scholarly work by concentrating, precisely, on that narrative void—a void closely related to psychological, epistemic, and literary problems.[10]

Unlike the novels that do openly narrate the aerial bombing of German towns,[11] in the works analyzed or mentioned in this paper there is a deliberate voiding of the main event that correlates to psychological trauma as described earlier.[12] I would like to underscore, however, that in these novels the discursive voiding of the traumatic event—a manifestation of the language of silence—does not have a relation of identity with the void of trauma. They constitute two different realities: one is a narrative, formal void, while the other belongs to the realm of mental pathologies. Having said this, the narrative void and the void of trauma need to be considered as homologous entities: the narrative voiding of the catastrophic event in fictions on air raids on the one hand, and the traumatic void caused by aerial bombing in the psyche of those who underwent them on the other, mirror each other, the former being a literary image of the latter. Thus, when read in relation to the traumatic event the narrative void reveals, as we shall see, crucial aspects of the experience and representation of trauma. By voiding the direct representation of the cause of the post-traumatic stress (i.e., the aerial bombing of civilians), the novels formally refract at once the aforementioned workings of acute trauma and the extreme difficulty of bearing witness to certain kinds of catastrophic situations. The

[8] See Horowitz's book on "voicing the void" (1997), as well as Agamben's influential comments (1999) on the "unwitnessing" of the traumatic event and the "lacunae" contained in testimonies written by survivors of German death camps.

[9] See Arnold (2011), Calzoni (2009), Hage (2003), Hell (2008), Hundrieser (2003), Huyssen (2003), Lawson (2009), Moeller (2009), Preußer (2007), Sauer (2010), Schildt (2010), Sebald (2005), Süß (2010), Vees-Gulani (2003b), and several contributions to a book edited by Wilms and Rasch (2006, 149–229, 281–294, 329–342).

[10] The void under discussion is also connected to a literary tradition that I cannot examine here. On the literary treatment of the void in the nineteenth century, see Adams (1966). See, also, Budick and Iser's collection of essays (1987b) on the "languages of the unsayable" in contemporary literary theory, philosophy, and literature.

[11] For instance: Otto Erich Kiesel's 1949 *Die unverzagte Stadt* (The undaunted city), Gert Ledig's 1956 *Vergeltung* (Payback), and Céline's 1969 *Rigodon* (Rigadoon).

[12] Given space limitations, from the entire corpus of fiction that voids the aerial bombing I have chosen to analyze a cohesive subgroup only: modernist novels. Realist works of fiction that also void the traumatic event are mentioned in the notes.

authors of the novels that I have selected seem to have sensed the defining presence of a "hole" in the minds of people severely traumatized by aerial bombing; accordingly, they have embedded a gap within their novels in order to explore, understand, and represent the psychic void. Furthermore, through their voiding technique the novels studied here suggest the manifold consequences and implications of the traumatic event, as well as the moral meaning of the bombing and the means for overcoming a post-traumatic stress disorder. In this sense, they invite us to reflect on the psychological, social, and transgenerational traumata triggered by the air raids,[13] deploy a hermeneutics of silence, consider narratives as coping mechanisms vis-à-vis trauma, and ponder on the ethics (or lack thereof) of strategic bombing.[14]

In addition to keeping a relation of homology with the psychic void, the narrative voiding of the traumatic event also brings out the resistance of aerial bombing to representation. Put differently: not only does the discursive void in the novels mirror and dialogue with the void of psychological trauma; it is also an answer given to the challenge posed by aerial warfare to cognition and linguistic representation. Like much war writing, representations of air raids are tinged with excess and ineffability. The voiding of the main event is a literary strategy that places the selected novels within what McLoughlin has termed as *not-writing*, namely a mode of writing common to war texts that "functions analogously to military diversion tactics: attention is diverted away from the main action, but with the inevitable result that the true target eventually becomes clear … such tactics are means of *deliberately* circumventing the direct depiction of the conflict" (2011, 139; emphasis in the original). Omissions, ellipses, indexical signs, parapolemics, circumlocutions, euphemisms, and lacunae are some of the rhetorical devices deployed in not-writing. Although one can find them in all sorts of literature, such devices "are particularly apposite responses to the representation-resistant phenomenon that is armed conflict" (2011, 151). Therefore, by exploring the narrative void I mean to address two different intersecting problems: first, there is the problem of expressing in a literary text the effects of the catastrophic event on the human psyche and on the language used to talk about it; and second, we have the problems intrinsic to representing the catastrophic event itself. The novelists examined in this article found in the void a solution to those intertwining problematic issues. I ultimately claim that the void is a figure for the elusiveness of both trauma and aerial warfare. Finally, as we shall see in the last section, the embedding of negativity in fiction had a significant effect on novelistic language and form, as well as on the reading experience.

[13] See Schwab (2010) for an account of transgenerational trauma in Germany after the war.

[14] For an ethical discussion of strategic bombing in the Second World War, see Grayling (2006).

Voiding the Traumatic Event

The discursive voiding of the air raid plays an important role in modernist novels.[15] Take, for instance, Hubert Fichte's 1971 *Detlevs Imitationen "Grünspan"* (Detlev's imitations), an experimental novel in which the void refers at once to the void of trauma and to the difficulty of finding adequate strategies for narrating an extreme and complex event such as the British bombing of Hamburg in the summer of 1943.[16] On first inspection, it is counterintuitive to argue for the existence of such a void. After all, the novel narrates several scenes from the bombing. But a more careful reading reveals that those narratives of the bombardment are not only partial and very fragmentary; in addition, they center more on its effects on the human body than on the event itself. The first time the novel relates the air raid against Hamburg is in chapter 14 (2005, 20–25). Here the bombing is described through the eyes of Detlev—the main character of the novel—as a child; he spends one of the several air raids undertaken by the RAF against Hamburg in the framework of Operation Gomorrah in a cellar together with his mother and grandparents. The unreliability and epistemological limitations implied in narrating the bombing from this point of view are evident: from the cellar, no one could see anything, and the main focalizer, the eight-year-old Detlev, is too little to fully understand the events that took place; in this sense, Detlev constitutes an unreliable focalizer. To be sure, Detlev and his family could hear the bombing, the flak fire, and they also felt the hopping of the cellar caused by the pounding of the bombs. But this is all we learn about the bombardment in this chapter. The narrator uses a paratactic syntax, with a remarkable presence of nominal sentences, inserting in a syncopated way the interventions of the characters who had sought shelter in the cellar—literary devices that reproduce the staccato rhythm of the bombing and its shattering effects on space and human bodies. In *Detlevs Imitationen "Grünspan"* Fichte does not really portray the bombing. Instead, he narrates it through ellipsis and the unreliability of a child. The author captures the horror by suggesting the facts as perceived by a little boy who on account of his early age cannot really understand what goes on. After the bombing, the family decides to leave the city (2005, 31–33). When they cross Hamburg towards the train station, the narrator portrays through Detlev's point of view the effects of the bombing on the urban landscape. The destruction of the city is told in short sentences in a staccato style in counterpoint to other events. The

[15] In this article, modernism is conceived of as a literary practice, and not as a periodological label. Furthermore, in contrast to McHale (1987), Hutcheon (1988), and other scholars who have argued for the existence of postmodernism, I consider modernism and postmodernism to be one and the same, for they share core family resemblances (e.g., experimental language, dissolution of personal identity, spatial form, preponderance of discourse over story, tendency towards parody, metaliterature, distancing from the communicative function of language, employment of multiple or limited narrative voices). For this reason, the term *modernism* is applied to texts that some scholars might consider as "postmodern" (i.e., Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*). On modernism, see Childs (2000), Eysteinsson (1990), Santiáñez (2002), and Sherry (2017).

[16] Three accounts of Fichte's novel vis-à-vis the strategic bombing of Germany can be found in Calzoni (2009, 265–266), Hage (2003, 86–87) and Sebald (2005, 65–67). See, also, Böhme (1992, 163–182) and Kasperl (2002, 312–333), a paper in which the bombing of Hamburg described by Fichte is considered as a *Grenzsituation* or limit-experience.

fragmentary nature of these passages is related to Detlev's partial and somewhat unreliable understanding of the situation, and it also refracts the destruction brought on the city. For example:

> The home for cripples was here.
> A mine fell on it.
> Cripples and then to be killed by a blockbuster as well. (2005, 32)

> The panes of glass have already fallen out of the train.
> Soon there will be no more trains.
> During the overnight trip the second terror attack on Hamburg.
> It doesn't make any difference.
> It looks like the oven from inside. (2005, 32–33)

The difficulty inherent to representing the bombing itself and the firestorm it triggered is further emphasized with a scene that describes Detlev's family fleeing Hamburg by train (2005, 32–33). His mother tries to explain to a diplomat aboard the train what has just happened in Hamburg. The diplomat's reaction of incredulity clearly suggests the impossibility of effectively communicating certain experiences: "You are exaggerating!" (2005 33), he replies to Detlev's mother, who clearly understands why she is not believed: "Finally mummy realizes in the upholstered compartment that things here have not yet got so far … that here the war is still being won … and that her distress appears vulgar in the superior atmosphere of the first-class compartment" (2005, 33).

In *Detlevs Imitationen "Grünspan"* Fichte establishes a counterpoint between the chapters on the bombing and its immediate aftermath as experienced by little Detlev (chapters 14 and 16) and a chapter that describes Detlev's alter ego, Jäcki, conducting research in 1968 on the bombardment of Hamburg. In chapter 17 (2005, 34–54) Jäcki goes to the State Library, the Medical School in Eppendorf, the Hamburg History Museum, and the central fire station in Hamburg in order to gather documents produced on the bombing of his city. In each place, he consults or checks out material devoted to the aerial raids, inserting or summarizing in the novel passages that either describe the effects of the bombing or narrate very brief scenes of the bombardment itself. Most of Jäcki's attention falls on the findings of pathological anatomical examinations relating to the attacks on Hamburg from 1943 to 1945, produced by Dr. Siegfried Graeff (2005, 34–36, 48–49, 50–54). As a result, Jäcki centers on the disturbing effects of the bombing on the human body, describing at length the aspect of a number of corpses. Less attention deserves the bombing itself, parts of which are narrated through the insertion or summary of very short passages from *Hamburg und seine Bauten* (Hamburg and its buildings)—a document produced by the Municipal Statistical Office—, Martin Caidin's *The night Hamburg died*, a short film held in the central fire station, Karl Detlev Moeller's *Das letzte Kapitel* (The last chapter), and Curzio Malaparte's *La pelle* (The skin); the narrator also embeds fragments written by Carl Heinrich Hagenbeck. Intertextuality is a decisive constructing device in Hubert Fichte's experimental novel. The main character, who as previously said was in Hamburg during the bombing as a child, cannot properly represent the air raid; what he remembers is clearly insufficient, and the only thing he can do, aside from

remembering his experience of the air raid in a cellar, is the reproduction or summary of excerpts on different aspects of the bombardment. Perhaps the most extraordinary of those different "texts" put together by Jäcki is the summary of a film held at the central fire station. There Jäcki sees a short silent film that shows different scenes lived during the bombing: a family that runs into the flames, the burning of neo-gothic towers, bloated bodies, and so on (2005, 42–43). But what makes this passage interesting is the fact that the narrator, after watching the film, rewinds it, seeing everything in reverse order. Someone from the fire station tells Jäcki that in an aerial bombing people loose sense of time and of orientation: "Anyone who hasn't experienced such events finds it hard to understand that any sense of time gets lost in such situations. In the middle of an environment that changes completely within seconds or minutes, there is perhaps no 'in time' [*rechtzeitig*] anymore" (2005, 43). The rewinding of the film, and by extension the multitemporal non-chronological organization of the plot, reproduces precisely this abnormal reality produced by the bombing.

Crucially, at the end of chapter 17 the narrator intersperses passages from different sources with a sentence uttered by a "Spokesman" that is repeated, with variations (2005, 51, 52), several times, thereby establishing a *leitmotif*: "Speech fails before the huge dimensions of horror" (2005, 50). An English Spokesman conveys the same idea in English: "Speech is impotent to portray the measure of the horror" (2005, 50). These two statements constitute metatextual comments on the passages in the novel devoted to the bombing: indeed, language cannot capture the real dimensions of the horror brought about by the air raid of Hamburg. Hence the fragmentary nature of Fichte's depiction of the bombing of the city: it is impossible to find a unified voice on such a multidimensional event. The protagonist's experience and perspective are clearly insufficient; this justifies the fact that the representation of the air raid and its effects is done through other people's texts, and not through recreating direct experience. The inscription of the void on the novel's discourse is directly associated with the unrepresentability of the bombing itself and to a possible trauma developed by the main character. The narrator himself stresses the challenge posed to representation by the bombing of Hamburg in a metafictional passage that helps us understand the narrative voiding of the main event:

> Is there an expression for that?/Let letters burn? Lead type melt?… /Should writers set themselves alight?/Or invent pictograms …? … /Do pictograms convey the fire itself and the ashes?/… Color two pages of this book black./-This is the destruction!/Or print a black, shining, fat mark on two pages of the book—in the middle leave empty a minuscule, five-pointed American star—and let syllables peep out from the edge of the blot… What would be very bold for literature, would probably be pretty weak as an illustration. (2005, 47–48)

Significantly, this is precisely what Fichte does all throughout *Detlev's Imitationen "Grünspan"*, namely: experiment with form and language. That metatextual passage refers, therefore, both to the difficulty of representing bombing in fiction and to the modernist experimentalism in Fichte's novel. The untold destruction of Hamburg relates to the dissolution of the subject's unity (Detlev/

Jäcki), the superposition of temporalities (the novel contains two temporal levels: the war and immediate postwar on the one hand, and 1968 on the other), the spatial form of the novel, and the play with style and syntax, as for instance chapter 51 (2005, 81–98), a passage that imitates the structure of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*.

Unlike Fichte, Céline did not refrain from openly narrating air raids. In the second part of *Féerie pour une autre fois* (Fable for another time) (1952–1954), he relates, based on a true event, a bombing of Montmartre and the Paris *banlieu*, and in *Rigodon* (*Rigadoon*) (1969) he describes the bombing of Hannover (1969, 161–178). But in his experimental novel *Nord* (1960)—the second installment of his "German trilogy"—, devoted to the experiences of Céline, his wife Lucette, their cat Bébert, and their friend Robert Le Vigan in Berlin and Kränzlin (Zornhof in the novel) in the late summer and fall of 1944, bombing is surprisingly unrepresented. On the one hand, the destructive effect of bombing has a strong presence in *Nord*. In fact, Céline offers in this novel one of the best accounts ever written on the devastated urban landscape of Berlin in the Second World War (1960, 65–106). His *style émotif* was perfectly suited for depicting destruction. On the other hand, aerial bombardments are mentioned only in passing in the Berlin episode of the novel, and they are experienced by the main characters in a deep subterranean bunker in Grünewald (1960, 106–158). Down there, Céline, his wife, and Le Vigan barely hear the bombs fall: "From above us, from the ground, the '*hulуuuu*' of the sirens' echoes reached us" (1960, 119); and Céline adds: "the air full of sirens! *uuuu*! perhaps a bombardment? … I can't hear the bombs …" (1960, 120).

The Berlin episode in *Nord* does not contain any direct or detailed narration of air raids. In contrast, once in Zornhof—an imaginary place located one-hundred kilometers north of Berlin—Céline and his companions are permanently made aware of the continuous bombardments on the city. They constantly see the smoke and the flames from the fires triggered by the bombs (e.g., 1960, 236, 242–243, 250–251, 309, 427, 500), hear the echo of the explosions (e.g., 1960, 197, 198, 260, 361, 549, 597), sense the pounding of the bombs through the tremor of the floor, walls, and windows of the house where they lodge (e.g., 1960, 280, 369–370, 387, 483, 500), or simply sight the squadrons of bombers flying en route to their target (e.g., 1960, 236, 242, 250, 302, 532–533, 534–535). This constant unnerving awareness or perception of the destruction of Berlin despite the considerable distance separating Zornhof from the capital of the Reich functions as a counterpoint to the different events lived by Céline during his stay there. Notwithstanding the repeated mentions of the bombing of Berlin, Céline never does directly represent it in *Nord*. Aerial bombing is placed in this novel within a narrative void—a void that constitutes one of the most dangerous places for the characters, who anxiously perceive the bombers as a deadly threat (e.g., 537). In *Nord* danger lurks within the interstices of an empty space. The void refers, too, to the difficulty of representing air raids. In *Rigodon*—the third part of his "German trilogy"—Céline talks about the difficultness of representing aerial bombing in a passage that helps to understand the voiding of aerial bombing in *Nord*. Right before narrating the bombing of Hannover while Céline and his wife were crossing the city towards the train station, the narrator stops his narration to point out the problems

involved in narrating air raids: "From now on, I warn you, my chronicle is a bit choppy, I myself, who lived through what I am telling you, can barely find myself in it … earlier I was telling you about comic-strips, even in the comics you'd have a hard time finding a sudden break like that in the continuity, thread, needle, and characters … such a brutal event" (1969, 169). In *Féerie pour une autre fois* Céline had already insisted on the impossibility of narrating aerial bombing in a coherent way: "You will tell me that my chronicle is not well-organized at all!… But is there any order in deluges?" (1995, 424). He would refer again to this lack of narrative coherence in *Nord*: "disorder, a bric-à-brac of ideas!" (1960, 21, see also 1960, 32–33). Told as in *Rigodon* or voided as is the case with *Nord*, bombing in Céline's fiction after the Second World War is somehow connected to a radicalization of his modernist style. While his *style émotif* is already present in his earlier work, the truth is that his fiction becomes truly experimental as of the publication of *Féerie por une autre fois*, that is with the narration of aerial bombing. The metafictional passages in that novel and in the "German trilogy" clearly indicate that the rupture of normative syntax, the radical experiments with the representation of sound and images, and other modernist devices in Céline's oeuvre after the Second World War are deployed in close connection to the description or voiding of aerial bombings.

The pinnacle of the modernist voiding of the air bombardment is to be found in Kurt Vonnegut's 1969 novel *Slaughterhouse-Five*. To begin with, Billy Pilgrim, its memorable protagonist, presents an instance of psychological void. His post-traumatic stress disorder has already been commented on, so there is no need here to rehearse the arguments made by other scholars.[17] However, I do want to underscore the link, in Vonnegut's novel, between the void in the psyche of the protagonist and a void stamped on the narrative, namely the diegetic omission of the traumatic event. Such association, which has been largely neglected by scholars, emerges in chapter 8. In a scene from that chapter devoted to narrating a wedding-anniversary party organized by him and his wife, Billy Pilgrim listens to a song played by a barbershop quartet. At some point, Pilgrim has a psychosomatic response to the "changing chords" of the musicians (1991, 173); in truth, he looks so bad that his worried wife asks what is wrong with him. He replies reassuring her that he is all right. The narrator provides an important clarification: "And he was, too, except that he could find no explanation for why the song had affected him so grotesquely. He had supposed for years that he had no secrets from himself. Here was proof that he had a great big secret somewhere inside, and he could not imagine what it was" (1991, 173). After thinking "hard about the effect the quartet had on him", Billy Pilgrim "found an association with an experience he had long ago" (1991, 177). And it is then, and only then, that the novel tackles at last what it has promised from the first page: the bombing of Dresden (1991, 177–178). The "great big secret" Pilgrim did not suspect of having is none other, therefore, than the unacknowledged—and unwitnessed—traumatic event. The link connecting the barbershop quartet and the bombing is the resemblance between the musicians and the guards who kept watch on Pilgrim and other American prisoners of war (1991, 178). By

[17] See, for instance, Vees-Gulani (2003a, b, 161–171).

means of a chain of free associations (musicians/guards/bombing), Pilgrim unveils something crucial about himself.

The void of psychological trauma inscribed on Billy Pilgrim's psyche correlates to a structural void in the novel. In the same way that the bombing has created a hole in Pilgrim's existence, the bombardment of Dresden is inscribed in the novel as an *absence*. Vonnegut refracts the void of trauma into the very discourse produced to represent it. Of all the novels studied in this article, *Slaughterhouse-Five* constitutes the most prominent instance of the textual voiding of the traumatic event. The void plays a crucial role in Vonnegut's narrative. In this 215-page novel, Vonnegut defers for almost one-hundred eighty pages the narration of the bombing of Dresden. Even though the authorial extradiegetic narrator insists, in chapter 1, on the extreme importance of the bombing of Dresden in his life, even though that bombing seems to be the root of Billy Pilgrim's post-traumatic stress disorder, the narration of the traumatic event is constantly deferred, and it is only related *elliptically* at the end of the novel.[18] The ellipsis of the bombing is achieved by narrating it through the eyes of someone who did not see the bombardment: Billy Pilgrim spent the entire aerial raid in the meat locker of the slaughterhouse where the Germans had placed him and other American prisoners of war (1991, 177–178). The narrator sums it up thus: "He was down in the meat locker on the night that Dresden was destroyed" (1991, 177). To underscore the implied irony in that statement, the narrative voice adds that it was a "very safe shelter", and "All that happened down there was an occasional shower of calcimine" (1991, 177), thereby summarizing the quality of great safety that was implied in an earlier description of the shelter (1991, 165). The American POWs and their guards do not get out of the meat locker until noon of the following day, finding out that "Dresden was like the moon now, nothing but minerals…. Everybody else in the neighborhood was dead" (1991, 179). To be sure, Billy Pilgrim could hear from the meat locker the burst of the high-explosive bombs (1991, 177), but that is the only thing Pilgrim experienced of the air raid. He did not see the bombs fall, nor did he witness the horrifying situations produced by the ensuing firestorm. Strictly speaking, in *Slaughterhouse-Five* there is no narration of the bombing of Dresden. Pilgrim learns bits of what goes on above the meat locker by eavesdropping on what the guards say to each other, which is not much: "A guard would go to the head of the stairs every so often to see what it was like outside, then he would come down and whisper to the other guards. There was a firestorm out there. Dresden was one big flame. The one flame ate everything organic, everything that would burn" (1991, 178). That is all the narrator of *Slaughterhouse-Five* has to say about the air raid on Dresden. The most important event in the novel, the event that decisively determined the lives of the

[18] Freese argues likewise that the thematic center of Vonnegut's novel—Dresden—"is endlessly circumnavigated but never fully encountered" (1994, 221). Similar observations in Cacicedo (2005, 363–364), Rigney (2009, 18) and Vees-Gulani (2003b, 169). None of those critics, however, have correlated this systematic avoidance of describing the air raid on Dresden with the psychological void inscribed in Pilgrim's mind or the narrative void ostensibly articulated within the discourse of the novel.

authorial extradiegetic narrator and his character Billy Pilgrim, is conspicuously absent.[19] The bombing of Dresden may be viewed as a sort of black hole in *Slaughterhouse-Five*: in spite of its psychological and textual importance, it takes place *outside* the narrator's visual field. In this sense, one may argue that the very title of the novel emphasizes the void. It refers not to the bombing of Dresden, but rather to the place where Billy had found protection from it and from where he could not see anything. The slaughterhouse number five is the place of the unwitnessing; paradoxically, it stands for survival, for life (and not for death, as it has been claimed). The narrative voiding of the event may be seen here as a trope that stands for Billy's psychic numbing and repression of the traumatic event. The title of Vonnegut's novel is, therefore, the ultimate emblem of both the psychic void and the discursive void.

Within the logic of the novel, two main reasons explain this voiding of the main event. To begin with, Billy Pilgrim and fellow veterans do not remember much of what they went through during the bombing. In psychological terms, Dresden is so painful an event that it has been repressed. Pilgrim's war comrade Bernard V. O'Hare says that "he couldn't remember much" (1991, 4) about Dresden. In his summary of a conversation with O'Hare, Pilgrim acknowledges that "neither one of us could remember anything good. O'Hare remembered one guy who got into a lot of wine in Dresden, before it was bombed, and we had to take him home in a wheelbarrow. It wasn't much to write a book about. I remembered two Russian soldiers who had looted a clock factory" (1991, 13–14), concluding: "*That* was about *it* for memories" (1991, 13–14; emphasis in the original). Indeed, it isn't much. At the end of the novel, when asked by another patient at the hospital "what it had been like" in Dresden, Pilgrim merely tells him "about the horses and the couple picnicking on the moon" (1991, 197–198). Again, there is no story of the bombing of Dresden. If the first reason that explains the voiding of the traumatic event has to do with the repression of memories, the second one is connected to the insufficiency of language for capturing trauma as well as extreme, catastrophic events such as aerial bombing. The novel itself suggests as much a couple of times. Once the bombing is over, Billy Pilgrim and the rest of the American POWs are forced to help the Germans in rescue missions. Pilgrim writes the following about their walking through Dresden's lunar landscape: "Nobody talked very much as the expedition crossed the moon. There was nothing appropriate to say" (1991, 180). According to the narrative voice, the aerial bombardment of Dresden had been planned with the objective of killing everybody: "One thing was clear: Absolutely everybody in the city was supposed to be dead … and anybody that moved in it represented a flaw in the design" (1991, 180). Naturally, an event designed for killing everybody precludes, if successful, all possible witnessing. The extradiegetic narrator had already touched on this issue earlier in his explanation to his editor as to why his book on Dresden is somewhat short and disorganized: "It is so short and jumbled and jangled, Sam, because there is nothing intelligent to say about a

[19] To be sure, Vonnegut refracts an episode of his own life: a prisoner of war held in Dresden, he had indeed spent the bombing of that city in a meat locker. However, *Slaughterhouse-Five* is a work of fiction, and not a book of memoirs. As a novelist, Vonnegut was free to narrate that episode as he pleased. Other novelists would choose to depict aerial bombing. He preferred instead to void it.

massacre. Everybody is supposed to be dead, to never say anything or want anything ever again. Everything is supposed to be very quiet after a massacre, and it always is, except for the birds" (1991, 19).

These narratorial interventions may be read as metaethical commentaries as well as self-referential metatextual passages, for they provide a key to understanding why the bombing is not represented in *Slaughterhouse-Five*: there is nothing appropriate or intelligent to say about the bombing of Dresden. As both an event and the source of trauma, the bombardment of Dresden resists witnessing, cognition, integration, and linguistic expression. We lack the adequate words for expressing that air raid. Writing about Dresden is not an easy task—hence the deferral of its elliptical depiction. As the extradiegetic narrator of *Slaughterhouse-Five* puts it at the very beginning of the novel, "I would hate to tell you what this lousy little book cost me in money in anxiety and in time. When I got home from the Second World War twenty-three years ago, I thought it would be easy for me to write about the destruction of Dresden, since all I would have to do would be to report what I had seen…. /But not many words about Dresden came from my mind, anyway. And not many words come now, either" (1991, 2). In part, the difficulty lies in finding the right strategies to narrate a void that encapsulates the death brought on people and space, as well as the trauma caused on those who survived but *did not really see it*. The solution to this predicament is the language of silence, specifically the representation of the void of trauma through the void in the psyche and the void of form. The inexpressibility of the bombing relates to the unsayability of trauma. *Slaughterhouse-Five* formally duplicates the structure of trauma, for it builds upon a void by means of excluding from memory and narrative discourse the representation of the core event of the traumatic experience—aerial bombing.[20]

The Hermeneutics of Silence

In *Leben für Leben* (Life for life) (1987)—a novel by Panitz devoted in part to the destruction of Dresden—a character named Michael Simrock asks himself, apropos of the firebombing of that city, a question that many people have kept asking ever since: "Why?" (1987, 159). This collapse of meaning derives from the overwhelming character of the bombing as well as the lack of a sound justification for targeting Dresden, and it indirectly refers to a fundamental element in the experience of trauma. The Allied air raids on Hamburg, Dresden, and Berlin in the novels analyzed in this article are clearly perceived as potentially traumatic events because they may damage the mental mechanisms used for the cognition, storage, and linguistic representation of reality. As we have seen, the answer given by some

[20] Other novels that void the aerial bombing are Max Zimmering's *Phosphor und Flieder* (Phosphor and lilac) (1954) and Eberhard Panitz's *Die Feuer sinken* (The fires recede) (1961). In several literary works, bombing is altogether absent; they exclusively focus on its effects on space, city life, and cultural memory. This is the case of Heinrich Böll's *Der Engel schwieg* (The silent angel) (1992), Peter de Mendelssohn's *Die Kathedrale* (The cathedral) (1983), and Hermann Kasack's *Die Stadt hinter dem Strom* (The city beyond the river) (1947). In these three novels, the bombing has been left unwitnessed, unrepresented, *repressed*.

novelists to the double challenge of representing the act of bombing as well as its psychological effect on people consists precisely of voiding the traumatic catastrophic event in the mind of specific characters and in the narrative discourse. In those narratives there is a crucial dialogue between silence and remembrance that reproduces the structure of trauma. At the same time, the novels explored in these pages are also manifestations of the not-writing that characterizes, according to McLoughlin (2011, 135–163), much war literature, particularly those works that try to capture the resistance of warfare to representation. In the novels studied above, not-writing emerges as the recognition that the condition of possibility for writing—aerial bombing—is in itself narrative-resistant. The void is a way of tackling this difficulty.

The narrative embedding of the void and the difficulty of truly bearing witness to the catastrophic event need to be understood, too, vis-à-vis language and the generic conventions of the novel. For the void is not only a narrative correlate of trauma, or a literary device characteristic of not-writing. It is also a shaping force, a pivotal element that disrupts at once language and narrative form by emptying them out of all positivity. As Adams has shrewdly noted in his book on nothingness in nineteenth-century literature, the void is much more than a mere theme or literary device: "by its positioning in the scale of experiential values, it has sooner or later an influence on all the other elements in the literary register" (1966, 242). In truth, it is a symptom of a failure, in the sense that negativity is predicated on language's inability for giving an account of the destruction caused by the bombs. Considering *Detlevs Imitationen* "*Grünspan*", *Nord*, and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, modernist works do not seem capable of fully capturing the horrific violence unleashed by the aerial bombing of German cities without acknowledging the failure of the word by inserting, within their texture, language's double—silence. In order to let the unsayable speak, the novelists introduced in their fictions a radical device—the principle of negativity—that greatly contributed to their formal implosion. "What allows the unsayable to speak", Budick and Iser have written, "is the undoing of the spoken through negativity. Since the spoken is doubled by what remains silent, undoing the spoken gives voice to the inherent silence" (1987a, xvii); the unsayable, they add further on, "can only speak for itself" (1987a, xix). In key passages from the novels explored in the previous section, the language of silence replaces the written word, thereby introducing in the text a vanishing point which does not properly belong to any specific poetics or mode of writing. A no man's land that exceeds the boundaries of both realism and modernism, the narrative void may be viewed as an extraterritoriality, as a "beyond" of sorts that decisively determines the grammar and meaning of the entire work.

In the fiction on the strategic bombing of Germany, negativity relates *formally* to the horror triggered by the bombers. Bombing civilians is an instance of what Cavarero (2009) has called *horrorism*, a notion that she defines as a mode of inordinate violence grounded on the massacre of helpless victims and the disfiguration and dismemberment of the human body. Despite their voiding of the destruction of urban space and human bodies, the novels commented on in this paper could not escape from being themselves casualties of the horrorism theorized by Cavarero: formally speaking, they have been broken-up, emptied-out,

destructured, "dismembered", traumatized as it were, by the very catastrophe circumvented by the narrator. The experimentation with form, style, imagery, and language in the novels by Fichte, Céline, and Vonnegut textually refracts the effects on space and people of the horrific violence that those authors chose to void. The violence and horror voided through ellipses, indexical signs, and circumlocutions re-emerge with a vengeance in the novelistic form itself. They reappear as the psychological splitting and the dissolution of the characters' identity (Detlev/Jäcki in *Detlevs Imitationen "Grünspan"*, Billy Pilgrim in *Slaughterhouse-Five*), the disruption of normative syntax (most particularly in Céline's *Nord*, but also present in Fichte's *Detlevs Imitationen "Grünspan"*), the abandonment of straightforward storytelling and lineal chronology (*Detlevs Imitationen "Grünspan"*, *Nord*, *Slaughterhouse-Five*), and the breaking up of both the plot and discourse in all the novels studied in this paper. In sum: the voided catastrophic event leads to the destruction of representation. Given the close links between the voided catastrophe and the modernist literary devices employed by Fichte, Céline, and Vonnegut, we could describe their novels on the strategic bombing of Germany as instances of Blanchot's "writing of disaster" (1980). As Blanchot reminds us, disasters constitute a break with any form of totality; they mean the "ruin of the word" and entail the dissolution of the unity of the subject who has lived it. The disaster is not, according to the French thinker, a name or a verb, but rather a reminder that "would cross out through invisibility and illegibility all that shows itself and all that is said" (1980, 68–69). Hence the disaster "unwrites"; it limits and erodes the individual's ability to understand and express it through language. In Blanchot's view, the disaster seems to tell us that "there is no law, prohibition … but transgression without prohibition that ultimately congeals into law, into a principle of meaning" (1980, 121). And that is precisely what happens to the experimental novels that I have examined earlier: the disaster, by means of its discursive voiding, "unwrites" the novels, shaping them as modernist works.

The void does not merely represent here, I would like to add, a pure negativity. Like the one inscribed in the traumatized mind, the narrative void embedded in the novels is indeed an empty space, but one of a peculiar sort: its boundaries simultaneously separate *and* connect silence and language, forgetting and memory, traumatic absences and liberating presences. The novels considered in this paper bring out this essential aspect of the void. By making the void conspicuous, the novelists highlight the unbearable violence and the unspeakable horror of the air raids, thereby directing our gaze straight to the core of the problem and forcing on us the production of an interpretation on the meaning of such void. Thanks to their skillful voiding of the catastrophic traumatic event, the novels by Fichte, Céline, and Vonnegut reshape our reading experience and demand from us the deployment of a patient hermeneutics of negativity. By so doing, they teach readers the language of silence, encouraging them to penetrate into the ostensible representation of the void. Readers are asked to fill in the gaps, to mentally add words in order to make up for those purposely left unsaid by the author—a readerly operation that has decisive consequences, for in the reader's reconstruction of the voided traumatic event (i.e., an aerial bombing) one moves from an empty space, that is to say from the void of not-writing, to a space now populated with figures, actions, emotions, and words. In

the same way that the narrative void mirrors the psychic void caused by a traumatic event, that crucial alteration in the order of the play between absences and presences (what was absent before is now partly present thanks to the reader's hermeneutic activity) is somewhat reminiscent of the "restorative power of truth-telling" (Herman, 1997, 181) in people suffering from a post-traumatic stress disorder: for them, a narrative account of the traumatic event may recover the contents and emotions that up to then had been painfully inscribed in their minds as a negativity.[21] Writing or speaking turns thus into "scriptotherapy". As Smith and Watson argue in their definition of this notion, "speaking or writing about trauma becomes a process through which the narrator finds words to give voice to what was previously unspeakable. And that process can be, though it is not necessarily, cathartic" (2001, 22). In other words: the articulation of a void within a narrative first, and the readers' filling in the gaps later, mirror the healing process, through the reconstruction of the story of the traumatic event, in traumatized people. Moreover, it signals a way for overcoming the epistemic, linguistic, and literary problems which often arise when someone attempts to represent multidimensional catastrophic events such as the massive aerial bombing of helpless civilians. The very act of embedding the void within a narrative contains the seeds of a liberating power. When it is articulated through a narrative, the language of silence may end up bringing understanding (as it may happen to readers who have applied a hermeneutics of silence in their reading of the novels analyzed above) and recovery (as it may be the case for traumatized patients under professional treatment). Epistemic impasse and trauma do not necessarily have the last word, after all.

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[21] On the therapeutic power of narrative for people suffering from trauma, see Herman (1997, 176–195).

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