The Destruction of Dresden in Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* and Harry Mulisch's *Het Stenen Bruidsbed* ('The Stone Bridal Bed'): A Comparative Literary Study

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The destruction of Dresden by massive firebombing in February 1945 is the central theme of two widely acclaimed anti-war novels, *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969) by the American novelist Kurt Vonnegut (1922-2007) and *Het Stenen Bruidsbed* ('The Stone Bridal Bed,' 1959) by the Dutch author Harry Mulisch (1927-2010). These two novels, however, are radically different in just about every respect. Mulisch tells the story retrospectively from the view point of one of the perpetrators of the bombing, the American pilot Norman Corinth, a fictional character who is utterly unlike Vonnegut's autobiographically based central character, Billy Pilgrim. Vonnegut's narrative, which is basically spare and minimalist in style, stands out for its satire and its dark comedy and humour, these being the hallmark of much of his fiction, and Billy Pilgrim has elements of the picaresque anti-hero which recurs in western fiction, whereas Mulisch's novel is avant-garde modernist, as seen, for instance, in its use of interior monologue and densely concentrated imagery, and Norman Corinth is a far more complexly drawn individual. However, despite the dissimilarity in the way they internalize the Dresden bombing, in both Pilgrim and Corinth, as has been suggested by Susanne Vees-Gulani, one can discern symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. Perhaps even more arresting in Mulisch's high-pitched style and manner is the pastiche of Homeric language and themes, including a particularly grand epic simile from the Iliad. My paper concludes with a brief reflection on the artistic and ethical rightness of what I call Mulisch's bravura-style in relation to his novel's subject matter.

Key terms: Bombing of Dresden; Vonnegut; Mulisch; post-traumatic stress disorder; modernism in literature; the Iliad.

On February 13 and 14, 1945, the German city of Dresden was subjected to a horrendous British and American firebombing which destroyed much of the city, including the entire Old City with its priceless treasures of art and baroque architecture, and killed tens of thousands of men, women, and children, the large majority of them civilians.[1,2] The saturation bombing of Dresden was perhaps even more destructive than that of Hamburg in July 1943, but whereas the bombing of Hamburg, Germany's largest port, had at least a military-strategic rationale,[3] that of Dresden did not: the end of the war was imminent, less than three months away, and Allied forces by now were already standing within German borders; huge numbers of refugees, mostly from the eastern German territories, were crowded in and around the city; and most important of all, the city was not a major centre of war production. The bombing, therefore, deserves to be called a senseless, gratuitous act of retribution, an enormous-scale massacre that has all the markings of a war crime and indeed a crime against humanity, although it must not be inferred from this judgment that it was in any way morally equivalent to the genocidal horror of the Holocaust perpetrated by Nazi Germany.[4]

[1] Earlier versions of this paper were read at the annual meeting of the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Netherlandic Studies (CAANS-ACAEN) at the University of Waterloo in May 2012 and at the annual meeting of the Atlantic Classical Association (ACA) at the University of Prince Edward Island in October of the same year. I profited from the spirited discussion that followed each of these presentations. I am also very grateful for the critiques, corrections, and suggestions put forward by the anonymous reviewers and the Editor of the Journal. All the translations are my own. Mulisch's novel is available in an English translation, *The Stone Bridal Bed*, by Adrienne Dixon (London: Abelard Schuman, 1962).

[2] The best recent book on the fire-bombing of Dresden is De Bruhl (2006). The estimate of those killed was much too high in the early years after the bombing, with estimates of well over 100,000. Indeed, in *Slaughterhouse-Five* the figure is set at 135,000 (Vonnegut 2009, 240). The actual figure was probably around 40.000.

[3] The best recent book on the fire-bombing of Hamburg is Lowe (2007). The number of dead in Hamburg may have been as high as in Dresden, but the figures for those made homeless in the latter are higher. Hamburg, of course—in the Federal German Republic—was rebuilt at a much faster rate.

[4] The moral-ethical versus the military-strategic issues of the bombing of civilians in World War II are well laid out by A.C. Grayling (2006). Also recommended for such a discussion is Primoratz (2010). Vees-Gulani's important study (2003), which will be brought forward below with reference to the so-called post-traumatic stress disorder, also discusses these issues in depth.

Dresden after the firebombing. February 1945. Bundesarchiv, Bild 183-08778-0001 / Hahn / CC-BY-SA. Reproduced with permission, Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Germany

To most readers in the English-speaking world, the destruction of Dresden is best known from Kurt Vonnegut's (1922-2007) hugely popular anti-war novel, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, published in 1969 at the height of the Vietnam War, its popularity sealed by the well-received – by critics and the general public alike – 1972 movie of the same title.[5] Vonnegut's novel was directly based on his experience as an American World War II prisoner of war. Captured by the Germans during their Ardennes offensive in December 1944, he was eventually interned in Dresden, where he survived the fire-bombing and, together with other prisoners of war, was put to work in collecting the bodies of the dead and torching them in huge piles.

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[5] The film is basically faithful to the novel, except, most regrettably, for the pseudo-happy ending for Billy Pilgrim and his Hollywood starlet-lover in their Trafalmadorean bubble after she has given birth to their baby; there is nothing of this, of course, in Vonnegut.

Het Stenen Bruidsbed ('The Stone Bridal Bed'), published in 1959, is, unfortunately, little known outside its Dutch-speaking readership, although it was translated into German and English in the early 1960's. It is therefore fortunate that it (together with Vonnegut's novel) receives ample discussion in Susanne Vees-Gulani's 2003 study *War and Guilt: Literature of Wartime Bombing in Germany*. The novel's genesis lies in a never completed novel, *Gratie voor de Doden* ('A Pardon for the Dead') which was to tell the story of a German war criminal. In order to obtain the necessary documentation for this work, from 1956 to 1958 Mulisch travelled extensively in East Germany (the German Democratic Republic) and also visited Dresden. *Het Stenen Bruidsbed* appeared in 1959 and was a huge success in the Netherlands, with dozens of reprintings following.

Although Mulisch did not have direct experience of Dresden's destruction even remotely comparable to Vonnegut's to draw upon, he was, I would argue, well equipped to make this tragedy the thematic and psychological focal point of his novel. Having a Jewish mother but a gentile father of Austrian birth who collaborated with the Nazis during the German occupation of the Netherlands while at the same time also protecting his wife and son, Mulisch was in a unique position to probe the moral and emotional imperatives, but at the same time also the ambiguities and complexities, of responsibility and guilt in times of war, as he also did in his widely acclaimed 1982 novel, *De Aanslag* ('The Assault').

Both *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Het Stenen Bruidsbed* are novels exemplifying twentieth century modernism in that they depart significantly from the fundamental literary conventions which had come to characterize the realistic novel at the height of its development in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, namely a readily recognized verisimilitude in the ordering of the overall story-line matched with an equally readily recognized individuality in the depiction of character. However, as this study hopes to demonstrate, Vonnegut's and Mulisch's modernisms are very different, and this fact is very consequential for the way the tragedy of the destruction of Dresden is built into their respective novels.[6]

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[6] Vonnegut's novel might be considered postmodernist because with its spare, minimalist narrative style it is very unlike Het Stenen Bruidsbed. However, I suggest that in this respect, as well as in the philosophy of existential absurdism it breathes, it has an affinity with Franz Kafka's novels and short stories from the 1910's and 1920's, which are generally considered to be hallmarks of 20th century modernism in literature. In any case, the line of demarcation between modernism and post- modernism in the literature of the past century, whether based on chronological or on purely formalist criteria, is so fluid and indeed tenuous that I prefer not to make too much of the distinction and, for the purpose of literary studies, to regard postmodernism as a subtype of modernism. It goes without saying that the popular novel

The modernist novel of the past century demands a great deal from the reader: the story-line may be jagged, self-interrupting, and even completely lacking in 'objective' sequential postings, and the reader may be thrust over and over again into interior monologues that come and go with equal suddenness, conveying a barrage of thoughts, feelings, and sensations that cannot always be easily unraveled, and in their most developed form constituting a veritable stream of consciousness, as supremely represented in English literature by James Joyce's ultra-modernist *Ulysses*. *Slaughterhouse-Five*, however, modernist though it is, does not really pose such difficulties. In reading a number of recent blogs discussing the novel (see bibliography), I was struck by the fact that no one complained about finding it difficult to read. A few had read it decades ago in their high school or college years and, I suspect, on their own initiative and not because it appeared on some required reading list.

Vonnegut's narrative mode is spare and minimalist, mixing satire, black comedy, and a bizarre and obviously deliberately amateurish science fiction. All this is boldly set out in the subscript to the novel's title: "Slaughterhouse-Five or the Children's Crusade: A Duty-Dance with Death. Kurt Vonnegut, who as an American Infantry Scout *Hors de Combat*, as a Prisoner of War, Witnessed the Fire-Bombing of Dresden, Germany, "The Florence of the Elbe," a Long Time Ago, and Survived to Tell the Tale. This is a Novel Somewhat in the Telegraphic Schizophrenic Manner of the Planet Tralfamadore, Where the Flying Saucers Come from. Peace."

Thanks to the device of time-travel, taken, in a self-parodying way, from mainstream science fiction, the narrative jumps back and forth in time. The novel starts with a chapter narrated in the first person by an individual, obviously a *persona* or mask for Vonnegut himself, who purports to have authored the main story, which then starts in chapter two as it launches into the life of Billy Pilgrim, and is narrated in the third-person and continues as such until the final chapter ten, where we return in part to the first person narrator. He has already made it clear in the first chapter that he, too, is a World War II veteran and a survivor of the Dresden fire-bombing. In fact, at a few points in the intervening chapters he actually inserts himself fleetingly but emphatically into the third-person narrative, saying in one instance, "I was there. So was my old war buddy, Bernard V. O'Hare," (Vonnegut 2009, 86), and later on, as Billy Pilgrim, together with the other prisoners of war, arrives in Dresden and someone compares it to the mythical city of Oz, "That was I. That was me. The only city I've ever seen was Indianapolis, Indiana" (Vonnegut 2009, 189). For all the jumping back and forth in time, the narrative of chapters two through nine will not faze the average

(murder mysteries, adventure stories, political thrillers etc.) of today still conforms largely to the major conventions of the realistic novel.

reader, thanks to the spareness of Vonnegut's prose and the unity of tone, flat and deadpan nearly all the way, maintained by the narrator.

Billy is obviously an Everyman type of figure and, prior to his being drawn into the fiery vortex of bombed Dresden, conspicuous only for his inconspicuousness and the wacky story of his being repeatedly kidnapped by the imaginary Tralfamadoreans to their planet in a distant galaxy, where he is put on display for the inhabitants to marvel at, but always made perfectly comfortable and enjoying the company of a similarly kidnapped Hollywood starlet. The weird-looking Tralfamadoreans represent a way and sense of life which might be characterized as an absurdist *carpe diem*, for their lives are lived as absolutely separate and unconnected moments, and these beings have the uncanny attribute of jumping at wish from one desired moment to another, completely outside the human categories of space and time. This magical ability they also impart to Billy.

In the crazy physics and psychology of Billy's Tralfamadorean adventures is crystallized the existential absurdism which informs the entire narrative, including his dreary childhood and youth and his enlistment in the Army, where he proves to be the klutziest of klutzes. Well before he is propelled into the Dresden catastrophe, the reader is already made to know everything about his postwar life: his material success as the eventual owner of a number of optometrists' clinics, which he inherits from his father-in-law, the father of his fat and unloved wife, who dies in a car accident at the very same time when Billy is recovering from the injuries he has sustained in an airline crash. Not long after his return from the war he spends time in a psychiatric hospital, and as he grows into middle age he is condescended to by his daughter, who thinks he is losing his mind with his continual immersing of himself in prodigiously bad science fiction and with the repeated kidnappings and relocations back and forth in space and time which he claims the Tralfamadoreans are inflicting on him.

Not surprisingly, the inescapable sense of the absurdity of life reaches its peak in the war episode. Here, as elsewhere in the narrative, this is underlined by the formulaic, "So it goes," by way of commentary on one more tragedy or setback that has just been related. During their journey from the battlefield to Dresden, Billy and his fellow captives are interned for a while in a smallish prisoner of war camp which houses British prisoners of war who have been confined there since the beginning of the war. These men have been very successful in fashioning for themselves a comfortable life in their captivity, thanks to their unwavering physical and mental self-discipline, the huge rations in the beginning erroneously lavished upon them by the Red Cross and then carefully hoarded over the years, and last but not least, the respect and even admiration they enjoy from their captors, who like to think, "They [the British]

made war stylish and reasonable, and fun" (Vonnegut 2009, 120). Their prison life with all its amenities, including elaborately staged entertainments featuring drag, seems to be enveloped in a surreal atmosphere of benevolence and serenity, until one prisoner speaks ruefully of the fact that for years he and his comrades have not seen grass, trees and women. Far worse, next door is a much larger compound where thousands of Russian prisoners of war are kept, starved and worked to death, as is calmly noted by the narrator.

The monstrosity and absurdity of war reaches its climax in the fire-bombing of Dresden. Billy and his fellow Americans have been put to work in the city, and he and others are housed in an unused slaughterhouse, Slaughterhouse No. Five. Together with their German guards, they escape death during the bombing by taking refuge in an underground storage chamber. As they emerge into the open air afterwards, they are met by the sight of a city reduced to rubble, a city with the aspect of the moon's surface: "'It was like the moon,' said Billy Pilgrim" (Vonnegut 2009, 229).[7] The moon-analogy is developed with grim absurdity in the following pages, including the comparison of any possible survivors (none of whom are found) to "moon-men" (230). Later on, in the final chapter, the narrator speaks of "hundreds of corpse mines" (273), as the bodies of the dead are dug out of the rubble.

Susanne Vees-Gulani, in her above-mentioned book, views *Slaughterhouse-Five* as a psychological novel which gains its special impact from the fact that the novel was written by a survivor. Much of the literature on the wartime bombing of German cities studied by her was indeed written by survivors, and in her perspective the typical survivor emerges as afflicted in later life with the so-called post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Thus, not surprisingly, her second chapter, 'Trauma and Its Consequences,' where she not only describes and analyzes the psychological profile of PTSD in its clinical context but also but introduces it into humanistic and literary studies, provides her with the principal methodological starting point of her study. A consideration of PTSD certainly contributes significantly to our empathy with Billy and how he copes with the trauma of Dresden. The generally flat, minimalist narrative style may be said to speak of the severe emotional repression which is symptomatic of PTSD, and the delusional escapist fantasies that constitute Billy's Tralfamadorean adventures are suggestive of the same disorder. (Vees-Gulani is correct, however, in underlining that, despite the author's use of the word "schizophrenic" in his subscript to the novel's title, Billy – and the first- and third-person narrators, too, I should add – shows no real symptoms of schizophrenia.)

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[7] I suspect that the moon-analogies may been inspired by the American Race for the Moon in the 1960's, climaxed by the manned orbiting of the moon in December 1968 and the first manned moon landing in July 1969.

However, besides the psychological profile created of Billy and the two narrators, *Slaughterhouse-Five*'s satirical thrust merits equal emphasis, perhaps even more so, for it was the absurdist satire, more than anything else, that made it such a popular novel. As such, it has a strong affinity with works of extended prose fiction already in much earlier Western literature. Hans Jacob Christoffel von Grimmelshausen's (1621-1676) picaresque novel, *Der Abenteuerliche Simplicissimus* ('The Adventurous Simplicissimus') comes to mind here; its central protagonist, who replicates the author's own survivor status, lives through the Thirty-Years War, which devastated Germany and took millions of lives. Here, too, the anti-war satire trumps any psychological profile one may care to devise for Simplicissimus – whose name says it all about how he is portrayed. Voltaire's *Candide* of the following century is best remembered for its fierce attack on metaphysical optimism, and the psychological profile of its hapless, naïve protagonist only feeds into the audacious philosophical satire.

Candide concludes with the proverbial message of the protagonist, a much wiser man now: "Il faut cultiver notre jardin." Does *Slaughterhouse-Five* offer a similar, at least somewhat positive conclusion? I would cautiously suggest that this may indeed be so. We are told by the (third-person) narrator as the end of the final chapter approaches that after Billy and his fellow captives found shelter in a Dresden suburb, springtime did eventually arrive and the war came at last to an end: "Billy and the rest wandered out onto the shady streets. The trees were leafing out. There was nothing going on out there, no traffic of any kind" (Vonnegut 2009, 275); and then, "Birds were talking. One bird said to Billy Pilgrim, '*Poo-tee-weet*?'" (275). Here the story ends. The bird is not simply chirping: it directs its tweeting to Billy himself. There is an echo here from chapter one, where the first-person narrator says, "Listen: *Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time*. It ends like this: *Poo-tee-weet*?" (Vonnegut 2009, 28). Earlier in the chapter, the same narrator tells the publisher, Seymour Lawrence, about his forthcoming book: "It is so short and jumbled, Sam, because there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre. Everybody is supposed to be dead, to never say anything or to want anything ever again. Everything is supposed to be very quiet after a massacre, and it always is, except for the birds. And what do the birds say? All there is to say about a massacre, things like '*Poo-tee-weet*?'" (Vonnegut 2009, 24). Once again, the onomatopoea rendering the bird's chirping comes out as a question, which at the very end of the story will be directly addressed to Billy Pilgrim. Is it a question of whether nature can still assert an almost childlike innocence over and above all the almost inconceivable wartime atrocity that has been told? The answer rests with Billy, the narrators, and the reader.

In contrast with the mostly spare narrative style of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, a bravura expressiveness reigns supreme in Mulisch's novel with its rapid-fire interior monologues, its synaesthesia of imagery fusing the impressions of the different senses, especially the visual, tactile, and the auditory, and last but not least, its audacious intertextuality with Homer's *Iliad*. This high-pitched mannerism of style is far less characteristic of the later novels such as *De Aanslag* and *Siegfried* and even *De Ontdekking van de Hemel* ('The Discovery of Heaven'). It is not surprising, therefore, that the Dutch-language blogs that I have read on *Het Stenen Bruidsbed*, mostly coming from people who had read the novel for the first time many decades ago in their secondary school or university years, remembered it as a challenging read (e.g. Bookgrrls 2005; Leendering 2009).

Whereas the story of *Slaughterhouse-Five* moves climactically to the destruction of Dresden as seen through the eyes of Billy Pilgrim, in Mulisch the catastrophe is relived retrospectively, not only or even principally by its victims, such as by the man-woman couple in the episode "Stille Bossen, Vredige Heuvelen" ('Tranquil Woods, Peaceful Hills'), but by Norman Corinth, the novel's central character, who was the pilot of one of the American planes which bombed Dresden. He is now a dentist in Baltimore, who has accepted, rather daringly in fiercely anti-communist America of the mid-fifties, an invitation to attend a dentists' congress in Dresden. In the episode "Maar Zonder Emotie" ('But Without Emotion'), while he is still in Baltimore preparing to leave for the conference, it is already clear that Corinth is emotionally damaged, the damage physically represented by the prominent scars marring his face – scars which, as we learn towards the novel's end, are the result of the severe burns he sustained when his plane was downed after the bombing of Dresden. At the end of the prelude, we see him reflecting ironically on his loveless marriage with his superficially all-knowing and all-understanding wife:

> Zijn vrouw hoefde hij het niet uit te leggen, zij begreep immers alles? Zij begeep immers dit en dat en zo en daarom en waarom? Haar begrip hing in kringen om haar ogen, holde haar wangen uit, stond in flessen en potjes en buisjes naast haar bed.

> 'He didn't have to explain it to his wife – for didn't she understand everything? She understood this and that and like this and because of this and why this. Her understanding hung in rings around her eyes and hollowed out her cheeks and stood in little bottles and jars and tubes beside her bed.'

> (Mulisch 1989, 12)

Of Corinth, too, a psychological profile of the post-traumatic stress disorder is offered by Vees-Gulani, and for him it holds up even better than for Billy Pilgrim, because *Het Stenen Bruidsbed* is an intensely psychological novel, whereas in *Slaughterhouse-Five* any psychological typology or assessment we might care to make of Billy is secondary to the novel's overriding satirical impulse. Corinth's PTSD profile is easily established as we read not only of the soul-cramping emotional repression, the terrifying periodic anxiety attacks, and the roaring and flashing welter of memories reliving the bombing attacks he participated in, but also of his aggressive sexuality towards Hella Viebahn, the conference organizer with whom he has a short-lived affair, of his violent outbursts, especially his vicious beating of the West German Schneiderhahn, and of his identification of himself, whether boastful or ironic (probably both, I would suggest) with a fallen Greek warrior of the Trojan War, who, he says, is still alive.

Once Corinth has arrived in Dresden it becomes even clearer that he carries with him searing memories of his participation in the American wave of the fire-bombing – memories which not only surface over and over again in his mind but are also the driving force behind the quasi-philosophical ruminations on war and history he shares with Hella and, even more, with Schneiderhahn. The fact that much of Dresden is still a far-stretching wasteland of impassible rubble works as an inescapable catalyst on his mental state. The first impression, from the vantage point of the *pension* where he will be staying, Corinth has of Dresden, is of the city peacefully lying "in een mateloze ruimte" ('in an unbounded space') (Mulisch 1989, 16). The almost idyllic description continues in a lengthy paragraph, but then memories rise up: "… op het zelfde ogenblik hoorde hij het groene gefluister … Het was verdwenen eer hij het verstaan kon" ('… at the same moment he heard the green whispering … It had disappeared before he could understand it') (Mulisch 1989, 16). But next harsh sounds and voices intrude: "Het groene gefluister kon ook brullen, een zware mannenstem in hallen: '… maat over …', '… de draaitoren, en wie …', opdoemend en verzinkend in een muur van nacht…" ('The green whispering could also roar, a man's heavy voice in passage-ways '… all ready …', '… the turret, and who …', looming up and sinking away in a wall of night…') (16). The interior monologue continues with its evocation of voices from wartime and from a city of his past, and ends: " … hij kon het nooit begrijpen. Het betekende nooit iets, wat er uit die stad kwam" ('… he could never understand it. It never meant anything, whatever came out of that city') (17). Then, equally abruptly, Corinth is pulled back to the presence of Hella and Ludwig, the *pension-keeper*, his impression of the former vividly conveyed in a Mulisch-style synaesthesia: "Haar benen neurieden achter een waas blonde haartjes" ('Her legs hummed behind a haze of blond down.') (17).

The destruction of Dresden stands in the shadow of the legendary Trojan War which ended with the burning of Troy by the victorious Greeks. This was the paradigmatic war for the Greeks. It did come with victory for their mythical ancestors but at the cost of the anger of powerful gods and of innumerable lives lost, and with subsequent disasters of every sort plunging their ancient Bronze Age civilization into chaos and ruin. The conspicuous intertextuality of *Het Stenen Bruidsbed* with the *Iliad* is already signalled before the start of the narrative proper with a quotation from the *Iliad*, where in 3. 130-135, as a short-lived truce between the Greeks and Trojans has just begun, the messenger-goddess Iris addresses Helen as follows:

> Kom mee lieve Helena, dan kun je wonderlijke dingen zien van de trojaanse wagenstrijders en de bronsgepantserde Grieken. Zo pas nog raasde de oorlog – bron van tranen – in de vlakte rond en waren zij op dodelijke strijd berust: nu staan zij stil bijeen – de strijd is opgehouden – op hun schild geleund, de lange lansen naast zich in de grond gestoken.

> 'Come with me, dear Helen, for then you can see the wondrous things of the Trojan chariot-fighters and the bronze-armoured Greeks. Just now the war was raging – a source of tears – in the plain round about and they submitted to mortal combat; but now they stand together in silence – the battle has halted – leaning on their shields, their tall spears thrust into the ground next to them.'

> (Mulisch 1989, n.p.)

The Trojan War and the destruction of Troy also figured prominently in Roman myth, which traced the founding of the Roman people to the Trojan prince Aeneas, who, with his family and followers, had fled his burning city and, after many wanderings and under the guidance of the gods, had settled in Italy near the site of what eventually was to become the city of Rome; this was to be the subject of Rome's greatest epic poem, Virgil's *Aeneid*. The second quotation, which follows the Homeric passage and is from the Roman historian Tacitus, *Annals* 15.39, speaks of the rumour about the emperor Nero that spread throughout Rome after the fire which destroyed much of the city in 64 CE:

> Hoe populair dit ook was [the reference is to Nero's extensive relief efforts], het miste zijn uitwerking, omdat het gerucht ging, dat Nero tijdens het branden van de stad in zijn paleis het toneel bestegen en Troje's ondergang bezongen had, de huidige ramp vergelijkend met vernietigingstaferelen uit de voortijd.

> 'As popular as this might be, it missed its effect because the rumour went that Nero, during the conflagration of the City, had ascended the stage

and had sung of Troy's destruction, comparing the present disaster with scenes of destruction in times long past.'

(Mulisch 1989, n.p.)

An ironic contrast suggests itself between Nero's travesty-epic on the disaster which had befallen Rome and the cleanly straightforward Homeric description of Greek and Trojan warriors.

Travesty also touches the three "Homerische Zangen" ('Homeric Songs') with which the narrative is interleaved. These "Zangen" are the supreme crystallizations of the interior monologues carrying Corinth back to his bombing mission of more than a decade ago, and they are powerfully expressive of the tumultuous surfacing of his recollections. One Dutch commentator, Jona Leendering (2009) finds them "over the top" (the English term is used), but as a classicist I appreciate the fierce irony injected, especially into the first of de "Zangen", by their Iliadic intertextuality. In its simplest and most common form, this irony resides in the deformation of Homeric formulaic language which encapsulates the ideal aspect of the Iliadic warriors and their instruments of war: "de blauwogige Corinth" ('the blue-eyed Corinth'), "het luchtdoorklievende schip" ('the sky-cleaving ship'), "de kaartlistige Harry" ('Harry, clever with maps') (Mulisch 1989, 35-36).

Even more audacious is the travesty of extended Homeric similes, of which the lengthiest comes in the first "Homeric Song":

> Maar zoals in de fabriekshallen het staal, opgegraven het erts uit de gescheurde aarde en aangevoerd met treinen en in ovens daaruit gewonnen het rokend vloeiende metaal, wordt geslagen met hamers ontelbare – en ver weg hoort in de kantoren het dofdonderend gerucht de typiste en wordt bang: zo brullen in de nacht de motoren van de Liberators …

> 'But just as in the factory halls – the iron ore extracted from the riven earth and transported in trains and in the blast-ovens won therefrom the fume-enshrouded metal – the steel is pounded with hammers innumerable, and far away in the offices the typist hears the muffled thunderous noise and becomes frightened, so the engines of the Liberators roar in the night …'

(Mulisch 1989, 37)

This, including the contorted word-order of the Dutch – a word-order which is natural to Greek, a highly inflected language – is an ironic reformulation of the epic simile in book four of the *Iliad* (4.452-456). My prose rendering of the original Greek is slightly adapted from Richmond Lattimore's poetic translation:

> As when two rivers in winter's spate running down from the mountains throw together at the meeting of their torrents in the hollow stream-bed the weight of the waters coming from the great springs above, and far away in the mountains the shepherd hears their thunder, so, from the coming of men, was the shock and the shouting.
>
> (Lattimore translation 1951, 125)

This Homeric simile must have been a favourite of Mulisch, for it is cited at the beginning of *De Aanslag* when Peter, Anton Steenwijk's older brother, translates it laboriously under his father's watchful eye (Mulisch 1983, 21-22). In the war scenes of the *Iliad*, the poetic impact comes not so much from the points of comparison the similes make but from the wide vistas they open up into the enduring order of the world of non-human nature, whereas their parodying deformation in the "Homerische Zangen", along with the rest of the pseudo-Homeric language, the scraps of shouted dialogue, and all the roaring and flashing of mechanized, industrialized warfare resonate with the Shakespearean "It is a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing" (*Macbeth*, Act 5, scene 5).

The mock-Homeric intertextuality does not end here. Hella is an obvious stand-in for the Helen who eloped with Paris to his native city of Troy; rubble-covered Dresden is the "stone bridal bed" for her and Corinth, although Corinth is not Paris of the losing Trojan side but, as he puts it to Hella, a fallen warrior on the Greek side, who is still alive. As I have already suggested, this sounds either megalomaniacal or ironic – or, perhaps paradoxically, both simultaneously. Whichever is the case, there is an evasion of guilt here, as is obvious from the fact that Corinth has just lied to Hella by claiming it was the English who bombed Dresden. After reflecting within himself that he cannot afford to speak the truth, he says, "Het is of het nooit gebeurd is. Drieduizend jaar geleden. Ik ben een onder Agamemnon gesneuvelde Griek, die nog leeft. Ik denk er nooit aan" ('It's as though it never happened. Three thousand years. I am a Greek fallen [in battle] under Agamemnon who am still alive. I never give it any thought.') (Mulisch 1989, 105).

Corinth's stated indifference, too, is a lie, and most certainly an evasion, especially in view of his repeated philosophizing with Hella and Schneiderhahn about the causes of war and about the phenomenon of Hitler. Here he draws his sharp contrast between canonical ("kanonieke"), that is, rationally explicable, history and its opposite, apocryphal ("apokriefe") history, as is exemplified by the contrast between the war waged *against* Hitler as opposed to the wars waged by Hitler as well as to the horror of the indefensible bombing of Dresden (Mulisch 1989, 150). One might argue, though, that this dichotomizing typology of war amounts to little more than an evasion of personal responsibility, for it

implies that humans, whether collectively or individually, are helpless before the destructively irrational and absurd in human behaviour. With Corinth's periodic severe anxiety attacks we are back to a conspicuous symptom of the post-traumatic stress disorder. Just after his identification of himself to Hella with a fallen Greek warrior, when Corinth is lying in bed with her, he has a full-blown attack of frightening proportions, which is also anxiously noticed by Hella and fills her with panic. It comes with copious perspiration and increasingly fearful imaginings:

> Zijn ogen vraten zich vast in de kamer. Nog steeds werd het erger, onzichtbaar: een nachtelijk sidderen in de doodstille dingen, alsof zij zichzelf niet meer waren, een opengaan, dat hem walglijk bedreigde.

> 'His eyes crammed themselves [until] stuck fast in the room. It got steadily worse, an invisible something, a shuddering in the night amidst things deathly quiet, as though they were no longer themselves, a yawning open that menaced him nauseatingly.'

> (Mulisch 1989, 106)

Later he recovers somewhat and is left only with a bad headache, reminding himself that for some time he has not heard "het groene gefluister" ('the green whispering'). Its absence disturbs him: "… hij had een vaag gevoel, dat dat onrustbarend was" ('…he had a vague feeling that that should alarm him.') (Mulisch 1989, 107). Unfortunately, his tormenting fears and anxieties do not draw him closer to Hella, and it is not long before he breaks off the relationship.

Now a complete callousness appears to have taken hold of Corinth: indeed, in this 'farewell' scene his face carries a persistent grin: "grijnzen … grijnzend … grijnzend … grijnsde … grijns" ('grin … grinning … grinning … grinned … grin") (184-185). For all the apparent cruelty of his demeanor, though, he feels extremely confused and uncomfortable, even physically so: the description of Corinth at this point is Mulisch again at his most characteristically vivid:

> Hij voelde haar hand. Koude lucht streek langs zijn benen. Zijn lippen waren verlamd en zijn hoofd was zwaar: de helm. Hij zag haar, maar het was of zij er niet was. Grijnzend en met kramp in zijn wangen keek hij haar aan. Achter de wangen brak het donderen van het orkest los.

> 'He felt her hand. Cold air ran along his legs. His lips were paralyzed and his head was heavy: the helmet. He saw her, but it was as though she was not there. Grinning and with a cramp in his cheeks he looked at her. Behind his cheeks the thundering of the orchestra broke loose.'

> (Mulisch 1989, 185)

As the story moves towards its conclusion, Corinth badly beats up Schneiderhahn, whom earlier he had falsely accused of having exercised his profession in the extermination camps as a ghoulish dentist extracting gold from the mouths of gassed Jews. He flees in Ludwig's automobile, making his way through the ruins of Dresden, smashes the car up, passes out, and wakes up bloodied, with a wartime newspaper clipping in his hand announcing the fiftieth anniversary of the death of Heinrich Schliemann, the almost legendary excavator of the long-lost site of Troy. Then after Corinth has stumbled away from the now burning car comes the concluding sentence: "Hij stond weer op en kroop achter een begroeid heuveltje, waar hij het vuur niet meer zag en over de uitgestorven vlakte kon kijken" ('He stood up once more and crept behind an overgrown hillock, where he no longer saw the fire and could look across the desolate plain.') (219). "Een begroeid heuveltje" and "de uitgestorven vlakte" suggest not only the rubble-strewn wastelands of Dresden but even more the Hill of Hisarlik which had concealed the many layers of Troy buried since Greco-Roman antiquity, and the wide plain which had stretched before the city of Homer's *Iliad*. Thus, the novel's finale does not come in the form of a philosophic musing or inspiration in Corinth's mind but as a phantasm of Troy – an ominous closure, to be sure: clearly, his trauma has not been healed and may never heal.

Unlike *Slaughterhouse-Five*, *Het Stenen Bruidsbed* is a psychological novel par excellence, done in the bravura-expressive style Mulisch does so well, although the ultra-modernism will certainly not appeal to everyone. At the CAANS conference where an earlier version of this paper was presented, there was some lively discussion as to whether an author who was not a survivor of a horrendous-scale wartime atrocity should have felt he had the moral authority to make it the subject of a work of fiction, with the strong view being expressed that Mulisch should not have imagined that he deserved this privilege for Het Stenen Bruidsbed. This is a very difficult question which I do not presume to settle. As is well known, the same issue has been raised with respect to the fictionalization of the Holocaust. In the Introduction to his book *Imagining the Holocaust*, Daniel M. Schwartz probes the question at great length in all its ethical and artistic ramifications, citing, among others, Theodor Adorno's famous dictum, "After the Holocaust to write a poem is barbaric" (Schwartz 1999, 22). Schwartz comes out in favour of artistic freedom exercised within the ethical parameters of full respect and sensitivity towards the victims, and I join him in this. As I underlined at the beginning, Mulisch was well equipped, already by virtue of his family background, to tackle in his fiction difficult questions of guilt and responsibility in war; and although in his later *De Aanslag* he may have met this challenge in a literary-artistic form much more accessible to the general public, that is, without a superabundance of literary modernism, the

psychological portrait, both complex and vivid, of the perpetrator Norman Corinth which unfolds in our reading of *Het Stenen Bruidsbed* is, in my judgment, one of the outstanding creations of the twentieth century novel.

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