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ABSTRACT (English)

The Nisus and Euryalus episode in the ninth book of Vergil's *Aeneid* and Kevin Powers' 2012 novel *The Yellow Birds* on a soldier's experiences in the year 2004 during the American War in Iraq are both constructed around a very similar story pattern of two friends who go to war together and are faced with bloodlust, cruelty, death, mutilation, and the duties of friendship, as well as the grief and silencing of a bereft mother. While the narrative and commemorative background of the two texts is very different – including the sense of an anchoring in tradition, the role of memory, even the existence of a coherent plotline itself – both the Augustan epic and the modern novel employ strikingly similar techniques and sensory imagery in their bid to convey the fundamental experience of warfare and of "what it felt like" as vividly as possible.

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ABSTRACT (German)

Die Episode von Nisus und Euryalus im neunten Buch der *Aeneis* Vergils und Kevin Powers' Roman *The Yellow Birds* (2012) über die Erfahrungen eines Soldaten im Jahr 2004 während des amerikanischen Krieges gegen den Irak sind um ein sehr ähnliches Handlungsschema herum konstruiert: Es geht um zwei Freunde, die zusammen in den Krieg ziehen und mit blutigem Morden, Grausamkeit, Tod, Verstümmelung und den Pflichten der Freundschaft konfrontiert werden, ebenso wie um die Trauer der Mutter, die zum Schweigen gebracht wird. Während die beiden Texte in einem sehr unterschiedlichen erzählerischen und kommemorativen Kontext stehen – wie sich etwa an der Verankerung ihrer Protagonisten in einer Tradition, der Rolle der Erinnerung, sogar der Existenz eines festen Handlungsschemas selbst erkennen lässt – werden im augusteischen Epos und im modernen Kriegsroman vergleichbare Erzähltechniken und die Sinne ansprechende Bilder verwendet, um die Erfahrung des Krieges und "wie es sich anfühlte" so lebendig wie möglich zu vermitteln.

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"What it felt like": Memory and the Sensations of War in Vergil's *Aeneid* and Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds*

Anke Walter (Rostock)

I. Introduction

Among the many paradoxes of war, one directly pertains to ancient and modern war narratives: for all technological advances which have fundamentally transformed the face of battle, the existential feelings aroused by war basically remain the same – revulsion at the atrocities committed, fear of death, the mourning of the fallen.[1] When literary narratives, even if they are separated by thousands of years, set out to represent war and its horrors, to convey "what it felt like",[2] they face very similar challenges.[3] Even the imagery and the literary devices used to represent war often remain astonishingly stable over time. By appealing in similar ways to sensory experiences and feelings which are accessible to all humans alike, texts from very different periods aim at bridging the gap between past and present,

1 Cf. Chrissanthos (2007) on the similarities between ancient and modern warfare and its effects on those involved in it; cf. also the works of Shay (1994); Shay (2003); Tritle (2000). However, Smith (2015) 3 rightly cautions that the meaning people attach to certain sensory experiences and the way they experience them are in fact changed by the events and developments which have occurred between the past and the present; cf. Polleichtner (2009) 38–39 for the different periods of antiquity. Melchior (2011) too argues that "we experience war very differently from the way the Romans did" (221); cf. also Konstan (2014); Crowley (2014). – What matters here, however, is not so much the exact identity of feelings, but the fact that such descriptions can arouse at least similar impressions in readers then and now.

2 This, at least, is how Kevin Powers, author of *The Yellow Birds*, describes one of the central aims of his novel: cf. Paul Harris, "Emerging wave of Iraq fiction examines America's role in 'bullshit war'" *The Guardian*, 3 January 2013, last accessed 11/26/2016 (http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jan/03/iraq-fiction-us-military-war).
Given that Powers' novel had not yet appeared when Kleppien (2010) published his survey of the representation of war in American literature, *The Yellow Birds* might well be "the Great Iraq War Novel" which, according to Kleppien (p. 408) was still lacking in 2010.

3 Cf. McLoughlin (2009) on "war and words".

between those who have fought in the war and the outsiders.[4] And yet, by a further paradox, precisely these most immediately accessible passages of a text, in their larger commemorative and narrative function, also serve to illustrate very well how the larger contexts of memory and commemoration, of tradition and the power of storytelling might considerably change over time.

I here propose to examine two texts, which are far removed in time, but which tell a similar story, albeit in very different commemorative contexts: Kevin Powers' war novel *The Yellow Birds*[5] from 2012 and Vergil's epic *Aeneid*, dating to the time of the Roman emperor Augustus. There are a number of striking parallels between the Nisus and Euryalus episode in the *Aeneid* and the general plot of *The Yellow Birds*. Both texts are about two friends who go to war together, the death of the one, the duties of friendship which fall on the other, a promise that had been made to – or, in the case of the *Aeneid*, regarding – the mother of one of them, and that mother's grief, as well as the public silencing of her mourning. However, it is important to note that the use of these motifs in Kevin Powers' novel cannot be traced back to the *Aeneid* in particular. Beyond the general similarities sketched out above, no specific hint at the Vergilian text can be found. The comparison between the *Aeneid* and Kevin Powers' novel, which I am going to draw, should therefore be understood not as a case study of direct allusion and influence, but rather as a comparison between two texts and their respective cultural contexts.[6]

These cultural contexts could hardly be more different, in particular as far as memory is concerned. The one an ancient epic, devoted to the heroic deeds of the great Roman founding father Aeneas, whose victory in the war against Italian tribes paves the way for the foundation of Rome, the other a modern novel on a war not universally regarded as successful. The one an

4 On the problems of depicting wars ancient and modern, cf. e.g. McLoughlin (2009); McLoughlin (2011); Spina (2011); on the depiction and role of "people in war", Cole (2009). Cf. also Smith (2015) on the role of the senses in accounts of the American Civil War.

5 For the associations inherent in the title, cf. S. Crown, "Kevin Powers on The Yellow Birds: 'I felt those things, and asked the same questions'", *The Guardian*, 11/13/2012 (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/nov/13/kevin-powers-the-yellow-birds; last accessed 11/26/2016), as well as p. 139 of the novel (Powers (2013).

6 For the role played by references to Vergil in the context of the war in Iraq, cf. Thomas (2015). Cf. Hawkins (2014) on the place of *The Yellow Birds* in the tradition of modern war literature.

epic on a war long past, the other a text on a recent war,[7] which is not strictly autobiographical, but which does reflect the author's own experience as a soldier in the war in Iraq.[8] But still, both texts employ strikingly similar imagery to convey a vivid impression of the war. The reader can thus partake in the sensory perceptions and emotions of the protagonists – but also, in the modern novel, experience the loss of a sense of tradition and of a coherent plot, in which the individual images and sensory impressions can be firmly placed.

Although we are here not dealing with a clear case of the reception of an ancient text in a modern work, reading the *Aeneid* and *The Yellow Birds* side by side enhances our understanding of both texts. Approaching the modern war novel with the Vergilian paradigm in mind underscores just how disturbing the world as described there has become, while the modern text also reflects back on the *Aeneid*. For its crucial importance as Rome's foundational epic and a central text of Augustan Rome, it also reflects the experience of war, even if in a highly literary form. Not unlike *The Yellow Birds*, it mediates between the world of war and the society on whose behalf wars are fought.

II. Parallel plots

Book 9 of the *Aeneid* tells of an incident during the war fought by Aeneas and his Trojans in Latium. While Aeneas himself is away from the Trojan camp, which is besieged by the enemy, the two Trojans Nisus and Euryalus volunteer to secretly cross the Latin camp at night, in order to notify Aeneas of the danger in which the Trojans find themselves, and to speed up his return. The two heroes fail miserably. After committing great slaughter in the enemy camp, they are caught by a Latin patrol and eventually killed. As Gransden states, this episode is "the first conspicuous *aristeia*" of the second, the 'Iliadic' half of the *Aeneid*.[9] From very early on, it became a touchstone of Vergil's poetic project. Vergil himself paved the way for this. After

7 In the terminology established by Jan Assmann, the one a powerful example of collective, the other of communicative memory; cf. Assmann (2013).

8 Cf. e.g. the article by S. Crown in *The Guardian* on 11/13/2012, last accessed 11/26/2016 (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/nov/13/kevin-powers-the-yellow-birds).

9 Gransden (1984) 102.

describing Nisus' death, the poet himself intervenes in his narrative with what according to Philip Hardie is "the most emphatic authorial intervention in the epic and the only explicit reference to the power of his own poetry"[10], in which Vergil states that, "if there is any power in my poetry" (*si quid mea carmina possunt*) Nisus and Euryalus will never be forgotten (9,446–449, more on which below in section VI).

The reference to Vergil's own poetry (*mea carmina*) is later picked up by Statius in his epic on the Seven against Thebes. He introduces two heroes, Hopleus and Dymas (10,347–449), who are clearly modelled on Nisus and Euryalus and who die under similar circumstances.[11] In a final eulogy of the two heroes, equally modelled on the Vergilian one, the poet sends Hopleus and Dymas to the underworld, where "perhaps Euryalus shall not scorn your attendant shades and Phrygian Nisus' glory shall grant you entry" (*forsitan et comites non aspernabitur umbras / Euryalus Phrygiique admittet gloria Nisi*: 10,447–448).[12] Together with a direct reference to the *Aeneid* in the epilogue of the *Thebaid* (12,816), this is Statius' most explicit evocation of his great poetic model Vergil. Statius' near-contemporaries Valerius Flaccus in his epic *Argonautica* (2,242–246) and Silius Italicus in his *Punica* (4,398–400) also clearly react to the famous Vergilian lines.[13] From early on, then, the Nisus and Euryalus episode with its concluding eulogy came to be seen as a kind of epitome of the Vergilian epic project, which challenged Vergil's successors to react to it in the context of their own poetic programs.

Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds*, then, in the widest sense belongs to a long tradition of texts which react to and work with the paradigm of the story of Nisus and Euryalus. In contrast to the post-Vergilian epics just mentioned, however, it cannot be ascertained whether Powers consciously uses the Vergilian text. It might just as well be possible that the general story pattern, as well as the individual motifs examined below, are transmitted to him by way of modern war literature. But however that may be, the structural and typological parallels between the two texts are clear, and they provide fertile ground for exploring the relationship of 'war and the senses' in the context of ancient and of modern war narratives.

10 Hardie (1994) ad 446–449.

11 On this episode, cf. Kytzler (1969) 209–219; Markus (1997); Pollmann (2001) 18–25.

12 Ed. Hill (1996); transl. Shackleton Bailey (2003).

13 Cf. Walter (2014) 32–36; 134–137.

I will start by studying the parallels between the plot of the Nisus and Euryalus episode and that of *The Yellow Birds* in a little more detail: in the *Aeneid*, Nisus is first introduced as "keeper of a gate" (*portae custos*: 9,176), together with "his own comrade" (*iuxta comes*: 9,179), Euryalus, and the reader learns that "they were one in love, and side by side they used to charge into battle" (*his amor unus erat pariterque in bella ruebant*: 9,182).[14] In *The Yellow Birds*, after a brief 'chronology of war', reflecting on the appearance of war in spring, summer and autumn (p. 3–4), the first-person narrator homes in on himself and his friend, stating that "Murph and I had agreed. We didn't want to be the thousandth killed" (p. 4). Whereas the reader of the *Aeneid* never learns how and when Nisus' and Euryalus' close friendship originated,[15] the narrator of *The Yellow Birds*, in his second chapter, switches back and relates how Bartle and Murph first met when they happened to stand next to each other in formation (p. 32–37). Just as Nisus, the older of the two, feels responsible for Euryalus and wants to spare him from the danger of the nighttime mission (9,210–218), the sergeant entrusts Murph to Bartle's care ("'All right, little man,' he said, 'I want you to get in Bartle's back pocket and I want you to stay there. Do you understand?'", p. 33).

Both Nisus and Euryalus and Bartle, Murph and their comrades act against their enemies in a cruel and savage way, and in both cases, the death of innocent people, who have no chance against the armed attacks, is highlighted: in the *Aeneid*, many of the Latins who are killed by Nisus and Euryalus while they are drunk and sleeping are referred to by name, to heighten the pathos of their deaths 9,324–366). The first-person narrator of *The Yellow Birds* at some point admits that, "we were unaware of even our own savagery now: the beatings and the kicked dogs, the searches and the sheer brutality of our presence" (p. 159), and in the opening chapter of the novel, Bartle watches – and actively takes part – as a man and an old couple are shot from the rooftop of a house (p. 20–24, cf. below, sections III and V).

In contrast to the Nisus and Euryalus episode, one of the two friends stays alive in *The Yellow Birds*, to become the first-person narrator of the novel. But despite that difference, the motifs connected with death in both texts share a number of similarities. After both Nisus and Euryalus, as well

14 Ed. Mynors (1969); translations by West (2003).

15 He has only seen it in action previously, during the games of book 5, when they were both competing in the footrace (5,286–361).

as Murph are killed by the enemy, their bodies are mutilated: the heads of the two Trojans are cut off and affixed to spears (9,464–466). Murph's head too is nearly cut off, his ears and nose too, his eyes gouged out, and he "had been imprecisely castrated" (p. 205–206). Both the two Trojans and Murph, therefore, are negated a regular burial (a concern which features repeatedly in both texts: cf. Aen. 9,213–215; 490–492; *The Yellow Birds* p. 207–208). However, there is also one striking reversal: while Euryalus' mother has to bear the sight of her son's head affixed on a spear (cf. 9,465–472; 9,481: '*hunc ego te, Euryale, aspicio?*' – "Is this you I am looking at, Euryalus?"), Bartle and one of the sergeants make Murph's body disappear in a river – killing one of the locals who had helped them to accomplish this – in order to spare Murph's mother the sight of her son's mutilated corpse (p. 204–206).

From Nisus' and Euryalus' first conversation, the thought of Euryalus' mother plays an important role. Nisus declares that he does not want to be responsible for her grief, in case Euryalus dies (9,216–218). A little later, just before they embark on their mission, Euryalus asks Aeneas' son Ascanius to take care of his mother and comfort her (9,283–290), which Ascanius swears to do (*per caput hoc iuro*: 9,300). Similarly, the second chapter of *The Yellow Birds* tellingly begins with the words "Mrs. LaDonna Murphy" and deals with the promise Bartle made to Murph's mother, yet which will lead to more momentous events than the oath sworn by Ascanius. Immediately before the narrator reflects back on how he had first met Murph, he states, "I never intended to make the promise that I made" (p. 32), and a little later he describes in more detail the conversation he had with Murph's mother (p. 47):

> "John, promise me that you'll take care of him."
> "Of course." Sure, sure, I thought. Now you reassure me and I'll go back and go to bed.
> "Nothing's gonna happen to him, right? Promise that you'll bring him home to me."
> "I promise," I said. "I promise I'll bring him home to you."

Sergeant Sterling, who has overheard these words, beats Bartle up for making this promise (p. 47–48), which will have fateful consequences: Bartle tries to cover up Murph's death by writing a faked letter to Mrs. Murphy in his friend's name – which will eventually lead to false accusations that he had killed Murph, and to his imprisonment. But despite these differences in the consequences of the promise, the bereaved mother's grief forms an

important motif in both texts. Euryalus' mother utters a long speech of mourning after her son's death (9,481–497), just as the mourning of Mrs. Murphy is described twice in *The Yellow Birds*, once hypothetically (p. 207–208) and once in 'actual' fact (p. 220–222). Euryalus' mother, who cries out from the wall of the Trojan camp where she is standing, is eventually silenced and guided back to the seclusion of her home (9,500–502). Similarly, the military at some point decides that Mrs. Murphy, who had fought to find out what exactly had happened to her son, "could be done away with cheaply" (p. 221–222), and finally (p. 222)

> … everyone stopped listening to her, […] America forgot her little story, moving as it does so quickly on to other agonies, […] even her friends began to smile at her with condescension, saying, "LaDonna, you just gotta find *your* truth in all of this."[16]

III. The sensations of war

Apart from the general similarities in the basic outline of the plot, references to the heroes' sensory and emotional experiences in the ancient and the modern war narrative function in strikingly parallel ways as well. The Vergilian Nisus and Euryalus episode takes its cue from the two Trojans' emotional impulses. They are united by the love which made them one (*amor unus*: 9,182), and their entire mission is grounded in Nisus' "ardor" and "irresistible desire" (*'dine hunc ardorem mentibus addunt, / Euryale, an sua cuique deus fit dira cupido?'*: 9,184–185; cf. also *ardentem*: 9,198). The two are "trembling", as they are about to reveal their plan to the Trojan leaders (9,233), and Euryalus, upon hearing of Nisus' plan, is "pierced to the heart with a great love of glory" (*magno laudum percussus amore*: 9,197).[17]

16 On Euryalus' and Murph's mother, and the issue of silence and memory in their stories, cf. below, section VI.

17 On this episode, cf. e.g. Otis (1963) 349–50; Duckworth (1967); Fitzgerald (1972); Raabe (1974) 220–221; 228–231; Johnson (1976) 59–66; Lennox (1977); Lee (1979) 77–80; 109–114; Gransden (1984) 102–119; Pavlock (1985); Makowski (1989); Hardie (1994) 23–34 and ad loc.; Putnam (1995) 296–298; Horsfall (1995) 170–178; Fowler (2000); Fratantuono (2010); on tragic motifs and the "ephebic pattern" in the Nisus and Euryalus episode, cf. Hardie (1997) 320–321. – On emotions in Vergil and the poem's affective content, Heinze (1928), esp. 278–284; cf. Polleichtner (2009); on anger in the *Aeneid*, cf. Wright (1997) with 169 n. 1 for further literature; Polleichtner/Nelis (2009);

Once it comes to the actual fighting, sensory impressions loom large in the narrative. As soon as Nisus and Euryalus have surmounted the trenches, they see (*vident*) in the "glimmering" shadows of night[18] "men sprawling in drunken sleep all over the grass and chariots standing along the river bank with their poles in the air and a tangle of men's bodies and armour and wine vessels among the reins and wheels" (9,316–319).[19] The effect of the slaughter committed by Nisus is portrayed in highly graphic terms as well: for example, he caught "the armour-bearer of Remus and his charioteer among the hooves of the horses. Their heads were lolling. He cut them off. Next he removed the head of their master Remus and left the blood gurgling out of his trunk and warming the ground as the black gore soaked through the bedding" (*armigerumque Remi premit aurigamque sub ipsis / nactus equis ferroque secat pendentia colla. / tum caput ipsi aufert domino truncumque relinquit / sanguine singultantem; atro tepefacta cruore / terra torique madent*: 9,330–334). This last sentence in particular heightens both the vivid character of the scene and a sense of horror by appealing to several senses at once: the truncated body "sighs" (*singultantem*), the blood is black (*atro*) and leaves the ground and bedding warm (*tepefacta*) and moist (*madent*). The alliteration *sanguine singultantem* in particular mimics the hissing of the body, as the blood runs out, but also draws attention to the power of the poetic language in bringing the scene to life.[20]

Another device, which again is properly at home in the realm of language, is the simile which likens Nisus in his madness and bloodlust to "a lion

on Vergil's "Bildersprache", cf. Pöschl (1964), esp. 228–282, who stresses its symbolic meaning; Raabe (1974). Feichtinger (2007) examines the "staging of war and civil war" ("Inszenierung von Krieg und Bürgerkrieg") in Vergil and Lucan.

18 Cf. *noctisque sub umbram*, 9,314; *sublustri noctis in umbra*, 9,373; *noctis* […] *umbras*, 9,411. On this motif, cf. Rossi (2004) 86 n. 9. On the darkness of night as imagery of death, cf. Amberg (1961) 466–469.

19 Aen. 9,316–319: *passim somno vinoque per herbam / corpora fusa vident, arrectos litore currus, / inter lora rotasque viros, simul arma iacere, / vina simul.*

20 On this description, cf. Mazzocchini (2000) 336–341. On synesthesia in Vergil, cf. Catrein (2003) 58–66. – Other aural impressions too enhance the vivid character of the narrative. When Nisus looks for Euryalus, after he has been caught and cannot yet see him while wandering through the "silent undergrowth" (*dumisque silentibus*: 9,393), "he hears horses. He hears the noise of the pursuers and their signals, and in no time shouts reached his ears and he sees Euryalus" (*audit equos, audit strepitus et signa sequentum; / nec longum in medio tempus, cum clamor ad auris / pervenit ac videt Euryalum*: 9,394–936). On synesthesia in descriptions of mutilations in Lucan and Lucretius cf. also Walters (2013).

driven mad with hunger and ravening through pens full of sheep, dumb with fear, while he growls from jaws dripping with blood as he mauls and champs their soft flesh": *impastus ceu plena leo per ovilia turbans / (suadet enim vesana fames) manditque trahitque / molle pecus mutumque metu, fremit ore cruento* (9,339–341). Again, a number of senses – tactile (*molle*), visual (*cruento*) and aural (*fremit*) – are evoked, as well as the feelings and impulses both of the lion (*suadet enim vesana fames*) and the sheep (*mutumque metu* – again with an alliteration illustrating the "mute fear" by way of the sound of language; cf. also the vivid assonance in *manditque trahitque*). Vergil, then, employs a wide range of poetic techniques to create a sense of immediacy.[21] He allows his audience to share in the emotional experiences of the protagonists, at least as far as they can be conveyed by the sound and meaning of his language.

Kevin Powers' modern war narrative equally deploys the power of language to convey the sensory and emotional impressions involved in modern warfare. One example is the protagonist Bartle's first shooting scene, which is described in some detail. It takes place after Bartle, Murph and the other members of their platoon have spent the night – in fact, a number of nights in a row – awake on the rooftop of a house. In the early hours of daybreak, a shooting erupts. Bartle sees a man running behind a low wall in a courtyard, "his weapon cradled in his arms" (p. 20–21):

> He looked left, then right, and the dust popped around him, and I wanted to tell everyone to stop shooting at him, to ask, "What kind of men are we?" An odd sensation came over me, as if I had been saved, for I was not a man, but a boy, and that he may have been frightened, but I didn't mind that so much, because I was frightened too, and I realized with a great shock that I was shooting at him and that I wouldn't stop until I was sure that he was dead, and I felt better knowing we were killing him together and that it was just as well not to be sure you are the one who did it.
>
> But I knew. I shot him and he slumped over behind the wall. He was shot again by someone else and the bullet went through his chest and ricocheted, breaking a potted plant hanging from a window above the courtyard. Then he was shot again […]

21 Cf. also Rossi (2004) 88–89 on the way the parading of Nisus' and Euryalus' heads is visualized.

> and most of the side of his face was gone and there was a lot of blood and it pooled around him in the dust.

As in the *Aeneid*, the visual sense is important here to describe the gruesome details of the killing (including the moment when the dead man is even bereft of "the side of his face", the seat of the visual sense), and the same image of the pool of blood around the victim, so memorably described by Vergil, reappears. The bullet which "break[s] a potted plant" invokes the aural sense, mimicked by the alliteration. Verbal repetition ("He was shot again" – "Then he was shot again") imitates repeated action, but also draws attention to an ordering capacity of language in what in reality is a less orderly and highly disturbing scene. Overall, however, the scene, especially in its first part, is dominated by vocabulary of feeling, realizing and knowing in a way unprecedented in the *Aeneid*. This points to the presence of the mediating narrator, who is both experiencing the scene and acting in it.

What is notably absent here, compared with the Vergilian text, is the simile which compares Nisus to a lion. But still, the essential components of that simile are present. The question "what kind of men are we?" raises the issue of what it means to be human and of the distinction of man and beast inherent in the simile. The fear which the simile ascribes to the sheep is here felt by both the victim and the soldier who kills him. Both the bloodlust and its realization are attributed to the first-person narrator in the same sentence ("I realized with a great shock that I was shooting at him and that I wouldn't stop until I was sure that he was dead"), effectively illustrating the alienation of the self which the situation brings about. Intriguingly, the Vergilian text leaves open a similar possibility. The slaughter ends when Nisus "'sensed'[22] that Euryalus was being carried away by bloodlust and greed" (*sensit enim nimia caede atque cupidine ferri*: 9,354). That Euryalus is meant here, however, as presupposed by the translation, is not explicitly stated in the text. It is likely, since Euryalus' bloodlust is described in the preceding lines, but given that Nisus himself is possessed by the same fury, his moment of realization could equally refer to himself or to both himself and Euryalus. Both texts, then, effectively convey some of the feelings and emotions experienced in the face of war and bloodlust. In the modern war novel, however, some of the graphic imagery of the Vergilian text, such as the lion simile, is transferred to the reflections of the first-person narrator – a point with

22 Translation mine; West (2003) has "noticed".

important ramifications for the interplay of sensory experience and memory, as we will see below in section VI.

IV. The senses and tradition

One important difference in the way both texts deploy the language of sensory perception lies in the way in which such perceptions – which first of all refer to and illustrate one particular present moment – are anchored in traditions or previous experiences. In the *Aeneid*, Nisus' and Euryalus' feelings and emotions also affirm their grounding in a long heroic tradition.[23] The scene type of the nighttime expedition to the enemy camp goes back to the so-called Doloneia in book ten of the *Iliad*, as well as to other epic and tragic models,[24] but there are also countless individual echoes of earlier texts throughout the narrative. One example is the lion simile, quoted above (9,339–341). It establishes a connection between Nisus and Euryalus and other heroic figures of the *Aeneid*, such as Turnus, who is compared, in similar terms, to a wolf and to a lion (9,59–64; 9,792–796).[25] At the same time, the lion simile conjures up a long literary tradition. It clearly goes back to a lion simile in the *Iliad* (10,485–486),[26] which occurs in the Doloneia, the very model for this Vergilian scene. Yet another lion simile from book 12 of the *Iliad* is even closer in detail (12,299–301),[27] a simile which is partly repeated in the *Odyssey* (6,133–134).[28] While vividly evoking the images,

23 Some scholars argue that Nisus and Euryalus are in fact paradigms of a kind of heroism which is presented as outmoded within the *Aeneid*; cf. DiCesare (1970); Rabel (1981) 804; Saylor (1990), esp. 88–89. However, it still holds true that, for all the innovations introduced by Vergil, the attempt to inscribe his work in the tradition of epic narrative remains prominent; cf. n. 30.

24 Cf. Rabel (1978); Rabel (1981) 803–804; Gransden (1984) 102–119; Hardie (1994) 29–30; Knauer (1964) 266–269; 272–277; 406–412 for the Homeric parallels.

25 Cf. Hardie (1994) ad 9,339–341; 59–64 for these parallels.

26 "And just as a lion comes on flocks unshepherded, on goats or sheep, and leaps on them with evil intent, so after the Thracian warriors went the son of Tydeus until he had slain twelve"; transl. Murray (1999).

27 "[…] so he set out to go like a mountain-nurtured lion that has long lacked meat, and his proud spirit tells him to go even into the well-built fold to make an attempt on the flocks"; transl. Murray (1999).

28 Cf. Od. 6,130–134: "Then he (sc. Odysseus) advanced on them like a mountain lion who sallies out, defying wind and rain in the pride of his power, with fire in his eyes, to

sounds and feelings involved in an intense present moment, then, Vergil's epic language also stresses the way his heroes are grounded in and re-enact traditional epic scenes.[29]

This anchoring in the past fits in with other textual elements, such as the repeated use of patronymics to underscore the connection with the preceding generation,[30] or the great symbolic value of gifts and weapons with a long and illustrious pedigree. Ascanius promises Nisus "two solid silver embossed cups which Aeneas took at the fall of Arisba, and with them a pair of tripods, two great talents of gold and an ancient mixing bowl given him by Dido of Sidon" (9,263–266).[31] Even the medallions and the "gold-studded belt" (*aurea bulli / cingula*: 9,358–359), which Nisus takes from an enemy named Rhamnes, have a story to tell: "long ago the wealthy Caedicus had sent them from his home as gifts to Remulus of Tibur to form a guest-friendship with him. When Remulus was dying, he gave them to his grandson, and after his death they passed to the Rutulians as spoils of war. Euryalus now snatched them up and put them round his brave shoulders, but little good were they to do him" (9,359–364).[32] By way of these references to the past, Nisus and Euryalus are firmly grounded in the past

hunt down the oxen or sheep or pursue the wild deer. Forced by hunger, he will even attack flocks in a well-protected fold"; transl. Rieu (1991).

29 Of course, this is not to deny Vergilian originality and the creation of his own distinctive epic style by using a plurality of other genres and literary predecessors both Greek and Latin; cf., e.g., for Vergil's use of elements of historiographical narrative, Rossi (2004); cf. also Walde (2004) on Vergilian innovation. What is important here is that, in contrast with *The Yellow Birds*, the new style is markedly forged on the basis of and in dialogue with the narrative conventions of Homeric epic.

30 Nisus is first introduced as guard of the gates by his actual name, followed in the next line by his patronymic: *Nisus erat portae custos, acerrimus armis, / Hyrtacides* (9,176–177). This patronymic is a recurrent feature in the poet's references to Nisus (cf. also 9,234. 319). The sense of tradition inherent in this use of the father's name is strengthened by the fact that the same patronymic, yet referring to a different person, is already used in the *Iliad* (2,837; cf. Hardie [1994] ad 9,177, who also refers to a person with the same patronymic in the archery contest in Aen. 5,492. 503).

31 Aen. 9,263–266: *bina dabo argento perfecta atque aspera signis / pocula, devicta genitor quae cepit Arisba, / et tripodas geminos, auri duo magna talenta, / cratera antiquum quem dat Sidonia Dido.*

32 Aen. 9,359–364: *Tiburti Remulo ditissimus olim / quae mittit dona, hospitio cum iungeret absens, / Caedicus; ille suo moriens dat habere nepoti; / post mortem bello Rutuli pugnaque potiti: / haec rapit atque umeris nequiquam fortibus aptat.*

not only of the Trojans themselves and of their wanderings,[33] but – as though these were very premature hints at an imperialistic impulse – of the traditions of the Sidonians and Italians as well.

This forms a glaring contrast with the depiction and self-perception of the protagonist and narrator of *The Yellow Birds*, who expresses a weak sense of tradition at best. To begin with, there are no objects with a long tradition in the possession of the protagonists in Powers' novel. The only objects which could be read as similarly meaningful tokens are, tellingly, Murph's and Bartle's "casualty feeder cards", which are supposed to record what had happened to them in cases such as death in action, wounding or detention (p. 82–83). Even the extremely shortened kind of story these cards are supposed to tell eventually turns out to be false: "Murph had placed an X in the box for Body Recovered" (p. 83) – the fate he will decidedly not face. On his way to prison, Bartle takes both their cards and throws them into a river (p. 188–189). Even these tokens, then, tell no other story than that of the two soldiers, and they finally disappear when Bartle's time as a soldier is definitely over. In contrast to the meaningful objects involved in the ancient narrative, no lines of tradition and continuity are at play in the modern novel.

Secondly, the novel opens with a kind of 'chronology' of the war, as seen from Bartle's perspective, surveying the changing faces of the war in spring, summer and, finally, autumn, in which the central action of the novel takes place (p. 3–4). Yet beyond this rather narrow 'anchoring' of the main action, there is very little in the world of the novel's protagonists which could ground their experiences in larger frames of reference – beyond the 'mechanic' working of the army with its usual, ordered procedures – such as history, both individual and collective, or religion. At the beginning of Bartle's and Murph's term in Iraq, after they have arrived and before they start fighting, one of the sergeants tells the soldiers (p. 87):

> "I don't have to tell you what kind of enemy you'll be up against." His voice became a blunt staccato as he gained confidence in his capacity to motivate us, a bludgeon that smoothed the weary creases in my brain. "This is the land where Jonah is buried, where he begged for God's justice to come." He continued, "We are that justice. Now, I wish I could

33 On the difficulty of exactly pinning down the reference to Arisba cf. however Hardie (1994) ad loc.

> tell you that all of us are coming back, but I can't. Some of you will not come back with us."

The sergeant, somewhat clumsily, tries to anchor the war in Iraq in the biblical story of Jonah. However, this link is rather tenuous at best. The sergeant's interpretation of Jonah as "begging for God's justice to come" is so simplified as to amount to a misreading – leaving out, most blatantly, the fact that this story is also one of god's mercy towards men – and not particularly convincingly made to fit the present situation, giving it the name of a noble cause ("justice"). The reference to Jonah is not elaborated upon and strangely out of keeping with the rest of the novel, where biblical themes have no role to play. Also, the analogy ends rather abruptly with the statement that "we are that justice." What immediately follows is unconnected with the story of Jonah: the question of sheer survival and of coming back home alive – which is the true focus of the novel, from Bartle's and Murph's reflection on the number of casualties at the very beginning (p. 4; 12–14) to Murph's death at the end.

Only about twenty pages earlier, the reader has encountered Jonah as a very different kind of example: at a chronologically later point, after he has left Iraq and is on his way home, Bartle sees before his inner eye what happens to Murph's dead body: "Still, there went Murph, floating down toward that bend in the Tigris, where he passed beneath the shadow of the mound where Jonah was buried, his eyes just cups now for the water that he floated in, the fish having begun to tear his flesh already" (p. 60–61).[34] Instead of functioning as an example and precedent for the purpose of the military mission ("justice"), Jonah here provides a clear contrast to Murph's fate: "the mound where Jonah was buried", at least in the imaginary scene Bartle is seeing, is still visible, even thousands of year later, with a name still attached to it. Murph's body, by contrast, is on its way to total annihilation and, ultimately, oblivion, as it is not saved by a whale but eaten by fish. In the use of this image at least, Bartle's language shows some religious grounding, but only to stress the wide gulf which separates Murph from the story of Jonah.

The arrangement of the text, with Bartle's reference to Jonah preceding the sergeant's speech, further invalidates the sergeant's attempt at invoking

[34] Cf. also the words with which Achilles taunts Lycaon, when he depicts his corpse as eaten by the fish of the river Scamandrus in Il. 21.120-5. I'm grateful to the editor for drawing my attention to this parallel.

a precedent for their mission. The reader already knows that, instead of functioning as an early advocate of justice, Jonah will eventually embody the contrast between long-lasting memory well beyond death and the oblivion of the individual soldier who died in the same country where Jonah's burial mound is fixed, himself by contrast not leaving any traces there as he is floating past on his way to the ocean. The very image which Bartle sees in his imagination, then, speaks of the way the first-person narrator perceives of himself and Murph as de-rooted, and undermines the sergeant's attempt to evoke a – noticeably feigned – sense of tradition.[35]

In *The Yellow Birds*, then, the biblical tradition of Jonah is invoked only to convey the sense of a loss of tradition. This contrasts with the Vergilian text, where the very way Nisus' and Euryalus' perceptions in the present moment are described underlines the fact that they are anchored in an age-old literary tradition.

V. "Scarlet flowers": images and traditions

One area where the re-deployment and re-interpretation of narrative traditions come particularly to the fore is the use of a certain kind of imagery, with which both texts seek to elicit an emotional reaction on the part of their readers: the imagery of flowers, which heightens the pathos of death. In the *Aeneid*, the death of Euryalus, the younger of the two,[36] is marked by such a simile. Euryalus "rolled on the ground in death, the blood flowed over his beautiful body, his neck grew limp and the head drooped on his shoulders, like a scarlet flower languishing and dying when its stem has been cut by the

35 Also, isolated instances of religious language are sometimes used in similes and metaphors, where they usually clash with the reality of war. Cf. the speech of Malik, the interpreter, quoted below in section V ("He spread his hands out wide and moved his arms in a sweeping motion that reminded me of convocation. Murph reached for the cuff of Malik's pressed shirt. 'Careful, big guy. You're gonna get silhouetted'", p. 10), and Bartle's recollection of how, "in the heat of that first summer" "the shade of webs of power lines were little blessings as we passed beneath them" (p. 216; cf. below, section VII).

36 Cf. 9,181, where Euryalus is introduced as "a boy with the first signs of manhood on cheeks as yet unshaven" (*ora puer prima signans intonsa iuventa*). On Nisus and Euryalus as children, cf. Petrini (1997) 21–47; for a detailed study of the representation of "children and young heroes" in the Hellenistic poet Callimachus, cf. Ambühl (2005).

plough, or like poppies bowing their heads when the rain burdens them and their necks grow weary" (9,433–437).[37]

This simile has a long poetic history.[38] It reaches back to Homer's *Iliad*, where the death of a warrior named Gorgythion is illustrated with the following simile: "and his head bowed to one side like a poppy that in a garden is heavy with its fruit and the rains of spring; so his head bowed to one side, weighed down by his helmet" (8,306–308). Another intertext of the Vergilian simile comes from the lyric poetry of Catullus (Cat. 11,21–24).[39] The image of the "purple flower" also has a much older precedent, in two lines of Sappho ("like the hyacinth which the shepherds tread underfoot in the mountains, and on the ground the purple flower", fr. 105c Lobel/Page).[40] But the flower simile in the Nisus and Euryalus episode also looks forward to another, similar death in the *Aeneid*: Pallas, the young son of king Latinus and another handsome young man who dies a premature death, is compared to "a flower cut by the thumbnail of a young girl, a soft violet or drooping lily, still with its sheen and its shape, though Mother Earth no longer feeds it and gives it strength"[41] (11,68–71). While the simile illustrating Euryalus' death enhances the pathos[42] and emotional impact of that individual death of a young, beautiful warrior, it also, somewhat paradoxically, makes this death part of a larger network of meaning, both

37 Aen. 9,433–437: *volvitur Euryalus leto, pulchrosque per artus / it cruor inque umeros cervix conlapsa recumbit: / purpureus veluti cum flos succisus aratro / languescit moriens, lassove papavera collo / demisere caput pluvia cum forte gravantur.* On the correspondences of this simile with the surrounding narrative, cf. West (1969), esp. 47; Perutelli (1972) 55–56.

38 Cf. Hardie (1994) ad 9,435–437 for the parallels listed here; cf. also Gransden (1984) 115–118.

39 Catullus' eleventh ode, which begins with the topos of friendship, reads as follows: "And let her not look to find my love, as before; my love, which by her fault has dropped, like a flower on the meadow's edge, when it has been touched by the plough passing by" (*nec meum respectet, ut ante, amorem, / qui illius culpa cecidit veluti prati / ultimi flos, praetereunte postquam / tactus aratro est*; ed. Mynors [1958], transl. Cornish (Cornish/Postgate/Mackkail [2005]). Cf. Petrini (1997) 45–47.

40 Οἷαν τὰν ὐάκινθον ἐν ὤρεσι ποίμενες ἄνδρες / πόσσι καταστείβοισι, χάμαι δέ τε πόρφυρον ἄνθος.

41 Aen. 11,68–71: *qualem virgineo demessum pollice florem / seu mollis violae seu languentis hyacinthi, / cui neque fulgor adhuc nec dum sua forma recessit, / non iam mater alit tellus virisque ministrat.*

42 On Vergilian pathos, cf. e.g. Rieks (1989); Conte (2007). More specifically on the motif of "untimely death", cf. Conte (1986) 185–195.

with respect to a long literary tradition – in epic as well as lyric poetry – and to the larger framework of the *Aeneid*.

In *The Yellow Birds* too, the image of the "scarlet flower", or hyacinth, appears as a recurring image which frames and enhances scenes of death.[43] It first occurs early on in the first chapter: a little after the death of the boy as described (p. 20–21) in the quote above in section III, a car appears on the scene, with an old couple in it. Under the fire from the rooftop, the car is stopped, and an old woman falls out, dead. A young girl steps out from behind a building and tries to drag the dead body away from the car: "The path they made was marked in blood: from the car smoking and ablaze, through a courtyard ringed by hyacinths, to the place where the woman lay dead, attended by the small child, who rocked and moved her lips, perhaps singing some desert elegy that I couldn't hear" (p. 23).[44] Not unlike in the *Aeneid*, this image establishes a connection between a number of death scenes, most notably the death of Murph occurring not much later chronologically, but not described before the end of the novel: "We found Murph, finally, covered in a patch of lifeless hyacinth, resting motionless in the shade of the grass and low branches" (p. 204–205).

The image of the hyacinths is grounded in its own story of origin only a few pages earlier. When the troupe of soldiers first occupies the house from whose rooftop they shoot, they meet Malik, a native interpreter. Upon overlooking "the dried brown grasses of the floodplain" (p. 9), Malik states (p. 10):

> "Mrs. Al-Sharifi used to plant her hyacinth in this field." He spread his hands out wide and moved his arms in a sweeping motion that reminded me of convocation.
>
> Murph reached for the cuff of Malik's pressed shirt.
>
> "Careful, big guy. You're gonna get silhouetted."
>
> "She was this crazy old widow." He had his hands on his hips. His eyes were glazed over with exhaustion. "The women in the neighborhood were so jealous of those flowers." Malik

43 Cf. also p. 14; 51; 205.

44 There is a certain paradox here in the language of sensory impressions, since it describes a sensory impression which the narrator-focalizer cannot perceive ("… perhaps singing some desert elegy that I couldn't hear"). There are a number of examples for this in *The Yellow Birds*. They heighten the pathos of the description even beyond the 'actual' sensory impressions. For another example cf. below, section VI.

> laughed. "They accused her of using magic to make them grow the way they did." He'd paused then, and put his hands on the dried mud wall we'd been leaning against. "They were burned up in the battle last fall. She did not try to replant them this year," he finished brusquely.

As a symbol and an image going back to Homeric epic, the hyacinths – whatever the chain of reception behind this process – are re-deployed and fitted out with their own story. They are re-imagined as native flowers, deeply grounded in the soil which is the site of the most gruesome scenes of the novel. However, they are no simple peaceful symbols, as opposed to violent death. They are themselves bound up with a tale of jealousy among neighbors and accusations of witchcraft – which perhaps could be read as marking out the native community as adhering to a simple, rural lifestyle prone to superstition, and not immune to the potentially disruptive emotion of jealousy.

Malik can only just finish his speech with the words "It is a shame you didn't see those hyacinths" (p. 11), when their building is attacked and Malik, the interpreter, is killed. His death is the first casualty described in the novel, a fact which in itself is programmatic: it symbolizes the failure of speech and of words in the face of the brutality of war. Compared with the *Aeneid*, the use of the flower imagery is taken one step further, as the speaker of words about the planting and brutal burning of those hyacinths is killed, with "hyacinths" being the last word he utters. Even though the author of the novel himself uses the image of the hyacinths throughout his work as a framework for brutal death, the very act of speaking in those terms is confronted with the horror of war.

VI. The senses and memory

As I have observed above (at the end of section III), at least in the description of the fighting examined earlier, the reflecting, mediating voice of the first-person narrator of the modern novel makes itself felt much more persistently than in the respective passage in the *Aeneid*. This difference becomes relevant once it comes to the question of how the events described in both texts are remembered. The notion of shifting memories and shifting frames of reference for the same events is present in both the *Aeneid* and *The*

Yellow Birds, but things get much more complex in the modern novel, where the notion of 'truth' and of a coherent plot becomes fragile.

In the *Aeneid*, the promise of memory is attached to Nisus' and Euryalus' mission from very early on. Immediately after the two Trojans have presented their plans for their nighttime attack, Aletes, "heavy with years and mature in judgement" (*annis gravis atque animi maturus*: 9,246), wonders what recompense could be given to the two young heroes for their daring deed. He declares that "young Ascanius for the rest of his life will never forget such a service" (*integer aevi / Ascanius meriti tanti non immemor umquam*: 9,255–256). This, however, is by far outshone by the epic poet's promise, at the conclusion of Nisus' and Euryalus' mission right after their death, that "if there is any power in my poetry, the day will never come when time will erase you from the memory of man (*nulla dies umquam memori vos eximet aevo*), while the house of Aeneas remains by the immovable rock of the Capitol and the Father of the Romans still keeps his empire" (9,446–449).[45]

By promising eternal memory to the two heroes, the poet, as it were, fixes his narrative about them, including the vivid descriptions of sensory impressions, in Roman memory. But at the same time, this solemn declaration also signals an important temporal shift. Through powerful images, the lion simile, the sounds created by the language and the other phenomena examined above, the events of the past, at least for a short while, take on a vivid existence in the audience's mind – a direct encounter which by virtue of its very immediacy is likely to be remembered by those who read or hear the text. With the narrator's apostrophe, however, Vergil's contemporary readers are suddenly made aware of their own present, Rome's *imperium* and the Capitol hill in the center of their city. The story of Nisus and Euryalus is placed in a new context: the connection of the "house of Aeneas" with the Capitol rock and the Roman *imperium* evokes the larger aetiological thrust of the *Aeneid*, since from the proem onwards, the poem is cast as the story of the foundation of Rome, the "Latin race" (*genus…Latinum*) and "the high walls of Rome" (*altae moenia Romae*) (1,5–7).

This perspective opens up the Nisus and Euryalus episode to new questions: to what extent did the two Trojans contribute to the foundation of Rome and its empire, given that their mission was ultimately futile? To

45 Aen. 9,446–449: *Fortunati ambo! si quid mea carmina possunt, / nulla dies umquam memori vos eximet aevo, / dum domus Aeneae Capitoli immobile saxum / accolet imperiumque pater Romanus habebit.*

what extent are the virtues – and vices – they have shown during their mission exemplary and worthy of memory for Augustan Rome?[46] Even while he invokes the eternal memory bestowed by his poetry in the most explicit terms, Vergil signals the beginning of a new phase of remembering Nisus and Euryalus. It is no longer exclusively the task of young Ascanius (cf. 9,255–256), as quoted above, nor is it any longer a matter of vivid impressions and emotions evoked by the text and remembered by the audience. Memory is now public, tied to the existence of 'monuments' such as the "unmovable rock of the Capitol"[47] and potentially, as the tension between the two Trojans' unsuccessful and Aeneas' successful missions shows, open to question. The audience is here confronted with the interface between the immediate sensory impressions of the protagonists, so vividly conveyed, and the 'public' and long-term memory of the two youths – or between war and its function for the Roman state.

Finally, Euryalus' mother in her speech again opens up the question of *pietas*, and of the conflicting demands of – and interpretations of *pietas* championed by – the state and the family. The grief of the mother, who mourns the fact that she cannot bury her son's corpse according to custom, or cover him with the robe she used to weave for him (9,473–502),[48] also adds another, more 'private' layer to the different kinds of memory which interact in this scene, before she is eventually guided away from the wall of the camp (cf. above, section II). Mairéad McAuley rightly argues that Euryalus' mother is both silenced in the text but also allowed to voice her argument in a powerful way. Her ambiguity is "symptomatic of the poem's own ambivalence towards the psychic, aesthetic, and moral force it finds in

46 On the questions surrounding these lines, cf. e.g. Otis (1963) 350; Pavlock (1985); Hardie (1994) 23–24; Horsfall (1995) 177–178; on Vergilian pathos, as expressed here, cf. Johnson (1976) 59–66; Lee (1979) 77–80; 109–114; for irony in this apostrophe, which praises precisely those virtues which eventually cost Nisus' and Euryalus' life, cf. Fitzgerald (1972); Boyle (1986) 89–92. 120–121; Goldberg (1995) 21–23. More 'optimistic' readings are Lennox (1977); Potz (1993). For a more balanced view, cf. Winnington-Ingram (1971–1972) 68–70.

47 Cf. also Gransden (1984) 111.

48 This too is a motif which inserts Euryalus in a long epic tradition, even confers some heroic status on him: as Dingel (1997) ad loc. notes, these lines take up the Homeric story of Penelope, who declares that she is weaving a shroud for Laertes (cf. e.g. Od. 2,93–110); cf. Pache (2014). Cf. also Hecuba's lament for Hector's unburied corpse in Il. 24,747–760.

mothers".[49] In the modern war novel, by contrast, Murph's mother is not even in a position to voice a different opinion on the same narrative. As I will show in what follows, Murph does not have one single story, which could be commented upon differently. Instead, the memories of the people involved, most importantly the first-person narrator, are split to a point where reconstruction of 'what really happened' becomes impossible. The mother's voice, in this context, is still distinct and marked out as a voice of grief, but, like all other voices in the text, its connection with the 'truth' is more than fragile.

The shifts in the frameworks of memory which are constructed around seemingly immediate sensory expressions are a central focus of *The Yellow Birds*. They manifest themselves both in the narrative itself and in explicit authorial reflections. An example is the use of a specifically striking image: Murph's eyes, which will eventually be gouged out after his death. This can be read as an iconic image of the contradictory relationship between sensory experience and the brute force of war. But the narrator also uses this image to complicate the notion of his own seeing, knowing and remembering. The first actual bit of a description of Murph in the first chapter reads as follows (p. 7):

> "On your toes, guys!" the LT called in a forceful whisper.
> Murph sat up and calmly worked a small dot of lubricant into the action of his rifle. He chambered a round and rested the barrel against the low wall. He stared off into the gray angles where the streets and alleys opened onto the field to our front. I could see into his blue eyes, the whites spiderwebbed with red. They had fallen farther into his sockets during the past few months. There were times when I looked at him and could only see two small shadows, two empty holes. I let the bolt push a round into the chamber of my rifle and nodded at him. "Here we go again," I said. He smiled from the corner of his mouth. "Same old shit again," he answered.

This description of Murph's eyes as "two small shadows, two empty holes", framed by Murph's and Bartle's preparations for the first shooting described in the novel, anticipates Murph's end, as a mutilated body whose eyes have been gouged out and who is being stared at in turn: "the wind […] uncovered

49 Cf. McAuley (2015), esp. 82–85 (quote from p. 83).

what was left of Murph's face. Sterling stared at the empty sockets. I put the blanket back" (p. 208). This anticipation ties together two events which are closely related in time – Murph's death following a few days after the first shooting described in the novel – but of which one is placed at the very beginning of the text, the other at the end. Between the two scenes, the individual chapters of the novel go back and forth between Al Tafar in Iraq and other places where the narrator is located before and after, such as Richmond, Virginia, or the brief interlude in Kaiserslautern, Germany, the chapters being dated between September 2003 and April 2009. Over the course of the novel, the reader has to reassemble the bits and pieces of information about Murph's death which are scattered throughout the text (beginning on p. 14, "I didn't die. Murph did"), but which are only fully resolved by the depiction of how Bartle and sergeant Sterling eventually find his corpse and reconstruct what must have happened (p. 204–206). The anticipation inherent in the way Bartle describes his impression of Murph's eyes at the beginning thus provides an important sense of unity in a text which keeps going back and forth in time and place.[50]

Yet upon closer inspection, the issue of Bartle's sensory impressions of Murph is even more complex, as a further temporal level needs to be taken into account: the moment when the first-person narrator recollects his impressions and memories and fixes them in writing.[51] At the end of the first chapter, for example, he reflects on the difference between his impressions 'then' and 'now' (p. 24–25):

> I try so hard now to remember if I saw any hint of what was coming, if there was some shadow over him, some way I could

50 Obviously, the *Aeneid* is not told in a linear fashion either, but notably complicates the relationship of past and present by virtue of narrative flashbacks and flashforwards, and by interweaving various layers of the past and the Augustan present in complex ways; on time in the *Aeneid*, cf. Mack (1978); Quint (1993), esp. 50–96; Rossi (2004), esp. 105–149; Mittal (2011); Walter (forthcoming). However, the *Aeneid* notably foregrounds the constructive aspect of time, as it leads to the foundation of Rome and the Augustan present – even if certain 'critical voices' might make themselves heard in the process – while any stable vantage point from which to view the past is lacking in *The Yellow Birds*; cf. section VII on "images of memory" below.

51 The narrator points to this moment a number of times, for the first time early on in the first chapter: "and now, as I reflect on how I felt and behaved as a boy of twenty-one from my position of safety in a warm cabin above a clear stream in the Blue Ridge […]", p. 11).

> have known he was so close to being killed. In my memory of those days on the rooftop, he is half a ghost. But I didn't see it then, and couldn't. No one can see that. I guess I'm glad I didn't know, because we were happy that morning in Al Tafar, in September. Our relief was coming. The day was full of light and warm. We slept.[52]

Despite his declaration that "I didn't see it then, and couldn't", the narrator had earlier stated that, when looking at Murph, he "could only see two small shadows, two empty holes". The distinction between sensory experience and memory therefore becomes problematic.[53] Did the narrator 'actually' see Murph's eyes back then in that way, or does his knowledge of what is about to come – as well as, importantly, his will to compose a powerful piece of literature – color this statement?

The tension between both passages directly touches upon the functioning of memory, which is one of the novel's primary concerns. One passage which is crucial in this regard is the beginning of chapter 3, which is located in Kaiserslautern, Germany, in March 2005 (p. 51):

> It wasn't long after I left Al Tafar that I began to feel very strange. I first noticed it on the highway between the air base and the town of Kaiserslautern. The trees outside the window of the taxi made a silver blur, but I could clearly see the green buds of spring as they untethered themselves from the remains of winter. It reminded me of the war, though I was only a week removed from it, and unbeknownst to me at the time, my memories would seem closer the farther I got from the

52 This "happiness" of not knowing fits in with another topos which keeps recurring throughout the novel: the pleasant feeling of forgetfulness (cf. the narrator's comment that "I had been pleasantly forgotten about by almost everyone", p. 215; cf. also "All I knew was that I wanted to return to ordinary. If I could not forget, then I'd hope to be forgotten", p. 222). By contrast, the narrator suggests that he himself is probably always going to be plagued by his memories (cf. below, n. 54).

53 This comes close to what McLoughlin (2011) 118, quoting Terr (1983) 253, refers to as "the misperceptions of duration and sequencing which are 'common' distortions of temporal sense after trauma", and which include "'omen formation' or the construction of 'retrospectively formed warnings'". However, I am here not so much concerned with the question which aspects of the texts might or might not be traced back to a sense of trauma, but rather with their literary effects.

> circumstances that gave birth to them. I suppose, now, that they grew the same way other things grow.

Whereas in the passage quoted above, there was a dichotomy only between "now" and "those days on the rooftop" back "then", the temporal layers involved in the processes of memory now proliferate, becoming ever more complex. The view from the taxi window triggers memories of the war, "only one week removed from it", but this moment of recollection too is clearly marked out as past ("unbeknownst to me at the time") and dissociated from the "now". The phrasing of the final sentence, "I suppose, now, […]" leaves open the possibility that the narrator's insight into and attitude towards his own memories might change and color his recollections differently again in the future. There are no fixed, 'absolute' memories of the past the narrator himself was part of, but a living organism of ever-growing memories. The present moment, when the narrator fixes them in writing, forms but an ephemeral version of his memories.

Under the impression of his constantly shifting recollections, the narrator realizes that he is unable to fully reconstruct a memory of Murph (p. 138–139):

> [M]y memories of Murph were a kind of misguided archaeology. Sifting through the remains of what I remembered about him was a denial of the fact that a hole was really all that was left, an absence I had attempted to reverse but found that I could not. There was simply not enough material to account for what had been removed. The closer I got to reconstructing him in my mind, the more the picture I was trying to re-create receded. For every memory I was able to pull up, another seemed to fall away forever.

The constant dynamic of his recollections, his inability to "reconstruct" the past once and for all[54] soon has serious consequences for the narrator.

54 Cf. also p. 61: "I felt an obligation to remember him correctly, because all remembrances are assignations of significance, and no one else would ever know what happened to him, perhaps not even me. I haven't made any progress, really. When I try to get it right, I can't. When I try to put it out of my mind, it only comes faster and with more force. No peace. So what. I've earned it." The phrase "remember him correctly", strikingly, is juxtaposed with the obviously imaginary sight of Murph floating down past the burial mound of Jonah (quoted above in section IV) – a juxtaposition which further underlines

Murph's disappearance leads to a criminal investigation. The narrator mentions "rumors" of an uncertain nature (p. 186–187), and the fact that Bartle had written a letter to Murph's mother, in the eyes of the investigators, suggests that he was involved in killing Murph. When the investigator first comes to see him, the two facts he states – "You know LaDonna Murphy" and "you wrote this letter" (p. 182) – to him seem sufficient evidence of Bartle's culpability, although what exactly he is accused of is nowhere spelled out directly. But despite the nebulous character of the accusations, the narrator is not able to defend himself by giving an unequivocal, coherent account of what had happened.

Only at one point does the first-person narrator succinctly sum up the case and his own role in it. When Murph's mother comes to visit him in prison, this is how Bartle reacts (p. 219):

> I didn't know what to say to her at first, but it seemed unfair that she had to bear it like this, to be responsible to start, so far away from any comfort or understanding. And if she should accuse, then I should be accused. His absence from the family plot was my fault. I had left him in the river. I had feared the truth on her behalf and it had not been my right to make that choice for her. But this was not her way. Her grief was dignified and hidden, as is most grief, which is partly why there is always so much of it to go around.

Ultimately, Bartle does not say anything and lets Murph's mother tell instead of how she first received the news of her son's death (p. 219–221). By some kind of cruel irony, when there would have been a chance to tell the truth, in the face of the mother's "hidden" grief, the true story of her son's death too remains hidden. For when Murph's mother wants to "understand what happened to her son, why I'd made her read a letter that wasn't real, standing in the snow, as I had" (p. 222–223), he gives her some other explanation, told "roughly", "the connections failing" (p. 223). The individual's experience of his own deeds in war and public knowledge and memory of it

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the impossibility of 'actual' knowledge, preserved over time. – The fact that both memories and the narrator's thinking about them keep changing is underlined by the insertion of several reflections on the functioning of memory, which develop out of individual recollections, and which are all slightly different in focus; cf. e.g. p. 138–140; 182–183; 225.

– even the story Bartle himself tells Murph's mother – are split. As Bartle himself is unable to fit the pieces of his memories, which are often bound up with sensory impressions, into a coherent 'plot', or to spell out the truth, everyone else – the army, the court, Murph's mother, the media (with its headlines "gaudy and absurd", p. 222) and the society it addresses – are left to construct their own narratives.[55] There is no room in this novel for explicitly raising the question of the war's function for the state, as long as even the experiences and memories of the individual soldier are presented as fundamentally unstable.

VII. Images of memory

The disjointed memories and recollections which are so characteristic of the narrative of *The Yellow Birds* are expressed in the form of an image – that is, another narrative element appealing to sensory perception: consider this 'icon' of memory in *The Yellow Birds*, which can be found at the end of the novel, when Bartle refers to his life in prison (p. 216–217):

> My first few months inside, I spent a lot of time trying to piece the war into a pattern. I developed the habit of making a mark on my cell wall when I remembered a particular event, thinking that at some later date I could refer to it and assemble all the marks into a story that made sense. I still remembered what some of them meant for a long time afterward: that long chalky scratch below the mirror next to "FTA" stood for that kid whose head Murph cradled in the orchard as he died. The one above my bunk reflected an instant of thought I'd had in an alley in Al Tafar, in the heat of that first summer when the shade of webs of power lines were little blessings as we passed beneath them, […]. Eventually, I realized that the marks could not be assembled into any kind of pattern. They were fixed in place. Connecting them would be wrong. They fell where they had fallen. Marks representing the randomness of the war were made at whatever moment I remembered them: disorder predominated.

55 Cf. also the advice that Murph's mother find her own "truth", quoted above at the end of section II.

This image reflects a number of points we have seen above. The marks on the cell wall illustrate the close connection between a particular memory of the past and the present moment when that memory, in whatever context, is retrieved and reactivated. As the marks on the wall proliferate, the process of memory is represented as constantly changing and creating ever new patterns, which in turn provide a new context for the other memories previously retrieved. Also, the material used for creating this image, chalk, in its limited durability, illustrates the non-permanent character of these recollections, which are bound to fade and be erased or washed away at some point. In its fragile character, the chalk itself influences and leaves its mark on the process of recollection (p. 216–217):

> As I made my mark, if I remember right, the chalk broke and the mark became much shorter than I could recall intending […]. I'd made that mark into a kind of flash, an explosion in chalk dust on the light green painted concrete of my walls. […] It seemed silly, but I remembered that mark and what it meant.

Marking the moments of recollection of the past itself becomes something to be remembered (cf. "if I remember right"; "than I could recall intending"; "I remembered that mark and what it meant"), and it triggers reflections which in turn show the recollections of the more remote past in a new light. Memory, as illustrated here, is a highly dynamic process, itself subject to the passage of time and in no way 'fixed'.

Both the moment of the past which is recalled and the time of its recollection – illustrated by the mark on the wall – appear as more or less random, not governed by a pattern. In the same way, the notion of plot is fundamentally destabilized. Just like the novel itself in its structure does not obey any straightforward plot, so the individual episodes, feelings and reflections are remembered in no particular order, and the narrative of what happened lies hidden under the narrator's recollections, vivid evocations of individual sensory impressions, and reflections. The lack or weakness of a particular plot has proved fatal once and led to the very situation Bartle now finds himself in, in the "six-by-eight-foot universe" of his single cell (p. 217). Just like others – the army, the press, Murph's mother – had reconstructed the plot of Murph's death, so the marks on the cell wall invite interpretation from outside and the reconstruction of a pattern: the guards, who see those marks as well, are unable to distinguish new marks from old ones. Only a few of them "recognized, if nothing else, when the randomness expanded"

(p. 217). They evidently read the marks as representing Bartle's counting the days of his imprisonment, as he comes closer to his release. The narrator comments (p. 217–218):

> Now, I understand why they would have seen this as a pattern, and perhaps there was a pattern there after all, for I confess myself that had I been confined for another year or two the walls would have been full, there would have been no marks at all, just a wash, a new patina whitening the walls with marks of memories, all running together as if the memories themselves aspired to be the walls in which I was imprisoned, and that seemed just to me, that would have been a worthy pattern to have made. But it was not to be. Everything disrupts. The guards seemed to understand that my marks had meaning, so surely they can be forgiven if their error was one of interpretation.

As this passage shows, the image of the chalk marks on the prison walls also acts as a mirror of the process of reading. It raises the question to what extent the reader makes the same 'mistake' as the guards, misinterpreting the signs and reading them as expression of a pattern which does not exist. The reader too, after all, is likely to read the novel 'for the plot', curious to learn what had happened with Murph and what had caused the situation the narrator finds himself in. This reading even seems to be invited by the structure of the novel with its regular hints at Murph's fate and the crucial scene of the retrieving of his body being placed at the end. Just as the plot of Murph's death was constructed by the press and the army, so the reader will probably reconstruct a plot out of what for the first-person narrator are disjointed recollections of scenes, images and feelings – even while the reader is given to understand and 'perceive' how for the first-person narrator there is no plot, but only individual, ever-shifting recollections, which resurface according to no particular pattern.[56]

56 Another image of memory used in the same context suggests something similar. When Murph's mother comes to visit Bartle, she brings him a map of Iraq: "Within the map there was a section magnifying Al Tafar and its surrounding landscapes. It stopped being funny after a while. The grid seemed so foreign and imprecise. Just a place scaled out of existence on a map" (p. 224). Cf. also p. 225: "The map, like every other, would soon be out of date, if it was not already. […] [T]he map would become less and less a picture of a fact and more a poor translation of memory in two dimensions." As with the chalk

Intriguingly, the image of the marks on the cell wall parallels a famous scene in the *Aeneid*, which also involves a pictorial representation of the past and raises the question of interpretation or misreading. Instead of at the end, as in *The Yellow Birds*, it is placed at the beginning: the ecphrasis of the reliefs in Juno's temple in Carthage. What is represented here is no mere moments of recollection, as in the novel, but an 'actual' image of crucial scenes from the Trojan War, a war which has already become famous (cf. *bellaque iam fama totum vulgata per orbem*: Aen. 1,457). The images signal the presence of the older epic tradition within the *Aeneid*,[57] but they also fulfill another function. Aeneas reads them as evidence that "here too there is just reward for merit, there are tears for suffering and men's hearts are touched by what man has to bear" (*sunt hic etiam sua praemia laudi; / sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt*: 1,461–462). However, this reading seriously raises the possibility of Aeneas misreading the images, under the dictate of his own present feelings and emotional needs. The images, after all, are placed in the temple of Juno, whose involvement in the Trojan War has shown her to be a fierce antagonist of the Trojans. This scene in the first book of the epic, then, could be seen as a powerful illustration of misreading, raising the question to what extent the reader, too, might be guilty of misreading the epic which is about to get under way.[58]

The temple reliefs in the *Aeneid* and the chalk marks in *The Yellow Birds*, in that respect, resemble each other as meditations on memory, its representation and risk of misinterpretation. But this parallel also points to a telling contrast, as far as the materiality of memory is concerned. The idea of memories shifting, changing and being reinterpreted over time is certainly not foreign to the *Aeneid*, as we have seen in the shifting frames of memory

marks on the wall, the map and Bartle's reaction to it, too, suggest that his memories are out of sync with the outside world: with the guards who search for patterns, and with the conventional representation of places on maps.

57 Cf., most recently, Gärtner (2015).

58 On this ecphrasis, cf. e.g. Segal (1981); Lausberg (1983); Fowler (1990); Lowenstam (1993); Putnam (1998) 23–54, and, most recently, Schiesaro (2015). On memory – and the necessity of forgetting – in the *Aeneid*, cf. Quint (1982); Quint (1993), esp. 50–96; Herzog (1993); Bleisch (1999); Most (2003); Walde (2004); Seider (2013). – As the editor rightly reminds me, other parallel passages from the *Aeneid* would be the temple doors described at the beginning of book 6, on which Daedalus fails to depict the death of his own son (6,30–33), or Aeneas' reluctance to act as an autobiographical narrator at the beginning of book 2.

constructed around the Nisus and Euryalus episode. But the images of the Trojan War are still set in a durable material (either bronze or stone).[59] They are fixed in a certain order (cf. *videt Iliacas ex ordine pugnas*: 1,456) and confined to a certain, unalterable plot. Even if the image of e.g. Achilles' son Pyrrhus, which is depicted on the relief, is subject to change and re-interpretation in the course of the epic, as Alessandro Schiesaro convincingly shows, it remains firmly placed within an overall plot, quite in contrast to the randomness of recollection illustrated at the end of *The Yellow Birds*. Consequently, the particular type of misreading envisaged in both works is a different one. Whereas in the *Aeneid*, the frame of meaning within which the individual images and the overall story are read by Aeneas is problematic, the modern novel questions the entire process of plot construction. While the emotional impact of the events is foregrounded in both cases, the framework of narrative and memory, of which they form a part, is notably different.

VIII. Conclusion

The language of sensory impressions in both texts is surrounded by a number of paradoxes. While it serves to convey a vivid impression of the unique present moment of the Nisus and Euryalus episode, the employment of e.g. the lion or the flower similes underscore the *Aeneid*'s placement in the long tradition of epic literature. In a slightly different way, Kevin Powers' novel is but – one of – the latest members of a very long tradition of war narratives, but images of sensory and emotional impact are employed in such a way as to suggest a feeling of any ties with a larger tradition, religious or otherwise, being severed.

While in the *Aeneid* too, the vivid sensory perceptions of the protagonists as conveyed to the reader, become subject to different frameworks of memory – of the reader, who gets immediate access to those scenes of the past, but also of Ascanius, Euryalus' mother and finally of the present and future Rome and its *imperium* – the narrative still preserves its overall sense of a coherent plot. Individual recollections are not disjointed, but they have their place in a fixed pattern. In *The Yellow Birds*, by contrast, the notion of a coherent plot, as well as of 'truth', breaks apart for the first-person narrator,

59 Although it is not quite clear where exactly these artworks are placed (on the temple doors or on the walls), whether they are set in stone or in bronze, and whether they are carvings or paintings. Cf. Lowenstam (1993) 37 n. 3 with further literature.

under the overwhelming presence of immediate and vivid, yet ever-shifting recollections. The narrator's memories, be they marked with chalk on the walls of his cell or fixed in the novel itself, invite the outside world to see patterns where the protagonist and narrator of the novel purports not to see any order. Memories and sensory impressions, then, become part of a somewhat paradoxical movement. They certainly give outsiders access to the unique emotions of war, bridging the gap between 'outsiders' and 'insiders' of war. At the same time, however, they are integrated into different frameworks: while the 'outside world' keeps looking for patterns of events, they elude any attempt of the first-person narrator to fix them in a coherent plot. To that extent, even while sensory impressions form a direct means of communication between narrator and reader, they also point up and seal the narrator's isolation from the outside world.

As these examples show, even while the language of sensory impressions provides a seemingly immediate access to the emotions evoked by and involved in war, this same language is at the same time firmly rooted in, and in its interpretation depending upon, the larger contexts of the functioning of narrative and of memory. For all their vividness and immediacy, these sensory and emotional experiences need to be interpreted against the background of an understanding of how memory functions in a given work, to be understood correctly, and they carry very different meanings depending on that context. In particular, the modern war novel dramatizes the traumatic experience of the modern soldier, whose experiences and sensory impressions disrupt any sense of coherence, be it the anchoring in a tradition, or the coherence of a plot – a plot which a long narrative tradition has led both himself and everyone around him, as well as the novel's audience, to expect, but which must remain hidden under the surface of the narrative.

But still, for the inherently fleeting character of the sensory and emotional expressions involved, the individual images, even the basic plots constructed to convey the sensations of war remain surprisingly stable over time. While warfare itself, its time and place, the technologies employed, and the politics and poetics of its memory may change drastically, at least the two texts examined here are united by the basic techniques of conveying "what it felt like" as vividly as language permits. From this perspective, the modern war novel sheds light on an important function of the Vergilian text. Although the war described in the *Aeneid* belongs to a remote past from the point of view of the poet and his contemporaries, and although the two works belong to such different contexts, the narrative still invites its recipients to relive

experiences of war, which many of them knew first-hand, and to reflect on their connection with the values and traditions of contemporary Rome. Without positing that the war in Latium corresponds to any specific war of the recent past, we can still see how the text fulfills an important function as mediator between the world of war and the civil society. For ancient no less than for modern communities, literature and the sensory impressions it conveys is a potent medium for bridging that gap.

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