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Violence, Vulnerability and the Overcoming of Trauma in Rachel Seiffert's *The Walk Home*[1]

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Abstract. Rachel Seiffert's *The Walk Home* (2014) tells the story of a Protestant Irish family living in Glasgow that has been haunted by a problematic fanaticism since the Partition of Ireland (1922). Its narrative builds an intricate family tree where its members, immersed in the vicious cycle of ethno-sectarian violence, reveal their own traumas and intrinsic frailties. Their isolation and helplessness are further exacerbated by their tendency to repress their traumatic past. However, the encounter between Lindsey and Eric, two relatives-in-law, encourages them to run away and confront the past through art respectively, thus casting some light on the unending transmission of trauma in the family. Drawing on theories of trauma and ethics (Freud 1950 [1917], 2001 [1914]; Levinas 1986, 1998 [1993]; Volkan 2001, 2017; Butler 2004; LaCapra 2014 [2001]), I will attempt to demonstrate, firstly, that the narrative form of *The Walk Home* performs the disruptive and repetitive symptoms of transgenerational trauma; and secondly, that the ethical encounter with the other and the recognition of a shared vulnerability transmitted through families can empower characters like Lindsey and Eric to change their lives. The analysis also considers the possibility of challenging the perpetuity of the traumas arising out of the British-Irish conflict and developing resilience through the acknowledgement of vulnerability, the need for interdependency and the heling power of artistic representation.

Key words. Ethical encounter, narrative form, Rachel Seiffert, resilience, transgenerational trauma, violence, vulnerability

Resumen. *The Walk Home* (2014) de Rachel Seiffert relata la historia de una familia irlandesa protestante que vive en Glasgow presa de un fanatismo intolerante desde la Partición de Irlanda (1922). La narración va construyendo un intrincado árbol genealógico mientras sus miembros, inmersos en un círculo vicioso de violencia étnico-sectaria, van revelando sus propios traumas y flaquezas. Su soledad y desamparo se ven agravadas por su tendencia a reprimir su pasado traumático. Ahora bien, el encuentro entre Lindsey y Eric, dos parientes políticos, les lleva a huir y a enfrentarse al pasado a través del arte respectivamente, arrojando así luz sobre la interminable transmisión del trauma en la familia. Utilizando las teorías del trauma y la ética

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(Freud 1950 [1917], 2001 [1914]; Levinas 1986, 1998 [1993]; Volkan 2001, 2017; Butler 2004; LaCapra 2014 [2001]), trataré de demostrar, en primer lugar, que los aspectos formales y estructura narrativa de *The Walk Home* reproduce los síntomas disruptivos y repetitivos del trauma transgeneracional, y, en segundo, que el encuentro ético con el otro y el reconocimiento de una vulnerabilidad compartida transmitida por las familias puede facultar a personajes como Lindsey y Eric para cambiar sus vidas. Asimismo, el análisis toma en consideración la posibilidad de cuestionar la perpetuación de los traumas derivados del conflicto británico-irlandés y de generar resiliencia por medio del reconocimiento de la propia vulnerabilidad, de la necesidad de interdependencia y del poder sanador del arte.

Palabras clave. Encuentro ético, forma narrativa, Rachel Seiffert, resiliencia, trauma transgeneracional, violencia, vulnerabilidad.

The exceptionally violent history of the Western world in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has bequeathed a traumatic legacy that has become a primordial object of study since the 1980s, especially in the field of the humanities. In particular, the conflicts provoked by the collapse of the British and other European empires, the Cold War and the resurgence of totalitarian fanaticisms such as Nazism and Stalinism and the atrocious effects of the Gulag, the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the Nazi extermination camps during and after the Second World War revealed that the technological, industrial and intellectual progress achieved by Modernity could be misused to threaten human existence itself. The ethical crisis that ensued stressed the necessity to interpret human suffering in radically new ways. This, coupled with the visibility that psychic trauma attained in the public sphere under the label of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (American Psychiatric Association 1980: 236), brought about a new conception of humanity as vulnerable and prone to being traumatised. As Susana Onega and Jean-Michel Ganteau argue in the Introduction to *Victimhood and Vulnerability in 21st-Century Fiction* (2017), "to be human is to be open to a violent expression of alterity" (3). Accordingly, these critics emphasize the need to move towards "a politics of reparation" based on the exercise of relational empathy (*Ibid*.). This conceptualization stems from Emmanuel Levinas's ethical demand for a non-violent movement towards alterity. Central to Levinas's thought is his contention that the encounter with the other is ethical when one's own identity is put into question by "the face"; that is, by the other in its "extreme exposure, defencelessness, vulnerability" (1998 [1993]: 145). The self, in being moved by the helplessness of the other, becomes aware of its own vulnerability as a human being and of its responsibility to respond to the presence of the other. The imperative demand of the other's vulnerability forces the self to become solidary and, thereby, "los[e] its sovereign coincidence with itself" (Levinas 1986: 353). The relation between self and other thus entails a bidirectional movement whereby the self is affected by the other's vulnerability but, at the same time, exposes its own suffering humanity to the other. The influence of Levinas's work has extended to contemporary leading philosophers. For example, in *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004), Judith Butler recognises the significance of the ethical encounter with the "face" of the other in that it awakens the self "to what is precarious in another life or, rather, the precariousness of life itself" (134). Together with Butler, Zeynep Gambetti and Leticia Sabsay (2016) have highlighted the dynamic duality of the ethical connection with alterity as a way to challenge the traditional assumption that vulnerability is exclusively a site of victimization and perpetual inaction. As they argue, social interconnection and interdependency have the potential to create modes of agency (Butler, Gambetti and Sabsay 2016: 6) that can foster the development of resilience by victims of trauma.

The increasing visibility of the wound after the ethical turn in the fields of ethics and literary criticism coincided with the emergence of literary and testimonial texts that represented the consequences of individual and collective traumas inherited from the recent past. These new concerns led the literature of the 1990s to tackle questions such as the irretrievability of memory, the figure of the victim, the vulnerability of the human condition and the importance of ethics and resilience in the overcoming of trauma. Indeed, as Onega and Ganteau remark, in this type of literature there is a correlation between ethics and aesthetics that manifests itself in a tendency towards "generic hybridisation and/or narrative experimentation" that is "aimed at fighting the unrepresentability of trauma" (2017: 4). This trend is represented by a great variety of contemporary writers, particularly those with a double or multiple cultural background, such as, to name a few, Eva Figes, Fanny Howe, Kazuo Ishiguro, Thomas Lynch, Robert Kelly, Dennis Lehane, Frank McCourt, Anne Michaels, David Mitchell, W.G. Sebald and Rachel Seiffert. Seiffert is an excellent case in point, as her complex family background grants her a multiple cultural perspective that is reflected in her cosmopolitan and transmodern stance. Born in Oxford to an Australian father and a German mother with Nazi parents, Seiffert grew surrounded by histories of violence and oppression narrated from strikingly opposed perspectives. In her attempt to work through and respond to her traumatic legacy, she delves into complex and sometimes unwilling forms of involvement in political conflicts as well as in the traumatic impact of history on the family, the individual and the community. This would explain her interest not only in the traumas caused by the Second World War, but also in those individual and collective traumas associated with colonialism and imperialism, notably those related to Ireland. Of the four internationally recognised novels she has published so far,[2] two deal with the British-Irish conflict. *Afterwards* (2007), which provides an emotionally charged and ethical insight into The Troubles, the ethno-nationalist period of conflict in Northern Ireland that lasted about thirty years from the late 1960s to the late 1990s; and *The Walk Home* (2014), which delves into the traumatic effects of the division of the country into two regions after the War of Independence (1919-1921): Northern Ireland, which remained under British rule, and Southern Ireland, which became the Irish Free State, now the Republic of Ireland. As the article will attempt to demonstrate, in this novel, Seiffert provides a thought-provoking and illuminating perspective on the British-Irish conflict that enriches as well as challenges previous literary representations of Irish suffering and resilience.

The Walk Home tells the story of a Protestant family of Irish origin living in Glasgow since the Partition of Ireland in 1922. The complex relationships stemming from this traumatic experience are intertwined in an experimental narrative that "*perform[s]*" (Onega and Ganteau 2017: 4; original emphasis) the traumatic symptoms in the phase that Sigmund Freud famously called repetition compulsion (2001 [1914]: 150) and that Dominick LaCapra would later refer to as "acting out" (2014 [2001]: xxiii). As the members of the different generations reveal their intrinsic frailties, their isolation and vulnerability are increased by their inability to cope with the past. Nevertheless, the ethical encounter between Lindsey and Eric, two apparently unrelated members of the family, leads to different modes of agency in each of them that shed some light to the unending transmission of trauma in the family. With these ideas in mind, I will attempt to demonstrate, firstly, that the narrative structure performs the disruptive and repetitive symptoms of trauma transmitted to the younger members of the Protestant family in

[2] Rachel Seiffert's debut novel, *The Dark Room* (2001), was short-listed for the Man Booker Prize, received the *LA Times* First Fiction Prize, and was the basis for the revered film *Lore* (2012). In 2004, her collection of short stories *Field Study* was given the PEN International Award. Her second and third novels, *Afterwards* and *The Walk Home*, were long-listed for the Orange/Bailey's Prize for Fiction. In 2003, Seiffert was declared one of *Granta*'s Best of Young British Novelists and in 2011, she received the E. M. Forster Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Her latest novel to date, *A Boy in Winter* (2017), was shortlisted for the 2019 International DUBLIN Literary Award.

The Walk Home; and secondly, that the ethical encounter with the other and the recognition of a shared vulnerability transmitted through families can empower characters like Lindsey and Eric to change their lives. Finally, the analysis will launch a reflection on the possibility of challenging the perpetuity of trauma and violence and of developing resilience through the acknowledgement of vulnerability and the need for interdependency.

"Aw the faimly woes, they all lead back tae Ireland": The Cyclicality of Transgenerational Trauma and Violence

The history of Ireland in the early twentieth century was characterised by a political revolution that revolved around the Easter Rising in 1916, the electoral success of Éamon de Valera's new fully republican Sinn Féin in 1918 and the Irish War of Independence (1919-1921), eventually leading to the creation of the Irish Free State, a new self-governing political state comprised by twenty-six of the thirty-two counties of Ireland. The end of British rule in Ireland was seen by the nationalists as part of the decolonisation of the British Empire and was accompanied by "the restoration of lost liberties and privileges marking a new beginning" (del Río and Carregal 2020: 4). At the same time, however, the change of political administration caused considerable uncertainty among the Protestant community, who fell victim to "wide-scale religious intimidation and […] murder[s]" when "hidden sectarian tensions came to the surface" (*Belfast News Letter* 2017), particularly during the War of Independence and the Irish Civil War. The subsequent feeling of nonbelonging of the Irish Protestants caused a wave of emigration from Southern to Northern Ireland and even to Scotland or other parts of the United Kingdom, where Protestantism could be openly embraced. In *The Walk Home*, Seiffert employs the idea of the constraining forces of Irish history as a starting point by using as epigraph a line taken from Louis MacNeice's poem "Valediction" (1934) that runs: "The woven figure cannot undo its thread" (l. 44). In this poem, MacNeice depicts Ireland as an island nation that captivates the tourists with its beauty but also imprisons its offspring with its history. Although a native from Belfast, MacNeice developed a critical view of his own country fostered by his condition as an expatriate early in his childhood and of his education in English schools. This allowed him to distance himself from his father's Protestant rectory and to realise that "in Ireland, arson and murder are legacies" (l. 12) because its "history never dies" (l. 11). The backbone in Seiffert's novel is precisely the period of political upheaval in Ireland that inspires MacNeice's poem, one that encompassed the Easter Rising, the War of Independence and the Civil War. However, unlike MacNeice's poem, Seiffert's novel also offers a complex picture of the aftermath of revolution that covers the Northern Irish Troubles and transcends the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, an accord between unionist and nationalist political parties that served as a blueprint for peace between the Protestant and the Catholic communities in Northern Ireland (McKittrick and McVea 2002: 219; del Río and Carregal 2020: 11).

The main trauma represented in the novel begins with the creation of the Irish Free State, when an Irish Protestant family is evicted from their farmhouse in Louth by their own neighbours under the threat of arson. Ever since the Protestant occupation of Ireland throughout the reigns of Elizabeth I and James I and later under Cromwell's rule, land property had constituted one of the greatest privileges among Irish Protestants. During the Irish revolutionary period (1919-1923), nationalist demands for agrarian reform and an egalitarian distribution of lands were infused with violence and intimidation. More concretely, the practice of destroying country houses owned by Protestants became popular among anti-treaty members of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) during the Irish Civil War (Dooley 2001: 190). Statistics reveal that no less than four hundred homes and businesses were burned down in the South during nationalist revolution, a fact that partly justifies the notable decline of Protestant population in

the area (Bielenberg 2013: 204). In *The Walk Home*, such an experience not only shatters the stability of the family but also seems to compromise the integrity of the text by deviating from traditional novelistic features such as the teleological sense of time and the unifying narrative perspective. The telling of the events is situated within two different time frames that move back and forth – the 1990s and "now, or thereabouts" (1) – and is focalised from the perspective of different family members (Eric, Brenda, Lindsey, Graham and Stevie), who are frequently assaulted by intrusive memories of the past. The use of multiple internal focalisation and anachronisms enables Seiffert to portray an intricate family tree where the creation of affective bonds between its members is deeply influenced by the trauma of dispossession of the first generation. At the linguistic level, there are also occasional disruptions of standard English by Scottish dialect that infuse the text with the cultural hybridity that the characters developed after the experience of displacement and immigration. One of the main tenets of Trauma Studies is that traumatic re-enactment is doomed to repeat itself until the traumatised subject has affectively assimilated the mnemonic fragments of its primal occurrence (Freud 2001 [1914]; LaCapra 2014 [2001]; Bloom 2010). Therefore, the fragmentation of the text – displayed on the levels of time, focalisation and language – suggests that the traumatic events narrated have not yet been successfully assimilated by the characters. What is more, their healing process is hindered by their tendency to repress the past, as is manifested in the silences and ellipses of their discourse.

The story recounts how, ever since they left the newly formed Irish Free State, the family remained under the rule of Papa Robert, the *pater familias* in the first generation of immigrants. Papa Robert was "an Orangeman"[3] and a "true blue" (16) who kept ruminating over "the family grief, all that they'd lost back in Louth" (38). The tendency of traumatised individuals to remain stuck in the past has been explained by LaCapra as a transformation of the initial loss into absence, when "one faces the impasse of endless melancholy, impossible mourning, and interminable aporia in which any process of working through the past and its historical losses is foreclosed and prematurely aborted" (2014 [2001]: 46). Moreover, the danger of improper grieving entails not only the perpetuation of the acting-out phase as suffered by the individual subject but also the potential transmission of trauma to subsequent generations. Vamik Volkan (2001) and Gabriele Schwab (2010) concur that the possibility of transmitting a psychopathology can be explained by the transgenerational transmission of trauma. This phenomenon takes place due to the permeability that usually exists between the psychic borders of one generation and those of their offspring, whereby the parents' anxieties can alter the development of the child's sense of self. This interference in the process of identity formation manifests itself belatedly in attitudes and behaviours that the child unconsciously adopts in an attempt to repair the unresolved trauma. Papa Robert's children, Eric and Brenda, spent their childhood listening to their father's stories about the Irish Civil War and how, when the south of Ireland became independent from the United Kingdom, "the family fled across the water" (17) to reach the coasts of Glasgow, probably attracted by the hope of finding a job in the by then prosperous shipyards on River Clyde. The psychological vulnerability induced by this haunting past led the children to develop a relationship with their father based on authoritarianism and obedience. Eric, his eldest and male child, devoted his childhood to study and work to gain his father's approval. As time passed, he turned into an intelligent man with a

[3] Named after Protestant king William of Orange, the Orange Order is an organisation that was founded in Northern Ireland in 1795 to uphold the interests of the Protestant Ascendancy in the face of increasing demands by Catholics to remove the civil and political restrictions imposed on them since the Reformation. Today, the Orange Order has lodges scattered throughout the Republic of Ireland, Great Britain and various former territories of the British Empire, and organises annual parades commemorating William's victory over Roman Catholic James II in the Williamite–Jacobite War (1688–1691). Its members have often insisted that Orangeism is a purely religious movement; however, its commitment to Loyalist and British Unionist ideals makes its influence in politics undeniable (Clayton 1998; Bradley 2004).

natural gift for drawing and became a ship architect. When he decided to marry Franny, a Catholic woman who worked as a secretary in his shipyard offices, Papa Robert posed several objections to that marriage: that Franny was older and that, since she was poorly, they will probably never have children, which was "life's purpose" (203). He never acknowledged that his real problem with that wedding concerned religion. Years later, Eric remembers his father's reaction and how Brenda had stuck by him in the face of their father:

> *I have nourished and brought up children and they have taken against me*. Papa Robert had carried on like Eric had betrayed him, broken faith with all his kin. He'd seen himself as the forsaken patriarch, like something from the Old Testament, and everyone had bent to his will, save Brenda. (56; original emphasis)

Papa Robert's understanding of the situation reflects the Manichean ways of relating to the world that he has inherited from his religious convictions. To him, the wedding is not a token of Eric's love for Franny, but rather a matter of betrayal to the kin and disobedience to patriarchal authority. The punishment for not complying with his father's wishes turned Eric into a victim of his ostracism and silence. Ironically enough, by condemning Eric to exile, Papa Robert was unconsciously repeating what the Irish Catholics had done to him back in the 1920s. The inability to work through his trauma keeps him stranded in the compulsion to repeat the traumatic event in a new context (Freud 2001 [1914]: 150; Bloom 2010: 206). Brenda recognises this phenomenon when she retrospectively comments that "he took the hurt of his own life and turned it on his children" (22).

For all this, the traumatic experience of enforced emigration, and the subsequent victimisation of Eric, did not only involve Papa Robert's direct descendants, but also those of the third generation. Eric had been physically expelled from their lives, but Papa Robert continued reproducing his relationship with him with Brenda's sons, Malky Jr., Craig and Graham. This is clearly seen when he scolds Graham for wearing his school uniform untucked, or when he compares his poor education to Eric's decent schooling. Feeling the pressure of his grandfather's "critical eye" (127), but also fearing ending up like his uncle, Graham represses his exasperation and "[stands] in front of his Grandad, mute and full of fury" (*Ibid*.). Brenda's silencing of Papa Robert's mistreatment of Eric and the desire to mitigate his loss, encourages his grandsons to conjure up a comforting image of their grandfather as the leader and founder of a new Irish Protestant community in Scotland that even survives his death. In trying to alleviate his pain and the damage done by Eric, they take part in the social rejection of their uncle, who becomes "a headcase" (122) and "the one person in the family they never went and visited" (41). The Protestantism they inherited from Papa Robert becomes violent when they grow up, as they undertake aggressive sectarian practices. Whereas Malky Jr. and Craig end up enrolling in the British Army to fight the Catholic nationalists during The Troubles in Northern Ireland, Graham, the youngest, becomes a drummer in The Pride of Drumchapel, a marching band of Orangemen in Glasgow that occasionally mingled with members of the loyalist paramilitary Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF).

Another pledge of allegiance to Papa Robert is the family's persistence on living in Drumchapel, the Glaswegian district where Papa Robert, his wife, and his children settled with other uprooted families attempting to lead respectable lives after their exile from Southern Ireland. The association between Drumchapel and their lost lands in Louth is made evident when Brenda tells her grandson Stevie how much the housing scheme has evolved since they arrived:

> [Papa Robert] took both his children to show them, and to tell them how he'd been a farm boy, back in Ireland. Born in his family's own smallholding, to open skies and

> views of the far hills, and the fields they'd worked for generations. When Papa Robert said they were out of the slums now, he spoke like they'd been returned to a standing they'd been robbed of. (38)

This remark suggests that Papa Robert and the family members of the following generations are victims of the pathological process of grieving Freud called "melancholia" (1950 [1917]: 153) and Volkan calls "perennial mourning" (2017: 13), that is, a lasting condition that, unlike the healthy process of mourning, makes it difficult for the displaced newcomers to locate "the mental representations of what has been lost (family, land, identity)", and forces them instead to "utiliz[e] linking objects and linking phenomena in maladaptive or adaptive and even creative ways" (2017: 12). Thus, the feeling of a recovered rootedness in both Protestantism and Drumchapel appears to counteract the sudden dislocation and dispossession after leaving Ireland, simultaneously masking and disavowing, however, their traumatic reality. The attachment to both has been transmitted across generations, transmuted into an unswerving loyalty to the family, so that whoever dares to break it will be punished. None of the members of subsequent generations venture to question the Protestant faith except Eric, who feels his expected loyalty as "chains about [his] neck" (205). Therefore, when he is eventually ousted from the family after pushing Protestantism away to marry Franny, he leaves both Drumchapel and Glasgow for somewhere else in Scotland.

Throughout the novel, the reader realises that the traumatic memory of dislocation of the first generation becomes, with the passing of time, something more than a shared account of the past. The unresolved trauma of loss is not only transmitted to the coming generation but also keeps changing its function. This phenomenon is what Volkan calls a "chosen trauma", that is, a "group's unconscious 'choice' to add a past generations' mental representation of an event to its own identity" (2001: 88). A chosen trauma survives its primal bearers as long as it is reactivated, a process which occurs especially when the group identity is threatened. In this sense, Eric's questioning of the family's Protestantism would constitute the menacing force that destabilises the group's identity, and his banishment from the family would symbolise the drastic change required to restore and enhance it.

As MacNeice's metaphor of the woven figure suggests, Seiffert builds *The Walk Home* as a fabric of complex and problematic relationships that are progressively interwoven among various family members in different time slots. The themes of the transgenerational transmission of trauma and the perpetuation of ethno-sectarian violence are formally echoed in the cyclical structure of the generational stories within the main narrative frame. Each of them opens and develops without concluding the previous one, thus giving the impression that there is no barrier between one generation and the next so that the traumatic history of the family will repeat itself incessantly. As Silvia Pellicer-Ortín and Merve Sarikaya-Şen contend, those immersed in the transgenerational transmission of trauma "tend to be more exposed to risks, and also to have a more limited capacity to manage risk successfully" (2020: 318). These dynamics recall the ones operating throughout Irish history, where the lingering ghosts of Ireland's colonial past keep on widening the divide between and Catholics and Protestants and generating new conflicts between them, thus precluding the possibility for reconciliation and recovery from historical trauma. However, as we will see in the following sections, there is indeed a sense of closure at the end of the novel since certain modes of agency that emerge from the recognition of a shared vulnerability do have the potential to heal the family trauma and put an end to violent ethno-sectarian practices in future generations.

"Plenty ae humans, in aw our weakness": The Ethical Encounter with the Other

Within the fabric of interwoven traumatising relations in the family, Eric would stand as a loose thread not only because of his decision to break with his family's stigmatisation of Catholics but also because of the never-ending confrontation with his father. A victim of a very similar situation is Lindsey, a young girl who becomes part of the family when she marries Graham, Eric's nephew and Brenda's son, after getting pregnant with Stevie. Although she belongs to a younger generation than Eric, Lindsey has also been the victim of the dogmatic values of a Protestant father. A native from Tyrone, the largest county in Northern Ireland and one deeply involved in The Troubles since 1968 (McKittrick and McVea 2002: 40), she grew up surrounded by riots, attacks and bombings. Unable to stand such a situation, her mother abandoned her husband and their child, leaving no sign of her whereabouts or the possibility of contacting her. As a result, Lindsey was left under the care of her father, who drank heavily and financed the loyalist terrorism of the UVF. All this leaves a traumatic imprint on her personality that she will try to ignore by keeping at a physical and psychological distance from home. When she escapes with Graham to Scotland, he notices that "she never said too much about home," only that "she was glad to escape that man" (195). However, Lindsey's tendency to repress the past does not exempt her from carrying an emotional baggage from home. Her undecipherable character is clearly perceived by Brenda the first day of her arrival: sitting on the back rack of Graham's bike while exploring Drumchapel, Lindsay had kept "her spine dead straight, arms slender, all her limbs, and her face showing nothing" (19-20).

Lindsey's and Eric's search for refuge in social and emotional isolation comes to an end when they meet in an anniversary of her wedding to Graham. Eric, now a widower, notices that none of Lindsey's relatives have attended the celebration and, in an attempt to appease the girl, he lets out that "[n]aebody came tae [his] weddin either" (55). This awakens Lindsey's interest in the old man and, ever since then, they establish a relationship based on mutual care whereby she cleans his house weekly and he takes care of Stevie. Having suffered in silence the victimisation of their fathers, the absence of their mothers, and the subsequent feeling of uprootedness, they both find in the other an empathetic shoulder to lean on. Though unaccustomed to talking about his paintings, Eric confesses to Lindsey that his obscure representations of Glasgow, tarnished by religious elements, tell stories. The darkness of his pictorial narratives reflects the conundrum of his traumas of dispossession and enforced exile not only from Ireland but also from his family. With Lindsey, he remembers how his father obsessively used to read the Bible to him and Brenda every day, to the point that he grew tired of God. The fact that he resorts to religion in his drawings and that he is "forever trying tae draw a better wan" (67) can be interpreted as part of his compulsion to repeat the traumatic memories of his childhood and youth. At the same time, however, rather than approaching the sacred texts as providers of purely religious lessons, as his father did, Eric conceives them as stories of human frailty and failure:

> Plenty ae good lines in there. If you know where tae look. Plenty ae stories. Plenty ae humans, in aw our weakness. Nothin new under the sky, same auld failins and frailties, goin back through the ages. Gies us insight, so it does, an consolation. (75)

Through these words, Eric acknowledges not only his own helplessness, but, most importantly, the precariousness of the human condition (Butler 2004: 28-29). It is in this terrifying perception of our common vulnerability that Eric seems to find a source of both artistic inspiration and solace to his pain. The exposure of his suffering humanity is received by Lindsey as "a sharp and guilty stab" (73) that demands an ethical response on her part. Indeed, his stories move her to the point of breaking up her mutism and confessing that the mere mentioning of

the Bible makes her restless because, just like Papa Robert, her own father was also very fond of the Scriptures and used to tell her

> [a]ll about the first big flood, that punishment from above. He'd made sure she understood: how disappointed God was, by the children of man, the children he'd made. Always falling short of his mark. Lindsey knew her Dad had felt the same about her, and she could even remember some of the words now, about the waters prevailing over the creeping things of the earth. (70)

The implied comparison of both Protestant fathers and the punishing figure of God situates Lindsey and Eric in the position of sinful humankind. To their eyes, the first generation of humans disobeyed God and was banished from Eden, while its offspring perpetuated evil and needed to be purged in the Flood. The absence in Eric's pictorial narratives of the rainbow or the olive branch, the biblical symbols of atonement and peace, points to Papa Robert's denial of the possibility of reconciliation, an attitude that Lindsey recognises in her own father when she says that "[h]er own Dad wasn't one for olive branches" (74). Like the Old Testament God, both fathers punished their progeny for their unfaithfulness, abandoning them unprotected in the fallen world. The encounters between Lindsey and Eric are, therefore, ethical in the sense that they allow them to acknowledge and share their vulnerability, restore their dignity as victims of transgenerational trauma and establish an empathetic relationship (Pellicer-Ortín and Sarikaya-Şen 2020: 324). This generates a unique bond that is noticed by Eric himself when he reflects that "the way he and Lindsey spoke, it was like they knew [the biblical folk in his pictures], the whole story" (88). Although Brenda had backed him against their father and occasionally visited him after their falling out, it is with Lindsey that Eric discusses his drawings: "[Brenda] couldn't see what they saw in those sketches" (*Ibid*.).

"Mebbe you could think about your Da": From Vulnerability to Agency

In *The Walk Home*, vulnerability eventually divests itself of the passivity traditionally attached to it and acquires an enabling quality. The interconnection between Lindsey and Eric allows them to recover an agency that manifests itself differently according to each context of abuse. Eric's movement towards agency is reflected in his attitude towards his art, but, more precisely, in what he draws. The old man had been drawing Glasgow and Biblical figures for a while. He was especially interested in the Patriarchs and arranged them in a family tree so that Stevie could "understand it all better, […] the way the stories and the people all connected" (115). Once, he read to the child how Abraham, commanded by God, took his son Isaac to Mount Moriah with the intention of following His command to offer him as a sacrifice. Before the ritual is performed, an angel appears speaking with the voice of God, stopping Abraham from killing his son and bidding him to sacrifice a ram instead. After the reading, Eric "blew his nose and cleared his throat, […] his eyes unfocused, and he did no more drawing that afternoon" (117). The distress provoked by this story tells us that he sees himself in the position of Isaac. Although Eric's and Isaac's stories have a different ending, what moves Eric is that both are victims of pious fathers who follow God's commands so unquestioningly that they are ready to sacrifice their sons. Though tough, what Eric seeks with the reading and representation of these stories is to try and understand his father's behaviour, even if in an indirect manner, through the figure of the biblical patriarch. This act of storytelling can even be interpreted as a way of transmitting resilience and understanding of life to Stevie, who soon learns to discern the "small pocket[s] of rapture or of passion" (119) in his great-uncle's pictures.

After struggling with it for some time, Eric finally manages to draw Papa Robert without any religious ornament by placing him where he belongs. He had "always got stuck before, when he'[d] tried" (97), but this time he had "done three big sheets of [his] Dad and his roses" (98), a scene that takes Eric back to a happy childhood memory when they both enjoyed planting roses together. He also draws "Papa Robert's much-mourned landscape" (197), the Irish farm where he lived as a boy before the outbreak of the Civil War. By so doing, Eric is articulating the family's traumatic absence derived from the loss of the Louth acres and of their dignity. Scholars like Dori Laub and Daniel Podell (1995) or, more recently, Sandra L. Bloom (2010) have acknowledged the potential of the figurative language of art to develop mechanisms of resilience and facilitate the move to the phase of working through of trauma. According to Laub and Podell, artistic representation has a healing power in that it enables the traumatised subject "to revive the enshrouded past of a trauma through a dialogue in the present" where s/he can "bestow form on chaos" (1995: 993). Echoing this, Eric tells himself Papa Robert's stories of Louth while working on his sketches, an act of remembrance that provides him with a long-forgotten perspective of an affectionate father:

> Drawing his Dad had brought him something like understanding just the same, allowed him to feel something like tenderness again, in among fury. […] the way the pictures opened him up was painful, but they'd all allowed in new thoughts as well, they'd renewed sympathies. (207)

As can be inferred from the quotation, Eric's creative exercise inspires him to go back to his roots and take a more empathetic stance towards his father, manifested in the recovery of a kindness that had been lost long ago. He also quotes some lines from 1 Corinthians 13 where St Paul enhances the prevalence of *agape*, the unconditional fatherly love of God for humankind and the reciprocal love of humans for God. According to Lewis B. Smedes, "[*agape*] gives power to accept life, to find goodness in living while we are victims of situations we despise" (1978: 4). This reinforces the idea that the gentleness that Eric manages to rescue from his childhood memories stems from a pure love for his father. Although reconciliation is by this time impossible because his father died some time ago, he chooses to comprehend and forgive him rather than perpetuate their enmity. Therefore, Eric's art allows him to develop resilience and move towards the overcoming of trauma as, though "bruised and overdue" (210), he attains "a new softness" that heralds the beginning of a peaceful future.

The empathetic relationship between Eric and Lindsey drives him to warn her against cutting herself adrift, as he did: "Best tae leave bridges unburned. […] That's what I've learned, hen" (206). However, at this stage, Lindsey has moved from the empathy arousing from their interconnectedness to the heroization of the old man. For her, Eric becomes "the one who's got away" (186) and "could tell her all about escaping" (75). She thus misinterprets Eric's outcast condition as the consequence of his own impulse to escape rather than as the result of an imposed expulsion from his family. Her inability to situate herself in the position of Eric as the wounded other prevents her from empathising with him any longer and, subsequently, from developing her own mechanisms of resilience. This would explain why Lindsey's evolution from vulnerability to agency is diametrically opposed to that of Eric. During her frequent visits to Eric, her husband Graham spends more time with his fellow Orangemen in the band, playing marches, drinking alcohol, and avoiding the company of his family. He even takes Stevie to the band rehearsals, which are sometimes attended by an "honoured guest" (164) in balaclava, or some "living, breathing paramilitary taking a short break from the struggle to listen to their music" (171). When Lindsey learns that the band is financing the loyalist terrorism of the UVF, as her father used to do, she finally understands that the only thing she can do to protect her family and put an end to the patrilineal transmission of violent practices and hard-line values is

to move from Drumchapel. However, when she tells Graham that she has found a new flat to live in, "halfway between Drumchapel and town" (135), he refuses to abandon the area where his family has been living for generations. At the same time, Lindsey reflects on how much time has elapsed since she arrived in Scotland and realises that Stevie will leave home one day. Moreover, the lack of a proper household and stable bonds with her parents makes her stance towards parenting rather ambiguous. While she asserts that she could never turn her back on her own child, her experience has taught her that "[t]hey grow apart. Kids and their parents. […] It's part of life's pain" (181). Eventually, both Graham's suffocating sectarianism, which so much reminds her of her father's, and her fear of becoming redundant in Stevie's life, which activates the trauma of loss caused by her mother's abandonment, drive her to leave husband and child behind in what may be interpreted as a defence mechanism triggered by her fear of being forsaken again. Concurrently, her leaving without saying goodbye can be conceived as the repetition of her mother's behaviour, an acting out of her childhood trauma. In a sense, her mode of agency turns Lindsey's status as a victim of violence into that of a perpetuator of it. Just like Papa Robert, Lindsey is unable to mourn loss, thus preserving the violence and melancholy of the family within the vicious circle of transgenerational trauma. She leaves Stevie thinking that she turns away because "[s]he didnae love [them] anymair" (260), thus inflicting a tremendous emotional and psychic wound with drastic effects on Stevie's sense of self.

"An old man's picture and a phone call": The Dawning of Hope for the Younger Generation

In the story's present, Stevie has been away from home for three years after his mother's abandonment in an attempt to assuage his loss and escape from his father's fanaticism. Ever since his mother left, he often found himself thinking "how she let him go to school, and then she took off" and he wondered "why she did that, when she could have taken him too" (237). After spending some time in London, he eventually returns to Glasgow and starts working as a builder with a group of Polish immigrants. There, Stevie meets the ethno-sectarian intolerance that still pervades Scottish society, especially in the sector of football hooliganism. On the very day of the Orange Walk, he is beaten by a group of Catholic men wearing Celtic t-shirts. To Stevie, this episode has the uncanny feeling of *dejà vu*, as it repeats another incident witnessed by him as a child, in which two boys wearing green-and-white tops were attacked by Orangemen during a parade. Papa Robert had once said that "the Walk wasn't done to provoke, it was a solemn occasion" (170), but these events reveal that the parades actually opened an unhealed wound that brought religious and political tension and animosity to the surface and forced people to take sides. After being left wounded on the street, Stevie asks himself the crucial question posed by his mother and his grandmother Brenda for generations: "Why the bloody hell did it have to be like this?" (281).

The fact that he is unable to answer this question seems to leave the Irish question unsolved. However, the novel ends with the faint promise that the spinning wheel of violence may slow down or even stop. This is suggested by the fact that, although he is still keeping a distance from his father, Stevie has started contacting his dear grandmother through phone calls. As Brenda herself thinks, "[h]is calls were strange and sore, but still a consolation of sorts" (264). She starts, ever since, imagining her grandson back home, just as Stevie had pictured himself "walking up [Gran's] road, up the steps to her close, and being buzzed in. […] Coming home with no questions asked. […] No one wringing their hands, or going over the same old ground. […] Just like his old life, but moving onwards" (278).

The prophetic message of Stevie's return in these mental pictures is precisely captured in Eric's last drawing before dying. In one of his conversations with Lindsey, Eric had advanced that "[he'd] draw somethin special. One day. […] Tae somethin that matters" (75). The hope that rises anew in Brenda's chest while contemplating it enhances its significance. It portrayed

> [Stevie] on one side, [Graham] on the other, and good likeness both. Graham solid and Stevie spare, and a bit older too that when he'd left, as though Eric's pencils had been keeping pace. There was nothing dark about the picture, it was just clear and simple, with no hint of old Louth hurt, or tricky wee clues to some Bible story […]. Stevie was sitting, up close, and Graham was standing, a bit more in the background; like Eric was imagining Stevie back, at home and with his Dad. Except it wasn't like a picture of the two of them together, more like two different pictures on the same sheet of paper. (265)

As this description suggests, Eric's drawing does not simply foresee Stevie's return but also drops hints about the future. The fact that both Stevie and Graham are reunited under the same frame but still separated from one another, points to a future reconciliation of father and son whereby Stevie would forgive his father and respect his values and Graham would refrain from admonishing his son and imposing his values on him. This atmosphere would ultimately empower Stevie to break the toxic ties with his family's sectarianism. The fact that Eric has chosen the father-son relationship as a theme reveals that the portrait was inspired by his own relationship with his father, the "simple and clear" artistic style symbolising the peacefulness he has achieved after understanding his trauma and forgiving him. Eric's last drawing prophesises a reconciliatory stage that he never attained with his own father but that he wishes Stevie to reach. Its uniqueness lies in that it emerges out of "an ethos of resilience" and constitutes a mode of agency where not only "flexibility, persistence, and adaptability" are at work, but also "the capacity of losing much or perhaps almost everything and building up everything all over again" (Butler, Gambetti and Sabsay 2016: 63). The complicity that Eric had tried to establish with Stevie as "[c]hildren ae the Irish" (71) during their meetings in the past and the fact that Stevie has started to yearn for home in the present opens up the possibility that he will end up embracing Eric's attitude towards vulnerability and moving away from the violent ways of paramilitary masculinity encouraged by his father, his uncles, and his great-grandfather. Indeed, Stevie's movement away from the traumatic past and sectarian violence is further reinforced by the uncompromising attitude of the younger generations towards tradition. By the time the novel ends, there is "hardly any young folk" (269) parading with The Pride of Drumchapel in the Orange Walk. The majority of them were "most likely getting married and thinking better at long last" (*Ibid*.).

Conclusion

Rachel Seiffert's *The Walk Home* brilliantly illustrates and enacts the uncertainties of contemporary ethno-sectarian and family violence, while proposing a reflection on how vulnerability is intensified in families that have been devastated by the unresolved British-Irish conflict. Stevie's family acts as a microcosm of contemporary society, where losses have not been properly mourned and violence between Protestants and Catholics survives the Good Friday Agreement of 1998. The use of non-linearity and multiple internal focalisation, the oscillation between standard English and Scottish dialect, and the cyclicality of the narrative structure perform the disruptive and repetitive symptoms of transgenerational trauma. The initial trauma of displacement and dispossession suffered by the first generation is unavoidably transmitted across time and space because the family members not only act as its victims but also as its vehicles. This idea is synthesised in the epigraph from MacNeice's poem alluding to

the impossibility of escaping individual, family, and collective traumas arising out of the British-Irish conflict and the perpetuation of radical patriotism and its extreme violence.

However, *The Walk Home* also accommodates a space for hope opened up by Eric and his art. Although the meeting between Eric and Lindsey does forge a relationship of interdependency, she is unable to understand that, by escaping from her past, she will continue to be not only haunted by her childhood trauma but also bound to re-enact it and transmit it to others. By contrast, Eric manages to move outwards and overthrow the sovereignty of his own self, attaining a position from where he can listen to Lindsey and even to his late father, and develop mechanisms of resilience that he will attempt to transmit to Stevie, the representative of the younger generation. Thus, Seiffert vindicates the necessity not only to comprehend and grieve for the past, but also to step out of the comfort of our own ipseity and embrace vulnerability and compassion to put an end to the transmission of violence and the constraints of an implacable history. The novel ends in a hopeful tone where, although not guaranteed, reconciliation and forgiveness, are presented as a possibility.

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