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Collective Suffering, Uncertainty and Trauma in Jeffrey Eugenides's *The Virgin Suicides*: Of Bystanders, Perpetrators and Victims

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This paper offers an analysis of Jeffrey Eugenides's debut novel *The Virgin Suicides* as a narrative of survival, uncertainty and coming to terms with traumatic experiences. It contends that the experimental narrator —a group of middle-aging men— participates in the different traumatic events in a threefold way, as men who become bystanders, perpetrators and victims. The perspective offered by Trauma Studies in the study of the novel points to the text's reticence to define both its peculiar narrator and the enigma at the core of the narrator's story. The effects of such textual uncertainty are interpreted as a process of gradual realization of the collective trauma suffered not only by the female protagonists but also by the would-be narrator of the story and by the whole community of Grosse Pointe.

Keywords: collective trauma; suffering; perpetrators; bystanders; victims; uncertainty

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Sufrimiento colectivo, incertidumbre, y trauma en *The Virgin Suicides*, de Jeffrey Eugenides: sobre testigos, perpetradores, y víctimas

Este ensayo tiene como objetivo analizar la novela de Jeffrey Eugenides *The Virgin Suicides* como una narrativa de supervivencia, incertidumbre y asimilación de experiencias traumáticas. Se parte de la hipótesis de que los hombres que constituyen el narrador experimental y colectivo del relato participan en los eventos traumáticos en un triple papel: como testigos, como perpetradores y como víctimas. Utilizando el marco teórico de los estudios de trauma y la importancia que tal marco ha tenido estos últimos años incluso en la narrativa de ficción, observamos la reticencia del texto a definir tanto a su peculiar narrador como el enigma existente en el núcleo del relato. La incertidumbre textual que esto provoca se interpreta como un proceso de comprensión gradual de la existencia del trauma colectivo que sufren no solamente las protagonistas, sino también el narrador y la comunidad de Grosse Pointe en la que se desarrolla la trama.

Palabras clave: trauma colectivo; sufrimiento; perpetradores; testigos; víctimas; incertidumbre

1. Introduction

Within the field of Trauma Studies, many critics understand a victim's post-traumatic condition as the paradoxical struggle between the impossibility of speaking about a violent experience and the imperative to do so (Laub and Felman 1992; Caruth 1995; Kaplan 2005).[1] In its broadest interpretation, trauma originates from a psychic and/or physical wound that leaves long-lasting mental scars. The most recent definition on the website of the American Psychological Association states that "trauma is an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape or natural disaster. Immediately after the event, shock and denial are typical". More than two decades after the reformulation of Freud's seminal ideas on trauma, scholarly articles that focus on the issue have begun to appear again (Kansteiner and Weilnböck 2008; Traverso and Broderick 2010; Brown Golden and Bergo 2009; see also Ehrenreich 2003 and Reisner 2003). However, their focus has shifted from Freud's interest in the individual patient to the problematic nature of the narrative representation of trauma, which encompasses the political, social and cultural implications that trauma theory entails. Thus, some authors express dissatisfaction with and attack the "homogenizing effects of trauma programs" (Simon et al. 2000: 201) or the overgeneralization of trauma in the socio-cultural dimension (Traverso and Broderick 2010: 8). Others are unhappy with the concept of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) due to its frequent diagnosis and its unifying status (Ehrenreich 2003: 18-24). Still others are infuriated by the Euro-American centralization of Trauma Studies (Craps and Buelens 2008) or the conflation of trauma and loss (Beardsworth 2009: 68).

Trauma has become narrativized, commodified and 'sold' on the big screen and in thick novels bringing other people's pain to an assorted audience that soaks it up either through voyeurism, sympathy or curiosity. Furthermore, writers and literary critics are not the only ones interested in scrutinizing the effects of trauma and survival in the cultural world. The subject is explored in many other contemporary works of art —sculpture, photography, film, painting, etc.—in what seems to be an attempt to check or question the validity of the theory. The frequent use of experimental techniques, in contrast to the mere documentation and dry critique of historical facts, has become symptomatic of the popularity Trauma Studies has acquired in different fields of contemporary culture. Experimental techniques help to vindicate approaches, other than the traditional realist one, that can represent the social and historical understanding of reality from new angles. In the background remains the postmodern anxiety motivated by the belief in the ideologically constructed character of reality, in its illusive history and art. The simulacrum, rather than mimesis, still rules in contemporary art and cultural theory. While in our daily lives we frequently demand truth, honesty and transparency, art works thrive in their complex attempts to represent the troubles of trauma in life and in the definition of our own identities. Consequently, Trauma Studies flourish even if they do so in a proliferation of theories that frequently question each other.

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Jeffrey Eugenides's *The Virgin Suicides* (1993) was an early confirmation of both the author's understanding of the importance that trauma already had in the cultural redefinition of reality and of the human being, and also the contradictory and complex status of Trauma Studies. This paper contends that thematically Eugenides's novel denies prominence to the classic discourse of trauma (from Freud to Caruth) and to the notion of PTSD as the only or, at least, ultimate solution to the enigmas in the story. In other words, and as is also seen in the writer's second novel, *Middlesex* (2002), *The Virgin Suicides* subverts psychoanalytical and clinical discourse: they can be useful, but they are not enough. Structurally, the text can be regarded as a collective struggle to cope with the effects of traumatic events. One reviewer declared that "the adults in the book emerge as an incompetent, embarrassed presence in the face of trauma" (McCloy 1993). Later on, many literary critics have also discussed the presence of trauma in the novel (Millard 2007, Kelly 2010, Dines 2012). In this vein, but more specifically, I propose the view that the novel is mostly a narrative about surviving suicide and collective trauma, while stressing that classic therapeutic notions in trauma theory are not enough to explain human nature. The trauma in the story emerges from a very personal act —the suicides committed by five adolescent sisters, the Lisbon girls— which eventually reveal a collective malaise repressed beneath evasive allusions to life in the Detroit suburbs in the 1970s.

This paper examines multiple roles of the experimental narrative voice in the different events related to trauma in the story: the men who become the narrator's collective voice have a threefold role depending on the characteristic interpretation from Trauma Studies we want to assign them: bystanders, perpetrators or victims. Represented as a group of middle-aged men with "thinning hair and soft bellies", the collective 'we' looks backwards to their adolescent personas in the relatively unacknowledged past of idyllic suburban America. Many critics and reviewers have understood the suicides as the major enigma in the book but according to Griffith the "real mystery" is to be found in the answers to the following questions: "Who are 'we'? How many of 'us' are there? Why are 'we' still chasing down people whose lives briefly brushed the Lisbon girls' twenty years ago?"(1994). The adult men who compose the collective narrator tell the story of their love for and obsession with the Lisbon girls, which started when they were teenage boys, and hence the narration is focalized through the boys' perspective. Additionally, despite the fact that they appear to be collectors of the girls' possessions, it is actually the collection of mementos that possesses them, a belated 'possession' similar to the one described by Cathy Caruth in her analysis of trauma symptoms (1995: 4-5). Yet, this collective narrator is not a mere 'eternal victim'. As voyeurs, these men can also be classified as bystanders, located between the categories of perpetrator and victim. As such, they can be defined, in John Fowles's words, as the "hoi polloi" or the unthinking, conforming masses (1986: 9). According to Fowles, although virtually innocent, the many obliterate individuality. In the same vein, the suburban community in *The Virgin Suicides* obliterates individuality by repressing it and replacing it with boredom and conformity. The boys, as bystanders, resemble this position of the suburban community because they are products of suburbia and of its

ritualistic banality. However, as mentioned, the narrator is also a collector, and collectors, as Fowles suggests (1986: 9-11), can be dangerous.

Perhaps it is the book's detailed lyricism and black humor that engage the reader's attention. However, even though the narrator is a master in these textual strategies, this male collectivity is far from being or becoming the hero of the story. The group never exerts control over the narration and never succeeds in reading the unfathomable traces of the Lisbon girls' lives, in preventing them from committing suicide, or in producing an authoritative account of the tragic events of the past. Notwithstanding, their systematic failure could easily just turn into a maneuver that works to confuse the reader about the ambiguous status of their collective figure. Can the narrators' adolescent selves be seen as scapegoats, deliberately disregarded by the sisters twenty years earlier? Were they victims of trauma through their roles as witnesses of the suicides? Or were they predators trapped in an inevitable destiny predicated by the socio-economic depression that characterized the Detroit suburbs in the 1970s? Progressively, their authoritative plural voice and sense of community become shattered by trauma, guilt and shame, which ironically are also the threads that have sewn together their group identity for twenty years. Their survival posits, in this sense, a transformation of traumatic experience into a magical-realist narrative which pursues a special bonding with others and a "gathering of the wounded", as Kai Erikson puts it (1979: 110).

2. Suburban Repression, Predicaments and Traumas

The words in the second part of the title of this paper refer specifically to the complex condition of the collective narrator. They are borrowed from Sarah Kane's play written before her suicide, although their order is changed. In *4.48 Psychosis* (1995), the statement "Victim. Perpetrator. Bystander" obscures further the already unclear classification of the traumatized. In *The Virgin Suicides,* these are interchangeable categories applicable to almost all agents in the story: to the interviewed suburban inhabitants, to the Lisbon girls, but mainly to the collective narrator. Being a reflection of the whole community, the boys seem to be mere bystanders or voyeuristic observers of the events in their neighborhood: they witness the metamorphosis of the childlike girls into alluring women, their subsequent death drive, the deterioration of suburban space (chipping down of elm trees) and of industry (lay-offs in automobile factories). As the group of boys tries and fails to save the girls, symbols of their new erotic desire, they become deeply traumatized, a condition that will last for twenty years. Towards the end of the novel, these middle-aged men admit that they might have acted as perpetrators because of their deliberate negligence in not getting to know the five sisters or letting them have their own voice, narrative, otherness. Even at the end, the narrator constantly replaces the girls by the objects that belonged to them. The sentence "[w]e haven't kept our tomb sufficiently airtight and our sacred objects are perishing" (246) sounds more like a confession of their status as perpetrators than as a description of the passing of time. In addition, Debra

Shostak argues that the boys' approach to the girls —physical and also objectifying— is what does violence to the latter and makes them commit suicide (2009: 814). This violence is not the result of a hate crime, but rather an excessive, erotic desire for the girls, which produces an equally excessive reaction in the girls. The long process of coming to terms with the shame, guilt and stupefaction that followed the traumatic events begins with the discursive interconnection between the collective narrator, the subjects of its narration, the suburban community and a prospective reader.

As stated above, among the main concerns in this paper are the experimental quality of the narrator and the analysis of how this group of grown-ups faces the traumatic aftermath of the suicides of their neighbors, events that took place about twenty years before the narrative begins. Their multiple and alternating status of bystanders, perpetrators and victims hinders the reader from siding with any one of the recounted versions of events. They try to cope with their post-traumatic suffering through searching for empathic bonds with the subjects of the story (the Lisbon girls), the rest of their neighbors and an unknown addressee. The collective voice recreates the year over which the suicides take place, which coincides with their sexual awakening, by using magical realist storytelling.[2] But what the narrator also recreates is his own capacity for recollection, disrupted by the traumatic witnessing of the suicides, which cuts short their sexual awakening. Symbolically, the narrativization of their past experiences constitutes the 'grave' of the sisters, but it also serves to acknowledge the damaging interconnections between the socio-historical conditions of suburban America in the 1970s and the individual experiences of its inhabitants. However, even though the narrator follows what in trauma theory is known as the path of mourning and working through, there still remains a semi-religious "pact of remembering", to use Assmann's words (2011: 49), which does not allow the narrator to forget his own involvement in the suicides. In the end, the narrator is able to combine a history of collective trauma —that of 1970s suburban America— and a story of survival —his imaginative storytelling. Gabriele Schwab maintains that "storytelling itself requires a form of translation . . . , that is, a psychic processing of cultural narratives and conversion into an individual story" (2010: 115). In *The Virgin Suicides* the reversal of this statement is true: there is a psychic processing of individual narratives and a conversion of these into a cultural story. Although the cultural story of the suburb might appear fictitious, it is in fact a condemnation of the conformity, homogeneity and artificiality of the time, and a reflection of their disruption through the effects of the influx of black people, environmental decay, and people's disillusionment with the government in the 1970s.

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[2] The phrase "virgin suicide" can be interpreted in religious terms —implying a pure, innocent suicide— and in secular terms —"suicide" being the head-noun referring to the girls who are described as chaste. Both perspectives apparently present a paradox since a sinless suicide is religiously impossible and not all the girls are virgins (what is more, they are described in erotic terms throughout the text). Hence, this oxymoronic combination might tie in with the one in the term "magic realism". Collado-Rodríguez offers a detailed interpretation of magic realism in 'Back to Myth and the Ethical Compromise: García Márquez's traces on Jeffrey Eugenides's *The Virgin Suicides*' (2005).

The narrative revolves around five suicides, committed by Cecilia (the first to attempt it) and her older sisters —Lux, Bonnie, Therese and finally Mary. Everybody in the Detroit suburb of Grosse Pointe tries to guess the girls' motives and soothe their pain in different ways. Nobody, however, had listened carefully to the girls' individual voices when they were alive or paid attention to the dangers of adolescent excess. As the suburban streets lose the only traces of natural life and fertility —the trees and the girls— the barren landscape becomes a symbol for the loss of emotional relations in the suburban community. The growing disunion among the suburbanites seems to be the result of the contagion spread by the five "virgin suicides". In his seminal work on suicide, Émile Durkheim argues in favor of a link between community and individual: [T]he victim's acts", Durkheim writes, "which at first seem to express only his personal temperament are really the supplement and prolongation of a social condition which they express externally" (1979: 299). Yet, once again in Eugenides's novel the link might also function in the opposite direction: as the narrator confirms, "Everyone we spoke to dated the demise of our neighborhood from the suicides of the Lisbon girls" (2002: 244). By minimizing the socio-historical references, Eugenides's collective narrator implies that the social space and time in which the girls lived cannot be prime drivers of their suicides. However, references to the socio-political context are tangible in nods to the Second World War and the Vietnam War ("hoisting the flag on Iwo Jima" or "the body counts from the evening war" 2002: 53, 44), the decaying city of Detroit after the 1967 race riots (231), the contaminating spill from the River Rouge Plant and the extensive lay-offs in the car industry. It can thus be argued that the novel also hides a latent criticism of suburban collective repression and its darker aspects. Suburbia —as refuge from difference and land of boredom, to borrow Laura Miller's ideas (1995)—shields its fictional inhabitants from contemporary social dangers (an escalating crime rate and the gradual impoverishment of the city), from environmental problems (Dutch elm disease and the plagues of fish flies) and from other suburban conflicts (fear of black people, increasing commodification and banality).

The text never clarifies whether the central trauma originates from the girls' suicides, from the narrator's threefold condition as bystander, perpetrator and victim or from the suburban repression of historical fears and sexual desire. According to Jeffrey Berman, teen suicide is one of the most difficult deaths to mourn because, in his opinion, "survivors generally feel that a loved one's death has killed part of themselves" (1999: 25). In Eugenides's novel, the girls' suicides destroy a substantial part of the surviving narrator, specifically the narrator's capacity to comprehend the girls and the erotic relationship that there was between them twenty years earlier. From the first page, the ghosts of the blond sisters haunt the narrative. As in trauma narratives, the "pale wraith" of Lux appears in the middle-aged men's lives, so that they can make love to her instead of to their wives (2002: 147). The narrator is haunted even in his dreams: "Many of us continued to have dreams in which the Lisbon girls appeared to us more real than they had been in life" (238). What is more, the narrator describes his story as "fingerprinting of phantoms" (182).

The story opens with an intrusive prolepsis that almost reveals the very ending of the story, and its turning point. Apart from deflating readers' expectations, the opening summary takes the reader twenty years before the narrative time, "on the morning the last Lisbon daughter took her turn at suicide" (3). What follows is a collective report written in the "language for trauma", as Caruth puts it, which is used to confront death: "a paradoxical obligation to speak without burying the silence at the heart of the story, to find a language that bears within it, although it does not submit to, the silencing power of the event" (2006: 2). Despite the gaps in his memories, the collective narrator reconstructs the story with an armory of collected exhibits, clinical and police reports, interviews with suburban inhabitants and his own conjectures, all of which are melded together in his attempt to understand and work through the painful events: "We've tried to arrange the photographs chronologically, though the passage of so many years has made it difficult. A few are fuzzy but revealing nonetheless. Exhibit #1 shows the Lisbon house shortly before Cecilia's suicide attempt. It was taken by a real estate agent, Ms. Carmina D'Angelo, whom Mr. Lisbon had hired to sell the house his large family had long outgrown" (5). However, the descriptions of the photos are anything but revealing, the coroner's reports "written in a colorful style . . . made the girls' deaths as unreal as the news", the news reporters stop asking why the girls had killed themselves but "instead, they talked about the girls' hobbies and academic awards" (221, 224).

Even though readers are provided with excessive information, the narrative clings onto uncertainty and a resistance to locate the cause of the suicides or to put the blame for the tragic events on the repressing role of the girls' religious mother, on the progressive social dysfunction of the Detroit suburb, or on the boys as passive bystanders. The wound opened by Cecilia, Lux, Bonnie, Mary and Therese is interpreted in the novel as both the symptom and the cause of a collective suburban malaise. This leads the men to realize "how truly unimaginative our suburb was, everything laid out on a grid whose bland uniformity the trees had hidden and the old ruses of differentiated architectural styles lost their power to make us feel unique" (243). The girls also want to break away from the oppression represented by suburban life. Other American novelists, such as Ira Levin, had already denounced the conformity and fakeness of the suburb back in the 1970s, when her story, *The Stepford Wives* (1972), takes place. The suburban threat of becoming homogeneous, compliant and oblivious to socio-cultural engagement and responsibility materializes in Levin's novel but in *The Virgin Suicides* this threat remains simply an impending possibility.

The social problems of the fictional suburb Grosse Pointe progressively emerge as faint references to the American historical background. In contrast to the pervasive ghosts of the girls, the invisible presence of African-Americans appears as an aside. The narrator seems to give fleeting importance to the resemblance borne by the mannequins in shop windows to Ku Klux Klan members or to the fear black people inspire in white kids. On rare occasions a black maid appears at a bus stop or a black bartender serves alcohol to underage kids. The narrator mentions these events apathetically, quickly plunging back into the story. The narrative never questions the cohesion of white suburbia in any direct

manner. However, even though the suburb might appear populated solely by whites, the ethnic component in their identity is always present: German (the Hessens' typical Alpine hats), Greek (the Anatolian decoration in the Karafilis' basement), Italian (the Baldinos' mafia business), Spanish (Señor Lorca's passion when it comes to speaking Spanish), etc.

Searching for truth, the traumatized collective narrator enacts a textual burial of the deceased via storytelling. This is carried out by reading traces of the girls' existence while also interpreting them for an unknown audience. Thus, this narrative memorial becomes a message that includes not only the dead adolescent siblings and the adolescent personas of the narrator but also an unnamed narratee frequently addressed as *you*: when talking of a song that the boys played to the girls over the telephone, "You may recall the song, a ballad which charts the misfortunes of a young man's life (his parents die, his fiancé stands him up at the altar)" (195); when drawing attention to an absent report, "you may read it for yourself if you like, we've included it as Exhibit #9" (95); or to a picture, "Here you have them, as we knew them, as we're still coming to know them" (118). In other words, the narrative burial is carried out by the collective narrator's effort to create a bond between the dead girls, himself and the addressee.[3] Dori Laub, in considering the role of the witness of trauma maintains that "the relation of the victim to the event of the trauma . . . impacts on the relation of the listener to it and the latter comes to feel the bewilderment, injury, confusion, dread and conflicts that the trauma victim feels" (1992: 57-58). He warns against the absence of "an *addressable other*" (68, emphasis in the original), because such absence would annihilate the story. Thus, engagement with this explicit *you* as other also brings the story closer to the real readers, suggesting our own role as witnesses of the traumatic events.

Not only are the multiple exhibits a means of engaging with the dead girls and the addressee, but also a manifestation of trauma. In particular, the exhibits' discursive presence but physical absence points to the unresolved struggle between traumatic experiences and memory: the traumatized narrator is eternally poised between the need to acknowledge the reasons for the girls' suicides and the failure to fully access and exteriorize the traumatic events. Trauma, Roger Luckhurst says, "falls out of our conscious memory, yet it is still present in the mind like and intruder or a ghost" (2006: 149).

The absent exhibits may also be read as a symbol for the presence of an already commodified togetherness among suburbanites. Despite the optimal conditions for togetherness, "suburbia may actually undermine familial harmony by exacerbating the strain of trying to live up to an essentially unattainable ideal" (Miller 1995: 393).[4] In the preface to *The Levittowners* (1967), Herbert Gans states that in the 1950s and 1960s life in the suburbs was questioned because such spaces did not join the national fight to eliminate racial segregation and poverty but rather promoted conformity (1982/1967:

[3] Lisa Perdigao suggests that these exhibits demand for a "reader [that] is . . . looking at the novel's end for these clues, for that appendix but is unable to find the pieces" (2009: 124).

[4] Interestingly enough, trauma critic Sharon Lamb observes that the perpetrators usually excuse themselves as being "under great strain" so as to deny any responsibilities for their actions (1996: 66).

xi). Conformity in *The Virgin Suicides* is underlined by the passiveness of the community of bystanders, the narrator included, who seem to see the girls as responsible for their misfortune. Steven K. Baum defines bystanders as a majority "characterized by their moderate stance between the highly conforming perpetrators and the independently minded rescuers"; that is to say, bystanders can easily transform into either perpetrators or rescuers (2008: 153). In chapter three, the collective narrator often refers to their adolescent personas as silent bystanders who were "telling ourselves that this would be the time we spoke to the Lisbon girls and asked them what was troubling them. . . . But it was always the same: their white faces drifting in slow motion past us, while we pretended we hadn't been looking for them at all, that we didn't know they existed" (2002: 101). This refusal to outwardly acknowledge the girls' existence, together with the violence the narrator does to them each time the girls are treated as "eternal Females" and objects, to echo Shostak (2009: 822, 824), can be interpreted also as acts of a perpetrator.

Since the rest of the suburbanites condemn the girls' suicide, the narrator-as-bystanders seem to present, as Baum says, a high concern for their "social fit and social status" (2008: 162). The bystander, according to Baum, seeks normalcy. The boys who will eventually become the narrator feel the need to belong within a society; a need paradoxically accompanied by their involvement with the female outcasts of that society —the Lisbon sisters. Given the fact that suburban society is one of conformity, in their own account twenty years later the boys are described as highly compliant bystanders who "cannot tolerate too much change" (2008: 165). While the boys can be seen as active detectives and concerned witnesses to the tragedy, offering their help to free the girls from their oppression by playing songs to them over the telephone, or by approaching their house to talk to Lux, in the last chapter of the book, there is a return to a position of inactivity until the last sister, Mary, puts an end to her life. The boys' position of bystanders is even more easily transformable into that of perpetrators since both categories are characteristic of "ordinary" people (Baum 2008: 162; LaCapra 2001: 125). In contrast to the "five glittering daughters" (2002: 8), the narrator is ordinary, bleak: neither exceptionally heroic, nor totally aberrant, comparable to what Fowles called the "hoi polloi", the many. The many, however, can be as dangerous as the protagonist in *The Collector* (1963), Frederick Clegg, the collector and killer of butterflies and of beautiful, bright girls. The collective narrator is also a collector: he compiles the girls' possessions so as to describe them in his narrative. And like Clegg and his victims, suburbia smothers the girls within its conforming masses and as a part of repressive suburbia, the narrator in *The Virgin Suicides* will not let the girls' voices have their own narrative and, by extension, individuality.

The illusive security of suburbia collapses as the inhabitants obviate their social and moral obligations to the Lisbon family and even condemn Cecilia's attempt at suicide to silence: "Our local newspaper neglected to run an article on the suicide attempt, because the editor, Mr. Baubee, felt such depressing information wouldn't fit between the front-page article on the Junior League Flower Show and the back-page photographs of grinning brides" (14). In a similar way, "[i]mmediately following the suicides . . . the

subject of the Lisbon girls became almost taboo" (245). The issue raises two important questions about the novel's ideological implications with reference to the individual and society: Is the suburban repression in Grosse Pointe an extension of the relations in the Lisbon family? Could repression be the basis for community formation? Progressively, the narrator's narrative subtly connects the private suicides of the five sisters to their capacity to shake off the repressed public conformity of the suburb and, what is more, to expose its malfunctioning. Their refusal to live brings to the fore the social effects of heavily repressed collective wounds such as race riots, lay-offs, the impossibility of integration experienced by immigrants, or the ecological crisis. It also highlights the smothered adolescent erotic desire that injures not just the girls' sexual awakening —by conflating it with death— but also the narrator's: the impossibility of eroticism and the girls' suicides, the narrator confesses, "have scarred us forever, making us happier with dreams than with wives" (169).

3. From Bystanders to Victims

The absence of true bonds among the neighbors and the social consequences unleashed by the girls' acts add to the boys' collective trauma. What traumatizes them is not only the loss of their neighbors, prospective girlfriends, but also their own participation in the 'madness', initially as bystanders and perpetrators and later as victims of collective suffering. Their roles as bystanders, perpetrators and victims become evident when they start blaming themselves for the girls' deaths and for their helplessness to prevent it. The climactic moment occurs on the night when the remaining four sisters decide to commit a mass suicide and the boys become direct witnesses on seeing Bonnie hanging from the ceiling. Their roles as victims, but also as staring bystanders and even as perpetrators combine in their own interpretation of the scene: "We *gazed up* at Bonnie, at her spindly legs in their white confirmation stockings and the *shame* that has never gone away took over. The doctors we later consulted attributed our response to *shock*. But the mood felt more like *guilt*, like coming to attention at the last moment and too late" (215, emphasis added). Gabriele Schwab argues that the change from perpetrator to victim is by no means a simple one because "the former perpetrators enter the new cycle of violence [in which they are victims] with guilt and shame" (2010: 109), as the collective voice of *The Virgin Suicides* confirms in the quote above. However, the whole story does not contribute to any clear-cut recognition of the different roles that might be assigned to the narrator's adolescent personas. As readers, we might even think that the roles have been reversed and the girls have become themselves perpetrators in order to punish the boys with eternal coldness and silence for their weaknesses. What we do know is that the narrator has suffered not a mere traumatic shock but a gradual realization of his own guilty part in the story. Structurally, it is not until the end of the narrative that the full realization dawns on the narrator: as the penultimate chapter finishes he admits, "We had never known her [Bonnie]. They had brought us here to find that out" (215).

According to Arthur Neal, collective trauma causes social disruption by threatening or invalidating "our usual assessments of social reality" (2005: 7). It may also impair the prevailing sense of communality. Erikson explains that communality refers to people connected not so much by a territorial bond but by a "network of relationships that make up their general human surround" (1979: 140). In *The Virgin Suicides*, the twenty-year-long witnessing of the suicides has strong and lasting effects on the narrator's group identity and sense of belonging to the neighborhood. The narrator confesses that as boys, they were dispossessed of that communality which "cushions pain, . . . provides a context for intimacy, . . . represents morality and serves as the repository for old traditions" (146). Suburbia, instead of being supportive, is either too nagging or too forgetful. Neal and Nytagodien state that "forgetting is frequently not a reasonable option for either the victim or the perpetrator of collective trauma" (2004: 466). A character named Mr. Eugene complains that the "liberal media distortion" provides no help but neither do the psychiatric conclusions about the girls suffering from PTSD, nor the family therapy sessions or multiple versions of the girls' self-inflicted deaths (2002: 245). The boys' need for a pact of remembering eventually results from their combining of imagination and awareness in their unimaginative suburb contaminated by collective trauma. Assmann contends that even if there is an unbridgeable gap between perpetrator and victim, their opposition could be transcended "by a shared memory based on an empathetic and ethical recognition of the victim's memories" (2011: 49). Accordingly, the narrator —as both former perpetrators and victims— fills the gaps in his "faulty memory bank" with passages retrieved from his own imagination. For example, the boys call the girls' grandmother to ask her about the girls' visit to her soon after their mother incarcerates them at home: "the old lady did not respond to questions about her involvement in the punishment . . . The smoky sound of her voice brought the scene to life for us: the old woman at the kitchen table, her skimpy hair up in an elasticized turban; Mrs. Lisbon tight-lipped and grim in a chair opposite; and the four penitents, heads lowered, fingering knickknacks and porcelain figurines" (144-45). This textual emphasis on uncertainty, frequently connected to the magical-realist mode, does not change until the last page of the novel, suggesting the narrator's difficulties in being sufficiently judgmental, given the fact that their actions as boys have left them in between the roles of victim and perpetrator.

Whereas Dominick LaCapra finds the distinction between victim and perpetrator important (2001: 79), Sharon Lamb claims that even perpetrators can be victims provided that being a victim does not exempt one from responsibility (1996: 21). Both critics exemplify their different approaches to the issue with examples from real life that open breaches in the networks of commun(al)ity —the Holocaust and sexual abuse respectively. In *The Virgin Suicides*, themes, the narrator's viewpoints and textual strategies bring to mind Primo Levi's ambiguous "gray zone" which according to LaCapra raises "the question of the existence of problematic . . . cases but it does not imply the rashly generalized blurring or simple collapse of all distinctions" (2001: 79). Throughout his report, the narrator shows reiterative symptoms of being victim, perpetrator or both.

However, this happens not without a conscious conflation of the three states, a strategy that may baffle readers and hence hinder their identifying with the narrator's perspective.

In addition, the multiple versions of the events stress the nonjudgmental, anti-categorical mode of the narrative. One by one, the neighbors in Grosse Pointe offer their speculations about the "virgin suicides": Mrs. Karafilis, the old Greek lady, claims that suicide in an incoherent American suburb makes sense to her, while Mr. Buell, the Christian Scientist, blames these suicides on the girls themselves because "[t]hey didn't have a relationship with God" (18). While the narrator reports the multifarious stories told by different neighbors about their own lives —Muffie Perry has inherited her grandmother's botanical garden on Belle Isle, Trip Fontaine is recovering in a detoxification ranch, Uncle Tucker has given up drinking, etc.—a network of affinities gradually develops with the suburban community. His storytelling in the first person plural is a gathering of the wounded in which, as Erikson puts it, they "can supply a human context and a kind of emotional solvent in which the work of recovery can begin" (1995: 187). The story told in *The Virgin Suicides* also becomes, in this sense, a therapy session that diminishes the traumatic symptoms, a discursive union between different members of the community despite the continuing fragmentation of the suburb: "With the elms gone, too, only the runt replacements remain. And us. We aren't even allowed to barbecue any longer (city air-pollution ordinance)" (246). The importance given to the term 'us' becomes obvious not only because of its graphic situation between two long clauses but also because of the use of the copulative 'and'.

Furthermore, the collective narrator-as-victim insistently fails to prove his account accurate: "Actually, none of this might have been spoken. We've pieced it together through partial accounts and can attest only to the general substance" (181). Many prolepses of the girls' deaths undermine the authorial narrative voice, too. Together with the abundant flashbacks, such anachronies point to the effects that trauma has on verbal representation. But the very insistence on prolepses and other narrative distortions such as paralepsis (unnecessary but detailed information) and paralipsis (putting aside important information) only attest to the status of the story as a therapeutic construct that creates relations and bonds among the "story community". Instead of providing definite answers, the collective narrator calls for the addressees' imaginations: "even college students, free to booze and fornicate, bring about their own ends in large numbers. Imagine what it was like for the Lisbon girls, shut up in their house with no blaring stereo or ready bong around" (175-76). Here, it is not the perpetrator or bystander speaking anymore, but a victim, concerned to consider all possible explanations for the suicidal rebellion of their neighbors: the repressive suburb, the castrating matriarch Mrs. Lisbon or the boys' own failure to become acquainted with the sisters.

Based on the numerous contradictory 'truths' reconciled in one single story, the bonds that the narrator establishes with his audience are charged with the pervasive guilt detected in Mrs. Eugene's words: "You would always wonder if there was something you could have done" (112). The mature men, after twenty years of silence, have grown

to hold themselves responsible for their actions, and inactions, in the past, as their self-absorption has shifted to feelings of selfishness, carelessness and even brutality — terms that define a perpetrator (Lamb 1996: 56). At various points in the story, with the pretext of helping the five sisters, the boys carry out several acts, such as breaking into the Lisbons' house to watch the sisters taking a shower (Paul Baldino), stealing the girls' possessions (Peter Sissen, Skip Ortega), or seducing and abandoning them (Trip Fontaine, Joe Hill Conley). As LaCapra says, such perpetrators can work through their trauma by gaining distance from "an earlier implication in deadly ideologies and practices" (2001: 79). Accordingly, the voyeuristic gaze of the middle-aged men has been transformed into a critical inspection: their textual investigation and report that encompass the rest of the neighborhood, the unknown receiver/s of the story and their own imaginative memory of the girls. The former bystanders have veered away from being mere observers of the suburban predicaments and have become the active agents of their narration. Vocalizing the suicides and passing on the story lead to new encounters within and outside their community. They insist on the need to create a story about the girls' tragedy and "to coalesce our intuitions and theories into a story we [can] live with" (241). Thus they work through their shared experience by, as Susan J. Brison remarks, "transforming traumatic memory into a coherent narrative that can then be integrated into the survivor's sense of the self and view of the world, but also by reintegrating the survivor into a community, reestablishing connections essential to selfhood" (1999: 39). Their narrative reaches out for addressees, for suburban interviewees, for the narrator's own distorted memories so as to create a new community based on the togetherness of the first person plural.

Nevertheless, in the narrative it is never clear whether the acknowledgment of the girls' suicides is the product of empathetic sufferers in their attempting to remember and overcome the loss, the product of selfish fetishistic voyeurs who have replaced the girls with an exhibition of objects or the product of the guilt and shame of perpetrators, which is meant not to be forgotten —"we began the impossible process of trying to forget about them" (231), "we might still gather . . . to reminisce about the Lisbon house and the girls whose hair clotted on brushes we still faithfully keep, has begun to look more and more like artificial animal fur in a natural museum exhibit" (246), or, as Chase Buell says, "[it is] time to write them off . . .", even though "he rebelled against [his words], as [they] all did" (186). The narrator's inability to forget and be free from the girls' ghosts attests to this fact and also to his "pact of remembering". Thus, it could be argued that his perpetrator mindset is being decolonized, a process which, to use Schwab's theory (2010: 109) follows the following phases: "identification with the victim" (the Lisbon girls), "unilateral rejection of anything identifiable with colonial (or racist) culture" (in this case, with the suburban conformity and homogeneity), "idealizing fixation on the other's . . . heritage" (on the sisters' virginal and erotic status), and finally an acknowledgement of active participation in the suicidal madness: "they [the girls] made us participate in their own madness" (2002: 248).

As considered above, the "pact of remembering" prompted by the collective narrator —in his roles as bystander, perpetrator and victim— consists of re-constructing his memories of the girls in a story that would engage everybody. Such striving for integrity symbolically adds to his own collective status as the narrator of the story, whose attachment to memory and trauma leads him to establish propitious grounds for an all-inclusive memorialization of the girls. In order to keep alive the memory of the loved ones, a proper burial or grave is a prerequisite. Klüger claims that people "are condemned to go on mourning" without a symbolic grave, i.e., "clear knowledge about the death of someone you've known" (2001: 80). Despite its unreliability and incomplete nature, the text promotes a shared mourning that is at once reticent and urgent in bringing about closure on the trauma that connects the men to the Lisbon sisters. Thus, the narrative voice is eager for an 'exodus' from the suburban space: "After deserting the city to escape its rot, we now deserted the green banks of our waterlocked spit of land" (245). At the same time, the story is never completely free of the girls' presence. What prevails at the end is the narrator's zealously kept memory of the girls. This is manifested in Mrs. Sheer's description of the four sisters' act of saving Cecilia's favorite elm tree from being cut down: "They weren't saving *it*. . . . They were saving [Cecilia's] memory" (182).

Although the narrator's voice fails to restore union in suburbia —because of the lack of authentic relations among its inhabitants— it pursues the feeling of a productive proximity through storytelling. These grown men not only decide to tell their story about the suicides but also promote listening and interpreting "from the site of trauma" (Caruth 1995: 11). In spite of their fluctuating status as bystanders, victims and perpetrators, their lack of agency is counterbalanced by the therapeutic storytelling, which confers different meanings to their traumatic experience. Furthermore, the story is aimed at an external addressee whose presence only confirms the narrator's readiness to cope with trauma not only through the (p)act of remembering but also through the act of listening and trusting the other.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has regarded the collective report of the middle-aged narrator in *The Virgin Suicides* as a therapeutic attempt to come to terms with his trauma and its threefold manifestation on him as bystander, perpetrator and victim. Based on the premise that trauma is a highly debatable concept, collective trauma in Eugenides's novel escapes a unifying definition, and complicates not only the narrator's post-traumatic condition but, and particularly, the complex notion of trauma, which was oversimplified in so many other works of the period. The collective narrator's status underlines further problems of representing trauma but also supports the refusal to accept current definitions of the traumatic aftermath in Trauma Studies, such as the notion of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. The story starts and ends as a reflection on an irremediable post-traumatic condition. The willingness to honor the girls' memory and keep it alive brings about

a partial liberation from the numbness that provoked the helplessness of the boys as bystanders and their passivity as perpetrators. Their report also helps to understand the repression suburban society dictated at the time of the suicides and by extension the silence that many collective traumas suffer from. By engaging the suburban community and his audience in his investigation, the collective narrator sets the ground for future working through of both the suicides and of the societal malaise in the suburb. It does not matter in the end how many of the boys comprise the adult collective narrator, which category —bystander, perpetrator or victim— they may fall into, but only that their melancholic story and collective status may have confusing effects on the unknown narratee and, by extension, on the readers of the novel: trauma is a pervasive condition of unpredictable effects and monolithic or simple responses to it do not work.

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