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Traumatic Memory in Eve Ensler's *The Apology* (2019)

ABSTRACT

Eve Ensler's memoir *The Apology* (2019) traces Ensler's growing up with an abusive father who raped her during her childhood and never apologized for the damage he caused. Ensler, now a successful woman in her sixties, thus imagines her father's apology and details everything she was going through. Unlike Caruth's theory of traumatic *aporia* where painful experiences are inherently contradictory and can never be grasped completely, Ensler's act of writing the unspoken words of her father points to the fact that trauma can be healed through writing. As Richard McNelly and Joshua Pederson claim, it is precisely through writing that the victim can gain control over the act of recalling, helping the survivor to remake the self. Thus, in Ensler's memoir, Caruth's traumatic amnesia is replaced by the power of remembered and written detail to enact healing. This essay addresses issues of incest and rape through the lens of more recent trauma theory by paying attention to an imagined act of the perpetrator's apology. By evoking pseudo memories, Ensler tries to understand her childhood trauma and how it affected her as a person. She establishes herself as a truth-teller and the survivor of intergenerational trauma with the ability to break the cycle of abuse, which is exactly what she does by writing *The Apology*.

Keywords: concept of time, memory, childhood trauma/pain, dissociation, art as a form of self-expression

Travmatični spomin v *The Apology* (2019) Eve Ensler

IZVLEČEK

Avtobiografija Eve Ensler *The Apology* (2019) opisuje njeno odraščanje z nasilnim očetom, ki jo je v otroštvu posilil in se nikoli ni opravičil za škodo, ki jo je povzročil. Zato si avtorica, zdaj uspešna ženska pri šestdesetih, predstavlja očetovo opravičilo, v katerem podrobno opisuje vse, kar je prestala. Za razliko od Caruthove teorije travmatične aporije, po kateri so boleče izkušnje v osnovi protislovne in jih ni mogoče v celoti dojeti, Eve Ensler z zapisovanjem neizrečenih besed svojega očeta pokaže, da je travmo mogoče pozdraviti s pisanjem. Kot trdita Richard McNelly in Joshua Pederson lahko žrtev prav z pisanjem pridobi nadzor nad spominjanjem, kar ji pomaga ponovno oblikovati svoje sebstvo. Tako v avtoričinih spominih Caruthovo travmatsko amnezijo nadomešča moč zapomnjenih in zapisanih podrobnosti, ki omogočajo ozdravitev. Ta esej obravnava vprašanja incesta in posilstva skozi prizmo novejšje teorije travme, pri čemer se osredotoča na domišljjsko opravičilo storilca. Z vzbujanjem »psevdo« spominov poskuša avtorica razumeti svojo otroško travmo in kako je ta vplivala nanjo. S pisanjem knjige *The Apology* se avtorica vzpostavi kot vir resnice in kot žrtev travme, ki je sposobna prekiniti začarani krog zlorab.

Ključne besede: pojem časa, spomin, otroška travma/bolečina, disociacija, umetnost kot oblika izražanja sebe

1 Introduction

Eve Ensler is an American playwright, feminist and activist who is best known for her extraordinary play *The Vagina Monologues* (1996) which she first performed off-Broadway as a one-woman show. She told an American journalist, Patt Mitchell (28 February, 2018), that she wanted to

focus on Valentine's Day as being a day that is safe and honoring and loving to women – and invite activists anywhere to perform *The Vagina Monologues* and whatever money they raise from the performance, stays in their communities supporting survivors.

Within a year, V-Day was created with a bold mission: to end violence against women and girls globally. Ensler is also known as an activist for women's rights in the aftermath of the wars in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Kenya, and her related TED talks have been viewed by hundreds of thousands of viewers. Her activism for women's rights is partly the consequence of betrayal and abuse she suffered as a little girl, something she writes about in *The Apology* (2019).

Her memoir traces the life of a girl who has to learn how to embrace herself after repeated sexual abuse by one of her closest family members. This little girl is Eve herself, and she recalls living with an abusive father who raped her from the age of five to the age of 16 and never apologized for the damage he caused. Therefore, she dedicates her memoir “to every woman still waiting for an apology”. For Ensler, the apology is a humbling act – it is “an act of intimacy and connection which requires great self-knowledge and insight” (2019, 9). Ensler knows that her father is long dead and he would never say these words to her. So the apology must be imagined in order to forgive her father and come to terms once and for all with the feelings of shame and guilt. She thus represents herself through the imagined eyes of her father, and her own memories are represented as her father's. She imagines how he must have felt when she was born, when he held her in his arms for the first time and when he started abusing her. This essay aims to address the issues of incest and rape through the lens of recent trauma theory, recognizing the thin line between a traumatic identity and trauma culture.

Although scholars such as Roger Luckhurst have insisted that we live in a trauma culture where we are continuously exposed to traumatic events on TV and social media, thus participating in the “pathological public sphere”, there is still a lot of controversy about how traumatic experiences are being remembered. One of the crucial terms in trauma studies is the Derridean concept of *aporia*, which is about the process of bringing traumatic experiences to memory, often riven with an inherent contradiction. For Derrida *aporia* is “a blocking of passage, a stalling or hesitation, a foot hovering on the threshold, caught between advancing and falling back, between the possible and the impossible” (Derrida as qtd. in Luckhurst 2008, 6). Trauma theory of the 1990s – with Cathy Caruth, Geoffrey Hartman and Dori Laub, to name just a few – relied on poststructuralist theory and embraced the Derridean concept of undecidability, or the inherent contradictoriness of the traumatic experience. In the words of Cathy Caruth (1995, 4–5):

The pathology consists, rather, solely in the structure of its experience or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in

its repeated possession of the one who experiences it. To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event. And thus the traumatic symptom cannot be interpreted, simply, as a distortion of reality, nor as the lending of unconscious meaning to a reality it wishes to ignore, nor as the repression of what once was wished.

Caruth thus posited that the force of traumatic experience arises precisely in the collapse of its understanding. Caruth and other early trauma theorists were trying to understand how traumatic memories work in the context of the Nazi atrocities, encompassed in the name of Auschwitz. In line with Adorno's famous statement "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbarous!", Western culture is at once contaminated by and complicit with Auschwitz, and traumatic identity lies at the root of many collective identities.

However, in the past 20 years poststructuralist trauma studies have been challenged by a number of authors claiming that the inability to speak about traumatic memories has to do with the wider cultural and social contexts of the victims. Thus, in 2003 Richard McNelly posited that trauma is both memorable and describable, and while "victims may choose not to speak of their traumas, there is little evidence that they cannot" (McNelly as qtd. in Pederson 2014, 334). Lucy Bond and Stef Craps further contend that traumatic memory is slippery and dynamic (2020, 5): "blurring the boundaries between mind and body, memory and forgetting, speech and silence. It traverses the internal and the external, the private and the public, the individual and the collective."

While most trauma narratives represent the *aporetic* experience of trauma survivors, i.e. the undecidability and irrepresentability of the traumatic event, Ensler's memoir is different in that it confronts the gaps and silences of past traumatic memories by filling them up in writing. For example, Toni Morrison in *Beloved*, Pat Barker in *Regeneration Trilogy* or Miriam Toews in *Women Talking*, to name just a few, have tried to imitate the silence, gaps, erasures or unspeakability of trauma through literary genres and devices. On the other hand, Ensler's memoir purports to reveal all the details of her father's sexual abuse in chronological order by filling in the gaps and voicing the silences. Ensler therefore believes in the representability of traumatic experience, and uses realist accounts of her father's and her own lived experiences. She thus points to the intricacies of intergenerational trauma and proves that women should be trusted as truth-tellers and empathized with unconditionally.

2 The Personal as Intergenerational Trauma

Contemporary trauma theory has had very little to say about the mind of the perpetrator. In *Trauma and Recovery* (1997), her study of traumatic experiences and their consequences, Judith Herman (1992, 54) remembers the legal scholar Hannah Arendt and the scandal when she reported that Adolf Eichmann, a man who committed unfathomable crimes against Jews, had been certified as normal by half a dozen psychiatrists: "The trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal." Still, as most studies have shown, in the case of mass killings such as the Holocaust, when "normal" first-time perpetrators are encouraged to participate in mass violence, the experience of killing unarmed civilians "may be associated with terror and horror" (Maguen et al. 2009, 442 as qtd. in McGlothlin 2020,

105) as well as with “physical disgust and moral abhorrence” (Munch-Jurišić 2014 as qtd. in McGlothlin 2020, 105) linked to traumatic stress. The perpetrators thus often suffer from PTSD in the aftermath of the atrocities they have committed. However, Evie’s father had no sense that what he had done was wrong, and this made him a monster with marked psychological pathologies. Such psychological pathologies he owed to his parents’ rejection of his authenticity,¹ and at the beginning of her memoir Ensler reimagines her father’s childhood years to figure out where the seeds of his abnormality lay. She describes him as a lonely child who was adored by his mother (2019, 14):

From the time I was conscious, I was made to believe I was better, smarter, more precious, more deserving than anyone around me. What I didn’t know was why. I still don’t. [...] I was my mother’s salvation. My mere existence would somehow resurrect her miserable marriage and redeem her suffering. I was light. I was darling. I was savior son. The idolized one is above you, beyond you. And so I was lonely. Excruciatingly lonely. The loneliness of the adored. [...] And I was indeed an object.

His father was Austrian and his mother German. Both were raised with the severest discipline and followed the teachings of Dr Schreber, who believed that children should be taught to obey and refrain from crying. Any physical demonstrations of affection like embracing, cuddling, or kissing were to be avoided at all cost. Ensler first introduces the reader to her father’s childhood years as she is trying to explain to herself what forces contributed to his monstrous nature. Apart from his parents’ coldness, his brother abused him by putting drops of alcohol in his eyes, hiding red ants in his underwear and convincing him something was wrong with the shape and size of his genitals. He would lock him in the closet for hours and tie him to the bedposts until his wrists were raw. Ensler thus clearly points out that her father’s trauma was intergenerational – his parents were cold and severe, and his brother clearly abused him, while he was given no protection from any member of his family. He never knew what genuine love and affection looked like.

As much as her father, little Evie was suffering from “betrayal blindness” – Jennifer Freyd’s term used for children being blind to their parents’ abusive behaviour (2020). Children, Freyd claims, cannot process the information that their parents, who are supposed to protect them, have in fact betrayed them in a significant way. In a normal situation the betrayed person could confront the one in power or escape from them, but the child is in the situation of voluntary and necessary captivity where neither fight nor flight is possible. Children are dependent on their parents for love and support and, when abused by them, repress the traumatic experiences. Her father repressed his childhood abuse by becoming an abuser himself, while Ensler repressed the horrible experiences of her father’s rape and torture until

¹ One of the most influential readings of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, Barbara Johnson’s “My Monster/Myself” (1992), claims that the Creature’s monstrosity comes as the consequence of parental neglect and the rejection of the Creature’s authentic self. Reminiscent of the story of Oedipus whose parents cast him out to die, Victor Frankenstein suffers at the sight of his ugly creation, unaware that he is a kind and gentle soul, and is willing to let him die in the wilderness. The Creature is trying to establish contact with his life-giver but is repeatedly told that “there can be no community between me and you; we are enemies” (Chapter 10). Therefore, he turns into a serial killer, the perpetrator of the most atrocious crimes.

the age of 61, because repression is a form of motivated forgetting. Instead of becoming an abuser like her father, Ensler embarked on a path of healing through the writing of her memoir and the usage of pseudo memories as a healing device. In line with what Pederson and McNelly contend about the wider social context influencing the desire and the ability to speak about being abused, Ensler had to wait for the time to be right in order to tell her story (for her to be strong enough to be able to talk about it, and for the fourth wave of feminism to take place with other women's open testimonies of sexual abuse). She thus proves that traumatic experience is never just a matter of the perpetrator's psychopathology,² but also of a wider patriarchal social discourse which views men as arbiters of truth and power. Her father was born in the late 1920s and grew up surrounded by images of Hollywood actors like Errol Flynn, Gary Cooper, and Rudolph Valentino, all of them strikingly handsome and charming. Suddenly he realized that a charming man could get away with any behaviour, and charm became his fortification. He tried to leave "the tortured man" of his childhood behind, but eventually he resurfaced (2019, 24):

I drank him away. But all the while, Shadow Man plotted, seethed and stewed. His sense of betrayal, his bitterness, his rage grew like volcanic lava bubbling beneath the surface of my skin. He would not emerge until much later.

As Judith Herman confirmed in her numerous case studies, "the formation of a malignant negative identity is generally disguised by the socially conforming 'false self'" (1992, 80). It is obvious that Evie's parents were both hiding their authentic selves behind a façade. From the outside, they looked like a happily married couple with three children, Evie being the eldest. It is difficult to say whether they were in love, but they were certainly embracing their marriage as a performance: everything looking fabulous on the outside, while actually being a total wreck on the inside (2019, 26):

We were two solo performers who joined our strength in a crowd-pleasing duet, Arthur and Chris. So when people later made constant reference to us as Cary Grant and Doris Day, we knew we had arrived. We were pure invention, confection. We existed only in performance, and in those early years, our act was working.

When Evie was growing up in the suburban environment of the 1950s United States, where patriarchal values were prevalent and her parents were playing out a "a perfect couple", what happened within the home stayed within the home, so as not to jeopardize the public performance. It was a time when women were taught to look feminine and behave in feminine manner, to drop out of college and get married, to devote their lives to their families. It is

² With the advent of highly acclaimed series on Netflix such as *Monsters: The Lyle and Erik Menendez Story* (released September 19, 2024) about two brothers who shot their parents after being raped by their father and not protected by their mother, or *Baby Reindeer* (released April 11, 2024), in which a comedian is stalked by a woman, herself a victim of parental abuse, there has been an increasing interest in the psychology of the perpetrator. In both series human monstrosity happens as the direct consequence of parental abuse, and the viewers have access to the perpetrators' memories of their own childhood abuse. Intergenerational trauma plays out in both series: Lyle and Erik Menendez's father was emotionally, psychologically and sexually abused by his mother, while Martha, the woman who stalks Donny Dun, a Scottish comedian, was a neglected child who would often witness parental fights.

possible to imagine that Evie's mother was caught up in this trap of being a "perfect wife and mother" with no desires of her own. As Betty Friedan explained in her essay "The Problem that has No Name" (1963), published around the same time when Evie was born, women were generally

taught to pity the neurotic, unfeminine, unhappy women who wanted to be poets, physicists or presidents. They learned that truly feminine women do not want careers, higher education, political rights – the independence and the opportunities that the old-fashioned feminists fought for. (1963, 3)

Thus, in 1960s America, the happy American housewife was in fact anxious and depressed because she had given up on her purpose as an authentic human being with more to offer than being a good mother and wife. It is possible to imagine Evie's mother being caught up in this patriarchal narrative which taught women that they have no purpose whatsoever beyond devotion to their household and servitude to their husbands. Her father was a CEO and her mother had been his secretary; Ensler imagines that their sex must have been "perfunctory, a performance too" (2019, 27).

Upon Evie's birth, the Shadow Man woke up again, "his rapacious hunger charged with the fury of a thousand wild horses rushing the winds of their freedom" (2019, 30). But he waited until Evie was five years old when her limitless love and tenderness towards him became an intoxicant, feeding the 52-year-old Shadow Man inside him. This is when he started to make secret visits to her bedroom at night when "dream and memory are indecipherable" (2019, 39). Thus, by exerting coercive control, the father becomes the most powerful person in Evie's life until the age of 16 when she rebels for the first time and runs away from home. In *The Body Keeps the Score*, one of the staple works for poststructuralist approaches to trauma, Bessel Van Der Kolk asserts that "trauma is primarily remembered not as a story, a narrative with a beginning, middle and end, but as isolated sensory imprints: images, sounds, and physical sensations, that are accompanied by intense emotions, usually terror and helplessness" (2014, 70). Instead, Ensler weaves a teleological narrative of progression where details are slowly revealed – the "motivated forgetting" of her earlier years is now transformed into an imagined memorizing of all the details of her father's sexual abuse: first pretending to be her doctor and to soothe her to sleep by his inappropriate touches, and then violently raping her from the age of nine until one day, at the age of 16, she froze in bed like a possum protecting herself from a predator. That was the point when he stopped visiting her room at night, as he could not make love to her frozen, almost dead body. He was a paedophile but not a necrophiliac. Herman claims that such repeated abuse is "passively experienced as a dreaded but unavoidable fate and is accepted as an inevitable price of a relationship" (1992, 81). Later on, the survivor of such continuous abuse would have "profound deficiencies in self-protection" (Herman 1992, 81) choosing abusive partners. Thus Ensler's understanding of why she was suicidal in her early teens, why she ended up being in relationships where she would be the second best, why she enjoyed violent sex and why she struggled with alcohol and drug addiction, only comes in middle-age. Though she remembers only pieces of events, objects and fragments, her older-self is filling in the gaps of what her younger-self could not have understood.

3 Women as Truth-Tellers

Memoir, as a type of autobiography, or the story of that part of a person's life which was the most significant in building up their present self, presupposes an experience which is authentic and unique. Furthermore, it relies on the concept of intentionality – the writer talks about their life experiences with an honest intention, the intention of telling the truth. As early autobiographies from St Augustine to Rousseau have shown, to tell one's truth means to engage the readers in the act of identification. Rousseau hopes to gain acceptance within his community by exposing all the events of his private life, as he believes that one's truth has certain redemptive qualities. He will no longer be judged, but instead will be sympathized with. So, the early autobiographers participated in a representative structure in which one may stand for many. If on occasion they spoke about incidents and minor traumatic events, their lives were not affected by any serious traumatic experiences. On the other hand, the proliferation of traumatic experiences in the media today make it seem as though representing traumatic experience is easy, while it actually involves a paradox of intensified representativeness. As Gilmore (2001, 19) asserts, autobiography and trauma stand on opposite ends:

when self-representation and the representation of trauma coincide, the conflicting demands potentially make autobiography theoretically impossible: How can the exploration of trauma and the burden it imposes on memory be representative? How can the experience of a survivor of trauma stand for many? How can one tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, when facts, truth and memory combine in the representation of trauma to undermine rather than strengthen representativeness?

Enslér's *The Apology* shows how traumatic memories jeopardize the basic requirements of male/white/bourgeois Enlightenment autobiography in the sense that it does not ask the reader to identify with the narrative voice. Instead, she pleads for an empathic reader who would try to understand what she went through. Moreover, her intention to tell the truth is corroborated by the difficulty of representing traumatic experience.

Although the history of masculine autobiographical accounts taught us to trust the male voice, in the face of narratives of sexual abuse, we must suspend that trust. Women are indeed truth-tellers to be trusted, but in a patriarchal society they are often seen as liars. Within such society women are seen as liars even by other women, and the male truth is still the most powerful one (2019, 68):

I was brought up in a time when men were praised for controlling and withholding their emotions. They were admired for their steely steadfastness and knowing the way. They never apologized. They never asked questions. They never explained. They never revealed their hand. They didn't speak. [...] I see now that this particular notion of manhood is highly questionable, as great violence is always required to preserve it.

Sadly, as this passage is an imagined introspective reflection by her father, the real man would never come to terms with his toxic masculinity. From his childhood, tenderness and kind-heartedness were mistaken for fragility and unmanliness. Furthermore, if Evie was betrayed

by her father, she experienced another type of betrayal from her mother. She came from a poor, Midwestern household, and fashioned a personality based on studying divas in the movies. Her much older husband provided for the household and had an incredible charm, which made her admire him and never question his sanity. She was aware that American culture was based on a fantasy, and was willing to support the fantasy her husband had created. They travelled and dined in New York City's most celebrated circles, but when alone had nothing to say to each other. When children came, they were just props for their evolving lifestyle. As Evie started having vaginal infections and changed her behaviour from a happy, extroverted child to a violent, introverted girl, her mother knew something was wrong yet did nothing to protect her. In *Trauma and Recovery* (1992), Judith Herman posits that the reenactment of traumatic scenes is most apparent in the repetitive play of children: "The everyday childhood is free and easy. It is bubbly and light-spirited, whereas the play that follows from trauma is grim and monotonous...As opposed to ordinary child's play, post-traumatic play is obsessively repeated" (1997, 28). Evie started avoiding play as the other children in school felt her internal horror (2019, 50): "Other children could smell your desperation and avoided you like the plague or teased and taunted you." In one of her later interviews, Ensler said that she confronted her mother with the truth, and her mother told her that she had to sacrifice her – Eve – to keep peace in the house: she had two other children who could have been abused, too, if Eve ever stopped being her father's "favourite". In *Woman's Inhumanity to Woman* (2001), Phyllis Chesler argues that in patriarchal societies, women always replace other women. In that sense, as daughters "we have replaced or are merely different from our mothers. Psychologically, daughters are unconsciously guilty about both facts" (2001, 173–74). In that sense, Evie is a scapegoat for the toxic dynamic between her parents, a sacrificial lamb denied a happy childhood so that her two siblings could grow up untainted by abuse. She is there to preserve family life as it appears on the outside – a masquerade of a happy, middle-class American family, living in the suburbs, with a spacious house and a car, great relationships with the neighbours, going on holidays and having interesting hobbies. We thus see that the abuse of women by men is woven into the broader narrative of systemic oppression which posits that the nuclear family should be preserved at all costs – even if it gives legitimacy to parental abuse.

When the father could no longer sexually abuse his daughter, he started battering her, and the family despised Evie instead of him for her "reckless" behaviour (2019, 42):

In that sense I set you up to be hated. And that would come to be part of what destroyed you. They couldn't blame me. I was the husband. I was the father. They needed me. So they blamed you. You were the reason I was angry. You stole my heart. You banished them to darkness. Your name was Eve and you brought the fall onto the family. You were five.

These last words indicate the psychopathology of her father's thinking that Ensler understands in the present moment: how could she have brought the fall upon the entire family at the fragile age of five? The narrative voice is continuously subverting the male voice as the truth-teller: the more he stands firm in his cold, rational and possessive masculinity, the more we distrust him.

By placing herself in the perpetrator's shoes, Ensler documents her father's incestuous desires, which upon her first rejection turn into hatred and the withdrawal of all support. He will not congratulate her on the feminist speech which she gives in front of the entire college at graduation, and she will be the only one excluded from his will. Though Ensler's experience seems to be deeply personal, nowadays we read the personal experiences of sexual abuse in a different way. In the aftermath of the #MeToo movement which started in 2006 when Tarana Burke spoke publicly about being sexually assaulted, we could say that Ensler's *The Apology* shows the magnitude of this persistent, global issue. Ensler's personal experience is easily recognized as an intergenerational, systemic and global problem.

4 Reading Narratives of Parental Sexual Abuse

This last point opens up the question of how we read accounts of traumatic experiences and how we handle the fact that the family and the community trust the perpetrator and distrust the victim. In *The Cut*, a psychology journal, Katie Heaney published an article (Heaney 2021) about Jennifer Freyd's parents' reaction to their daughter accusing the father of sexual abuse. They discredited her by founding the False Memory Syndrome Foundation in 1992, accusing her of wanting to achieve fame on false grounds; the foundation was later dissolved in 2019, the year *The Apology* was published. Significantly, "false memory syndrome" has been promoted by motivated parties to discredit testimony by survivors, to pathologize memories of sexual abuse in children and to stigmatize therapies related to this abuse. Often, parents want their abused child to accept the "official" family narrative – as far as s/he is a dissident from the narrative of family normalcy and harmony. The question of who is to control the family narrative is thus a game of power where memory plays a crucial part. Are children allowed to remember and are we to believe them? Children should never be excluded from the family narrative. Though we are aware that at the heart of self-representation lies the process of self-construction, a mixture of memory and invention, Ensler shows that literary accounts of trauma are narratives of resistance and an important path to healing, where the reader plays a crucial role in this process.

More than 50 years have passed since the publication of Georges Poulet's seminal essay "Criticism and the Experience of Interiority" (1972), which suggested that the act of reading involves the coming together of two consciousnesses – the writer's and the reader's – when the reader can hardly explain "the facility with which I not only understand but even feel what I read" (1972, 60). In the years after this, structuralists and poststructuralists convinced us that the role of the reader is insignificant, with nothing to look for "outside the text", to paraphrase Derrida. In the last decade, with the rise of affect theory, the role of the reader has been re-established and Poulet's ideas resuscitated. For example, Dominick Lacapra warns us about the possibility of identification between the victim and the reader, in which "to confuse self and other, and collapse all distinctions" in the act of identification of self and victim is more dangerous than feeling empathy, which preserves a certain distance (LaCapra as qtd. in Luckhurst 2008, 4). Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth claim that "affect accumulates across both relatedness and interruptions in relatedness" (2010, 2), where the affected reader acquires in turn the capacity to affect. The affect plays a vital role in reading trauma narratives, and the reader can take various positions. Some of the possible readings of trauma

narratives include: *the symptomatic reading* which embodies a reading effect that will in its turn emerge as a symptom (Rooney 2017, 127); *the empathic reading* as a response founded in empathy which involves “intellectual interest, active imagination, emotional investment” and – crucially – “ethical engagement” (Assmann 2018, 216) or *the implicated reading*, where the reader is a participant in a system that generates dispersed and unequal experiences of trauma and well-being simultaneously (Rothberg 2019, 12). In the symptomatic reading, Rooney underlines “the problem of form as an effect of reading” (2017, 129) where “the work of form entails the play on words, the rendering of form as reading’s effect” (2017, 135). Though, as we have already noted, the confessional style of *The Apology* is disparate from previous confessional narratives because it is voiced through Ensler’s father’s imagined voice, the reader trusts her intention to reveal her childhood traumas with truthfulness and sincerity. The symptomatic reading, which recognizes the confessional style as possibly suspect, thus turns into an empathic reading as the reader becomes emotionally invested in Ensler’s traumatic confession. Empathy is not identification, but this divide is constantly under threat of being overrun so the position of the reader is far from an easy one. The memoir is difficult to read for people who were victims of sexual abuse, for whom the identification with Ensler’s experiences might be triggering. Herman claims that “avoiding the traumatic memories leads to stagnation in the recovery process, while approaching them too precipitately leads to a fruitless and damaging reliving of the trauma” (1992, 125). It is possible that the reading of such a traumatic narrative causes intrusive symptoms in a survivor of sexual abuse, so it is essential to monitor the symptoms “so that the uncovering work remains within the realm of what is bearable.” (Herman 1992, 125). To a certain extent, Ensler is the emphatic reader/writer of her own traumatic experience.

Writing thus becomes crucial in building up Ensler’s older self, and it enables her to find solace in her vulnerability. Her father will never show his vulnerability but at least she is able to imagine his apology, as a successful writer and activist in her sixties (2019, 112):

Eve,

Let me say these words: I am sorry. I am sorry. Let me sit here at the final hour. Let me get it right this time. Let me be staggered by your tenderness. Let me risk fragility. Let me be rendered vulnerable. Let me be lost. Let me be still. Let me not occupy or oppress. Let me not conquer or destroy. Let me bathe in the rapture. Let me be the father.

Let me be the father who mirrors your kind-heartedness back to you. Let me lay no claims. Let me bear witness and not invade.

Eve, I free you from the covenant. I revoke the lie. I lift the curse. Old man, be gone.

In line with Michael Rothberg’s idea of “an implicated subject”, all of us who are “participants in histories and social functions that generate the positions of victim and perpetrator” (2019, 1) should feel partly guilty for the abuse of children in their families. Most of us do not play out clear-cut roles, but are still implicated in the crime simply by living in positions of power and privilege and pretending that sexual abuse would never happen in our household. However, an implicated reading of Ensler’s memoir gives us agency to spread her story and talk about the sexual abuse of children with the goal of creating conscious and empathetic community.

5 Conclusion

As Anne Whitehead noted, “[t]he rise of trauma theory has provided novelists with new ways of conceptualising trauma and has shifted attention away from the question of what is remembered of the past to how and why it is remembered” (2004, 3, as qtd. in Bond and Craps 2020, 5). Unlike Caruth’s theory of traumatic *aporia* – where painful experiences are inherently contradictory and can never be grasped completely – Ensler’s act of writing the unspoken words of her father points to the fact that trauma can be healed through imagining the perpetrator’s motives. As Joshua Pederson claims, it is precisely through writing that the victim can gain control over the act of recalling, helping the survivor to remake the damaged self. Thus, in Ensler’s memoir, Caruth’s traumatic amnesia is replaced by the power of remembered and written detail to enact healing through the perpetrator’s eyes. Thus Ensler’s memoir addresses the contradictory nature of traumatic memory, showing that the imagined *Apology* was needed for establishing peace, not with her father’s crime, but with herself. Furthermore, her exploration of parental abuse challenges patriarchal structures and gendered violence, as she shows that the abuse of women by men is woven into the broader narrative of systemic oppression.

The 21st century reader is definitely more inclined to sympathize with young Evie, the more so because she is a woman speaking her truth. Her personal experience is therefore empowering for many women who have been victims of sexual abuse and have been implicated in the collective trauma culture. Moreover, our position as implicated subjects (Rothberg 2019) gives us the opportunity to spread somebody else’s truth and actively engage in sharing and caring for the victims.

In one of her powerful TED Talks, which took place in India in 2009 (TED Talk: Embrace your inner girl 2010), Ensler introduced the term “girl cell” and explained it in the following manner:

I want you to imagine that the girl is a chip in the huge macrocosm of collective consciousness. [...] And then I want you to imagine that this girl cell is compassion, and it’s empathy and it’s passion itself, and it’s vulnerability and it’s openness and it’s intensity and it’s association and it’s relationship and it is intuitive. And then let’s think how compassion informs wisdom and that vulnerability is our greatest strength, and that emotions have inherent logic which lead to radical, appropriate, saving action. And then, let’s remember that we’ve been taught the exact opposite by the powers that be, that compassion clouds your thinking, that it gets in the way, that vulnerability is weakness, that emotions are not to be trusted, and you’re not supposed to take things personally. I think the whole world has essentially been brought up not to be a girl. [...] I actually think that being a girl is so powerful that we’ve trained everybody not to be that.

By revealing the traumatic truth of her growing up, Ensler is trying to influence our collective consciousness: vulnerability is strength and being a girl is powerful. But even more than that, as empathetic and implicated readers, we owe our community to hear the stories of sexual abuse and act accordingly.

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