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Transgenerational Trauma, Shared Vulnerability and Interconnectedness in Zina Rohan's *The Small Book*

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This article aims at showing that extreme situations, such as wars, can reveal a common human vulnerability, which thus leads to a lack of sovereignty affecting all the agents implied in the traumatic episode. In Zina Rohan's 2010 novel, *The Small Book*, this shared vulnerability crosses time and space boundaries by connecting coetaneous characters and their subsequent generations through inherited traumatic memories. These connections lead Rohan to blur the boundaries between what we may understand as victims and perpetrators of trauma. Thus, drawing on significant theories within the fields of trauma and memory studies as well as on conceptions about human vulnerability and interconnectedness, the main aim of this study is to analyse the key narrative mechanisms used by this British–Jewish author in order to represent the shared vulnerability and exposure to trauma that reigns during war and post-war times.

1. Introduction

As a common motif in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, war permeates many contemporary forms of artistic representation. In literary practices, war seems to have infused fiction at the level of content, form, genre and ideology, even in imperceptible ways. By understanding contemporary war novels as those fictions targeted at re-evaluating armed conflicts of the past and their influence in the construction of today's memories and identities, I have argued that this type of fiction is usually adopted by members of minority groups 'who have re-created their "counterstories" in fictional practices' (Pellicer-Ortín 2018, 12) so as to voice experiences of war and trauma hidden from hegemonic historical records. Moreover, present-day war novels often attempt to demonstrate that 'war disrupts most of the mechanisms of ordinary life' (Pellicer-Ortín 2018, 12) and point at its extraordinariness by making marginal characters come to the surface and reclaim their agency. In the same vein, contemporary authors often experiment with the literary form and narrative structure, echoing how our conceptions of the world waver when facing the hardships caused by war.

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In this sense, many contemporary novels representing episodes of the First and Second World Wars can be said to share many traits with so-called 'trauma novels' (Luckhurst 2008, 87),[1] as both war and trauma novels are mainly concerned with the (im)possibility of representing the unspeakable event of trauma, caused either by an armed conflict or another traumatising event of a different, but equally destabilising, nature. As will be further explained, trauma fictions are characterised by formal experimentation and a distinctive use of narrative devices that attempt to echo the disturbing and belated nature of the traumatic event (Caruth 1995). The abundant use of experimental literary devices in a variety of genres has led many critics to point at, and even criticise, the existence of a new millennium's 'traumatological' aesthetics (Tew 2007, xviii) and the emergence of a 'Traumaculture' (Luckhurst 2003) or 'trauma paradigm', understood as 'a new kind of articulation of subjectivity emerged in the 1990s organised around the concept of trauma' in our 'advanced capitalist economies of the West' (Luckhurst 2003, 28).

Yet an increasing number of scholars have started to argue that this Western trauma paradigm is giving way to a newer vulnerability paradigm. In *The Empire of Trauma*, Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman (2009) mention a 'shifting perception of the victims and of the changing norms of recognition presiding over the modalities and values of their visibility' (in Onega and Ganteau 2017, 1), and explain how the societal attitudes towards trauma victims have recently evolved from suspicion to sympathy. According to Susana Onega and Jean-Michel Ganteau (2017, 3), this 'paradigmatic shift in the conception of what it is to be human' implies that 'to a greater degree than in previous, more positivist eras, humanity tends to be characterised by the susceptibility to being wounded'. Therefore, as they keep on arguing, 'in today's wound culture, victimhood and its representations have been granted increased visibility' (Onega and Ganteau 2017, 3). If we accept the fact that, because of being human, all of us are radically exposed to being wounded, in other words, to become the victims of trauma, we can understand why trauma studies and an ethics of alterity (Levinas 1998) go hand in hand and, thus, why 'the current cultural, political, and societal emphasis on trauma is embedded in a discourse that professes more attention to the other' (Onega and Ganteau 2017, 5). Consequently, this vulnerability paradigm appears to be 'indebted to the ethics of alterity, the ethics of care, precariousness studies, and the ethics of vulnerability' (Onega and Ganteau 2017, 7) – the fields of study that will be explored in this article.

It is in this context that Zina Rohan's works may deserve special attention. Being the daughter of refugees – her father was a German Jew and her mother a Russian immigrant born in Serbia – this British–Jewish writer and her sister were born and raised in London, growing up in a very international family. In the 1990s, while working as a BBC reporter, she published *The Book of Wishes and Complaints*

1. Luckhurst (2008, 87) establishes a kind of canon of trauma novels shaped by Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), Atwood's *Cat's Eye* (1988), Barker's *Regeneration* trilogy (1991, 1994, 1995), Michael's *Fugitive Pieces*, Wilkomirski's 'memoir-belatedly-turned novel', *Fragments* (1996), Sebald's *Austerlitz* (2001) and Safran Foer's *Everything is Illuminated* (2002), many of which deal with the traumas caused by the First and the Second World Wars and their aftermath.

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(1991) and *The Sandbeetle* (1994), the novels that marked the beginning of her career as a novelist. The later publications of *The Officer's Daughter* (2007) and *The Small Book* (2010) would help to identify some common issues across her novels: migration, displacement and the intricate crossing of frontiers for alien characters; the lack of choices that individuals have when caught in armed conflicts; and the multidirectional and transgenerational links that can be identified in a variety of conflicts.

In particular, her novel, *The Small Book* (Rohan 2010), is a polyphonic text that portrays the ways in which war has marked the lives of all the members of a British family throughout the twentieth century.[2] Setting the scene in Somers Town in London, the narrative possesses a circular structure. It begins with an extract from Private Hoskins' testimony revealing the traumatic experience of being forced to shoot at one of his comrades, Private Miller, in July 1915. And it finishes with Hoskins' voice, this time set in 1945, narrating how he ended up marrying Miller's widow, hiding his true identity and living a life full of guilt. Together with this soldier's views on war, politics and family issues, the readers encounter the voices of the other members of this family, crossing temporal and spatial boundaries throughout the novel. Miller's daughter, Pam, and his grandson, Roy, present some crucial moments of the Second World War. For instance, they had to be evacuated from Surrey during the Blitz, and Pam ended up being the legal tutor of Roy and his sister Margaret after their father's death and her mother's subsequent mental illness. Moreover, the narrative leads readers to the contemporary age, the year 1998, when Roy and Margaret are grown-ups and have to handle their aunt's death and the subsequent inheritance of the family secrets. These discoveries make them re-evaluate their childhood memories and family roots as well as their personal and political views on the First World War.

In his review of *The Small Book*, Dan Carrier pays attention to the fact that the murder of 306 British soldiers by the British Army during the First World War is still a controversial issue in British memory. However, instead of talking about the soldiers that were the victims of this unfair massacre, Rohan focuses on 'the tale of one of the unfortunate soldiers who was forced to raise his rifle against a man in his regiment – and the chilling effects this action had not just on him but two generations of his family' (in Carrier, 2010). The author's interest in this peripheral issue within the history of Britain during the First World War arose during the 'Shot at Dawn' campaign that took place in 2006, which wanted to grant post-mortem pardons to all the soldiers who were shot at dawn for cowardice or desertion during the Great War. As Rohan acknowledged:

> I began to think not so much about the 'shot at dawn' themselves and more about who was in the firing squads. No one ever talked about that. [. . .] I decided to write a novel with this firing squad as the starting point. [. . .] Thereafter it was a matter of imagination. What would the effect of having to do something like that be on a young working-class man who had no *choice* in the matter? (Rohan 2010, emphasis added)

2. All the quotations are extracted from Rohan (2010).

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Here, one can appreciate, on the one hand, this writer's interest in vulnerability and the common loss of human agency when caught in such traumatic circumstances as those caused by war and, on the other, her focus on the blurred line dividing the categories of victims and perpetrators, both considered as vulnerable after having been exposed to the horrors of warfare.

Bearing these ideas in mind, this article is aimed at demonstrating that extreme situations, such as wars, can unveil a common human vulnerability, and thus lead to a lack of sovereignty, affecting all the agents directly or indirectly involved in the traumatic episode. In Rohan's novel, this shared vulnerability crosses time and space boundaries by connecting not only coetaneous characters but their subsequent generations through inherited traumatic memories and secrets. Moreover, these connections lead Rohan to blur the frontiers between what we may understand as victims and perpetrators of trauma, demonstrating that during extraordinary circumstances, such as those witnessed during the First World War, there are no losers or winners, but all human beings lose their capacity to make free decisions, which increases their intrinsic vulnerability. Drawing on relevant theories within the fields of trauma and memory studies (Caruth 1995; Granofsky 1995; LaCapra 2001; Luckhurst 2006, 2008; Rothberg 2009) as well as on notions about human vulnerability and interconnectedness (LeBlanc 2011; Maillard 2011; Kearney 2013; Butler and Athanasiou 2013; Ganteau 2015, 2017; Onega and Ganteau 2017), I will analyse the main narrative mechanisms used by Rohan in order to depict the shared vulnerability and exposure to trauma that reigns during war and post-war times. In so doing, I will endorse Ganteau's (2015) belief in the contemporary novel's capacity to evoke vulnerability by adopting a 'vulnerable form' which, as I will argue, can display the interconnection between trauma and vulnerability when representing some of the darkest episodes of our recent history. Finally, vulnerability in Rohan's novel will be read in both negative terms, as induced by traumatic episodes that transcend and generational boundaries, and in a more positive light, as the source of a multidirectional consciousness, solidarity and empathy. These dual facets may prove the importance of examining the notion of vulnerability for today's conceptions of the self and the world.

2. Traumatic and Vulnerable Forms

In the twentieth century, the greatest armed conflict that began to configure our modern understanding of war and the (im)possibilities of its representation was the First World War. The English literary canon of this war is directly linked to the testimonial poetry of such well-known poets as Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen, who fought in the war and experienced its horrors on the front line of combat. According to Tate Trudi (2009), 'British literature of the First World War remains immensely powerful, [as . . .] it tries to articulate the trauma of industrial warfare, raising questions that are still pertinent'. For its part, British fiction of the Second World War, as explained by Damon Marcel DeCoste (2005), 'is not a literature

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of the battlefront', but writers such as Evelyn Waugh, Elizabeth Bowen, T.S. Eliot and Keith Douglas, among others, 'offer(ed) us the war away from the front, and especially on the home front. Its war is the war of the black-outs, evacuees, rationing, aerial bombardment and industrial mobilization' (DeCoste 2005, 4). With the passing of time, these two wars have not disappeared from our, mainly Western, collective memory, as a great number of novels have returned to these traumatic events in the last few decades. Pat Barker's *Regeneration* trilogy (1991–1995) is one of the most famous current attempts at understanding the First World War from new-fangled perspectives on gender, trauma and memory issues. Furthermore, it has been argued that 'contemporary British authors have a peculiar attraction for *retro* narratives, for stories on history, and for a reassessment of the causes, consequences, processes, protagonists and victims of World War II. Added to this is a further generational issue' (Pérez Rodríguez 2012, 11-12). Led by this desire to come to terms with the previous generations' traumatic memories, many contemporary novelists, such as Zina Rohan, draw on history, in particular history related to war, by relying on the experimentation with form and genre and disclosing multiple truths and perspectives on events that had previously been absorbed by dominant discourses (Keen 2006, 171).

As mentioned in the introduction, the links between war and trauma novels can be easily established. In the 1990s, Ronald Granofsky defined the 'literature of trauma' as those 'works of any genre and any period which deal centrally with trauma', and he considered trauma novels as those 'contemporary novels which deal symbolically with a collective disaster' (Granofsky 1995, 5), as happens in the case of a war. In keeping with this, literary works about the two World Wars and the subsequent periods could be said to correspond to the category of trauma novels. In brief, some of the narrative features of both war and trauma novels are departures from chronological time, fragmentation and repetition; the recourse to intertextuality and polyphony; the incorporation of the uncertainties of trauma in the rhythm and form of the narrative; the blurring of the identities of authors and narrators and of the frontiers between fictional and autobiographical aspects; and the abandonment of the traditional categories of knowledge and assimilation (Granofsky 1995, 13–19; Luckhurst 2008, 88–116; Whitehead 2004, 81–88).

In *The Small Book*, most of these features can be distinguished. To begin with, Rohan's novel is built on the perspectives of diverse narrators and focalisers, all of them belonging to the same family, which makes the narrative a polyphonic text. At the beginning, we hear the voice of Private Hoskins, recounting how he had to contribute to the execution of one his comrades during the First World War. In the section set in 1946, the family and historical events related to the Second World War are by Aunt Pam and Roy thanks to the alternation in the chapters they narrate. In the section set in the present, readers come across Margaret and Roy's accounts. In the middle of this section (Part 4), the pictures in Roy's exhibition are described and the descriptions of these photos are alternated with Pam's, Roy's, and Margaret's memories about the episodes they captured. This alternation continues until Part 6, set in 1945, where the narrator-focaliser is again Roy and Margaret's

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fake grandfather, Hoskins. This choice of polyphony would support the theories of trauma critic Laurie Vickroy, who contends that the unspeakable dimension of trauma is translated into the texts by resorting to polyphony and dialogism, giving way to texts where diverse voices come together to give a testimony of trauma.[3]

In keeping with this, on some occasions, the characters focalising the narrative do not know what will happen in the story at the time of the narration, in opposition to the readers who have some wider knowledge because of the hints provided throughout the narrative, i.e. they are homodiegetic and intradiegetic. This may be observed in the main secret lying at the heart of the novel. It is not until the end that Roy and Margaret discover that their fake grandfather (Hoskins) had been part of the battalion that killed their real one (Miller), but readers can start joining the dots and reach this conclusion thanks to various characters' comments much earlier. For example, when Pam remembers Hoskins' reasons for joining the Communist party – 'Father [. . .] signed up to the Party as soon as it was launched because of the way they'd executed the deserters. [. . .] Better to be doing things than having nightmares' (15) – one can link this comment to the diary entry that appears in the opening of the novel: 'They have made a murderer out of me and all of us who were present. If that unfortunate man, Private Miller, was innocent of the charge, and indeed even if he was not, I fear I may never again sleep easily in my bed, unsullied by what I witnessed and by what I have been party to' (3). On the contrary, sometimes the characters make mature reflections on past episodes by showing how they understand them now as adults, in this way becoming homodiegetic and extradiegetic. For instance, when Roy remembers the beginning of his career as a photographer, he is aware that he could not imagine he would be successful at that time (79).

In addition to this variation of narrators and focalisers, Rohan tends to focalise particularly relevant traumatic episodes[4] from the perspective of the child who lived them, as occurs when Roy looks back at his father's death from the eyes of the child he was when it happened, using childish language to render that horrible moment: 'When Daddy woke up dead, Mummy started screaming. We didn't know what it was 'cos it didn't sound like a person, it was like a run-over dog, so instead of getting out of bed we hid under the blanket, and I held Mig's hand' (26). Furthermore, when it comes to remembering very traumatic episodes, the narrators sometimes fuse time dimensions by mixing up the present and the past tenses. A very telling example can be seen when Roy recalls his father's death. The house was full with neighbours trying to hide what had happened from him and his sister: 'they *was* much slower than us, the neighbours. We'*re* used tu running up and down the stairs [. . .] they *go* down step by step [. . .]. By the time the neighbours *got* down the bottom and *started* to look and see where *we'd gone*, they *couldn't* find us' (27–28, emphasis added). It can

3. She refers to dialogism in the Bakhtinian sense as the plurality of voices and meanings emanating from the text.
4. In keeping with the psychoanalytical theories reinterpreted by Trauma Studies, Luckhurst (2006, 499) has defined trauma as 'something that enters the psyche that is so unprecedented or overwhelming that it cannot be processed or assimilated by usual mental processes'. This definition is applied to the different traumas depicted in the novel.

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be observed that a part of the character's self has remained stuck in the past and is encapsulated in the memories of these disturbing episodes (van der Kolk and van der Hart 1995, 162). This would strongly demonstrate that Roy has difficulties in distinguishing the past from the present because a part of him is still possessed by that traumatic moment, giving way to his split self.[5]

Drawing on this problematic line dividing the past and the present, in Parts 2 and 4, Roy's photos point at some crucial moments in the family (hi)story. The pictures are described using the present tense as if the past events were compressed in the picture frame, happening over and over again, just as happens with traumatic memories, or *idées fixes* in Pierre Janet's (1901, 278–365) terminology. Indeed, Roy describes this phenomenon when he thinks of the picture '*Broken Promises*', evoking the day he promised the family friend Paul Cooke that he would never take a picture without Margaret:

> Things you do as a kid. Things you think. They stay with you, *even though they don't need to*. You're all grown up and you're a rational man, and you know that when you swore you'd always do something – or never do it – all those years ago, decades, it was the kid thinking, [. . .]. But it goes on sitting there like a monkey on your shoulder and if you try and shake it off, [. . .] you get this cold hollow feeling you get when you've let somebody down. (Rohan 2010, 120–121, emphasis added)

In these words, he considers how childhood memories can haunt you for the rest of your life. This haunting reminds us of LaCapra's (2001) description of the process of acting out trauma which, following Freudian notions (Freud and Breuer 1991 [1893]), he defined as the phase in which the subject is compelled to relive the traumatic events unconsciously. Roy admits that he does not 'need' to remember that broken promise, but it happens unavoidably. This process, for LaCapra, becomes visible in nightmares, with the repetition of past events, anxiety and strange fears (LaCapra 2001, 21). In this case, it takes the form of intrusive memories that the adult Roy cannot get rid of.

Briefly, the combination of voices, perspectives and tenses demonstrates that the reconstruction of traumatically hidden events cannot be successfully achieved by relying on an individual version, but needs to incorporate the voices and testimonies of the different agents implied in these episodes, providing the narrative with an important testimonial dimension – another key feature in those texts revolving around trauma (Felman and Laub 1992, 5). Likewise, narrative mediation is observed from the title of Rohan's book, as it includes a metatextual reference to the diary found by Margaret at the end of the novel, recounting their grandfather's last days, which is entitled 'the Small Book' (193). The inclusion of Miller's testimonial book within the larger narrative framework seems to call attention to the diverse testimonial layers contained in the narrative as well as to the repetition of events that gives way to the transgenerational transmission of memories.

5. Pam's remembrance of this episode supports the idea that this was a significantly traumatic moment for Roy, who 'didn't say a word. He just stood there looking really shocked' (35), and Margaret, who would not 'go anywhere without her brother at her side. Maybe not for the rest of her life' (33).

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The plurality of testimonial layers is endorsed by the variety of sources and textual genres present in the novel, since Rohan puts together official historical records, diaries, letters and pieces of news along with the fictional storyline. Therefore, *The Small Book* fuses historical, collective and individual versions of such relevant events as the executions of soldiers during the Great War, the period of the Blitz, the rise of Communism, and the internal struggles within the Communist Party in Britain. As I have argued elsewhere, such combination of genres seems to reflect 'the impossibility of representing trauma in a simple way and the difficulties in constructing a continuous narrative out of [the characters'] fragmentary memories' (Pellicer-Ortín 2014, 199). Moreover, this generic mélange comes to demonstrate that Roy's and Margaret's inherited memories cannot be addressed alone, and that the protagonists need to put them in the context of their family memories, the collective history of the First World War and even historical works related to the deserters' campaign.

Regarding the mixture of genres and discourses, some echoes from the critical discourse used in Trauma and Memory Studies are also present in *The Small Book* as another defining feature of trauma works (Pellicer-Ortín 2014, 203). Examples of this may be observed in Margaret's use of specific military and legal language when referring to their grandfather's war experiences, which is justified by her writing her PhD on the military history of the First World War (67). This can also be analysed in Pam's and Margaret's recurrent political discourse, in which they introduce war expressions to allude to their militancy in the Communist Party, as can be read in: 'my call to arms was hardly an act of valour, since I could sound off with impunity, and anyone still listening knew it' (65). And this may also be examined in the way these two women deploy a critical attitude towards war and armed men, as they say: 'Jack Miller, [. . .] didn't have the character of a fighting man [. . .] I was also supposed to understand how differently they did things then; to be aware of the pitfalls of anachronism, [. . .] when *shell-shock* wasn't yet understood' (215, emphasis added). In these lines, Margaret makes clear that, in order to come to terms with their inherited traumatic (hi)story, she and her brother need to know more about the context in which the events happened, realising that while shell shock is recognised as a psychiatric illness now, it was not when Miller was shot because of not being 'soldierly enough' (215).

As a matter of fact, Margaret's belated reflections on how shell shock could (not) be understood at the time when her grandfather was killed highlights Rohan's general reliance on the principles of belatedness and temporal juxtaposition to organise her narrative – another facet that characterises trauma narratives. By moving across the First and the Second World Wars as well as the twentieth century and by indicating that belatedness is one of the key elements structuring the narration, the narrative structure in *The Small Book* echoes some of the main tenets of Trauma Studies. Caruth has famously drawn on Freud's theories (Freud and Breuer 1991 [1893], 59) to explain the belatedness that typifies traumatic events as 'the period during which the effects of the experience are not apparent, [. . .] the successive movement from an event to its repression to its return' (Caruth 1995, 7). When explaining trauma-related belatedness, Luckhurst remarks that 'this two-stage theory of trauma, the

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first forgotten impact making a belated return after a hiatus, has been central to cultural trauma theory' (Luckhurst 2008, 8), to the extent that many trauma fictions 'work backwards towards the inaugurating traumatic event, or play with belated revelations that retrospectively rewrite narrative significance' (Luckhurst 2008, 80). This is what happens in *The Small Book*, a novel structured around the belated discovery of a family (hi)story, mainly after Roy and Margaret find Aunt Pam's box full of journals and letters (169). This discovery makes Margaret re-evaluate both her professional and personal life: 'How could I, who have spent my entire professional life interrogating information before I will accept its validity, have swallowed the family story without a single, sceptical qualm? It embarrasses me' (198). Thus, the undecidability of traumatic memories and, accordingly, of their representation are underscored.

Consequently, the narrative aspects mentioned so far point at the difficulties in the recall and assimilation of traumatic memories as a central issue in Rohan's novel both at the level of content and of form. Metaphors are frequently used to evoke remembering processes and textualise memories. The footprints in the forest, as they appear in the picture taken in 1948, entitled *Origins*, symbolise the importance of memory traces for all the characters represented. This picture takes us back to a conversation between Margaret, who said that 'It's the prints [that . . .] mattered. It don't matter whose they were. They looked funny, that's all', and Roy, who answered, 'It does matter. It does' (89). Thus, Roy's argument seems to support the novel's focus on the importance of feeling connected to one's origins so as to truly understand one's identity. Another symbol linked to memory is that of a continuous flow of water, as Margaret reflects after her aunt's death: 'Perhaps it was that dangling leg that prompted my unconscious to fish out a memory rowing boat on the Serpentine, fingers dabbling through the slow water' (141). The view of memory puts forward its malleability as an evolving flux across time (Bergson 1987 [1977], 7), which is in fact another facet of memory reinforced throughout the narrative. Moreover, another significant motif connected to memory is that of photography, mainly associated with the character of Roy. For instance, his taking of pictures suggests his tendency to distance himself from that reality which may be too difficult to confront in more straightforward terms, as he admits: 'I was behind my box of tricks, and my eyes were covered' (137). On other occasions, pictures appear as sites where memories can stay, forever waiting for the protagonists to return, as Roy reflects: 'All I could think of was they looked like they'd frozen in a frame, ready and waiting' (103). On the whole, the photographic exhibition parallels the characters' encounters with their own and inherited difficult memories, as Roy describes: 'a photographic retrospective means looking back, thinking back [. . .]. It's remembering. It's fishing out what you thought you'd forgotten. And if it's genuine, if it's really going to be about the past, then it'd better be all of it' (82). The protagonists' visit to the exhibition rendered at the heart of the novel – with Pam, Roy and Margaret commenting on the pictures together – echoes a similar process to the one they undergo throughout the narrative in order to assemble their traumatic memory pieces.

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All these aspects of the novel can allow me to assert one of my initial hypotheses: this novel fits in the category of trauma fiction. Therefore, considering the close relationship between trauma and vulnerability that was mentioned in the introduction, the next question would be whether these formal traits can also be seen as part of the vulnerable form described by Onega and Ganteau, as that form which makes use of specific narrative devices, from 'the various shapes espoused by trauma fiction, fragmentation, blurring, intensification, indirection and other traits of formal excess' to 'the use of spectrality [. . .] the adoption of the tentative mode of testimony, or else the privileging of vulnerable speech acts and risky addressees' (Onega and Ganteau 2017, 10). Attending to these formal traits, it can be agreed that this novel endorses not only a traumatic form but also a vulnerable one. Yet, in order to demonstrate that *The Small Book* fosters a 'poetics of narrative vulnerability' (Ganteau 2015), we need to truly comprehend which vision of vulnerability is fostered throughout its pages.

3. Shared Vulnerability and the Loss of the Sovereign Self

Ganteau and Onega explain that the common aspect to most definitions of vulnerability is that of

> 'exposure' or 'susceptibility' [. . .]. Whether applied to the physical or to the psychological, vulnerability refers to exposure and openness to an aggression [. . .]. Vulnerability may be said to point at the fundamental fact that to be human is to be open to a violent expression of alterity [. . .] vulnerability appears as the condition that makes autonomy impossible, the situation in which the self manifests itself in relation to some constrictive other. (Ganteau and Onega 2017, 3)

Endorsing these lines, most of the authors that have worked on theories of vulnerability – LeBlanc (2011) highlighting that human lives are featured by communal connections; Maillard (2011) stating that the understanding of vulnerability contributes to the evolution towards a paradigm of dependence; Butler and Athanasiou (2013) emphasising that people exposed to vulnerability are inseparably connected; Mackenzie *et al*. (2014, 4) claiming that 'as embodied, social beings, we are both vulnerable to the actions of others and dependent on the care and support of other people'; and Kearney (2013, 245) asserting that 'we are born in a state of total dependency and will die in a state of radical vulnerability' – define it as essentially relational. Namely, recognising our own vulnerability, and consequently the possibilities of being wounded and traumatised, can help us feel closer to the other's traumas and wounds, and thus make us realise we are all interconnected and interdependent subjects.

In *The Small Book*, all the characters have gone through a traumatic experience, somehow connected to the war, which displays their inherent and shared vulnerability: Miller was the victim of an unfair execution on the front; his wife Edith and his daughter Pam and son Bill lost a husband and a father; Private Hoskins lived with the guilt of having been involved in the killing of a man; Annie was not able to overcome the loss of Bill when he died of a heart attack; Roy and Margaret were always marked by the

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sudden parental loss and the difficulties in finding their roots; and even the fourth generation embodied by Roy's son, Douglas, seemed to perceive this atmosphere of suffocation, as he decided to move to the USA to find a renewed sense of identity. Thus, the dependence and connection among the characters, following Ganteau's ideas, is expressed in this novel in essential ways, as advocated through the permanence and inheritance of trauma, both at the individual and structural levels (Ganteau 2017, 446). Although Rohan's characters are depicted as individual victims of an important loss or significant trauma, all their traumatic experiences seem to originate in Miller's unfair execution during the Great War. This is acknowledged by diverse characters along the narrative. For example, Pam explains that the chain of events that led her to become an active member of the Communist Party originated in her father's obsession with the First World War firing squads (16). And Margaret considers these executions as the founding myth of the family, even when she does not yet know that the target of this killing was their grandfather:

> this story had become our family myth – [. . .] in the original, religious sense of imparting meaning to life; a myth passed from him to my father, who died young, and to my aunt who brought us up, and that it was in Granddad's honour [. . .] [I] had decided to study history, military history specifically, and within that the First World War, most particularly all that was allowed to be known about those executions? (Rohan 2010, 67)

Margaret's words thus demonstrate that Miller's murder acts as the original traumatic event connecting these generations through their shared vulnerability along the narrative.

Together with this, when Hoskins starts recounting his personal vision of this traumatic episode, he points at some other relevant aspects explained in contemporary theories about vulnerability. He comments on the scheme of shared responsibilities that is supposed to be at work within the military system, as should happen in other social systems that rely on the principle of mutual interdependence, as he thinks: 'the chaplain's business is to care for the well-being of a human soul, and the commanding officer's [is] to care for the well-being of his platoon' (5). But soon he becomes aware of the disruptive nature of war and how the state care system that should look after soldiers and the whole of society stops working. This system recedes not only for the soldiers that are killed on the field of battle and for their families, but also for those soldiers, like him, who are turned into perpetrators by a perverse scheme that should protect them, as he says: 'disgraced, I believe, by being made into executioners' (7). He accuses 'those in command' of inflicting an unforgettable trauma upon him and urges them to carry out the death sentence themselves to feel the pain and guilt he feels (7). His accusations remind us of Sassoon and Owen who, through their poetry, showed their disillusion with war and criticised the British institutions for sacrificing a generation of young men. This is underlined in the episodes in which Hoskins describes how the British soldiers ended up hating the common enemy, the Germans, until they realised that the German soldiers were victims of the war system just as they were: 'we hated all day long. It took some of us a long time to work out we were hating the wrong bloody people' (226). Fragments like this

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evince the 'gross dichotomizing' between 'us' and 'them' which, in Paul Fussell's (1977) view, emerged during the Great War, and still characterises the modern imagination. As he argues: '"We" are all here on this side; "the enemy" is over there. "We" are individuals with names and personal identities; "he" is a mere collective entity. We are visible; he is invisible. [...] He is not good as we are' (75). This dominant dichotomy has encouraged 'the modern versus habit [...]. One of the legacies of the war is just this habit of simple distinction, simplification, and opposition' (79).

As I have claimed elsewhere (Pellicer-Ortín 2018, 21), while exploring issues related to guilt, responsibility and victimhood, some modern-day war narratives draw on Hilberg's (1992) categorisation of victims, perpetrators, and bystanders, which he developed in relation to the Holocaust. However, historians such as Cesarani and Levine have argued that these three categories have become inflexible and tend to be used as 'monolithic blocs' (Cesarani and Levine 2002, 2). *The Small Book* represents an attempt to finish with the dichotomising 'habit' previously described by blurring the lines between the categories of victims and perpetrators. On the one hand, the novel reveals the common exposure to risk, trauma and vulnerability shared by all the soldiers on the different sides of the conflict, which turns all of them into vulnerable victims of a system that has failed to defend them (Fussell 1977, 86–87). On the other hand, the victim–perpetrator frontier is also blurred within the group of soldiers that fight on the same side of the war. The novel makes explicit the double status of Hoskins as a victim of trauma and a perpetrator of the Miller crime. Therefore, this obscuring of boundaries and the depiction of all the soldiers, and their families, as vulnerable trauma victims offers a vision of all those subjects living through the consequences of war as being interconnected.

In addition to this, Pam's death acts as a turning point in the narrative when it comes to the subsequent generations' awareness of their vulnerable status, as Roy's words make clear:

> I was thinking about P again, and about *people dying*, and *turning points* – that *deserter's execution* in the Great War that made Granddad join the Party, then *his death* that people wouldn't talk about, then our *dad's death* that drove our mum clean off her head but landed us with P, and her with us, more like, and now P's. (Rohan 2010, 160, emphasis added)

This episode also evinces Roy's realisation that all the family troubles started with a traumatic death that displayed the vulnerability of both victims and perpetrators in those armed conflicts in which the subject loses his sovereignty. Not only does Roy point at this loss of autonomy, but Margaret also frequently alludes to the fact that she and her brother did not have any choice to alter the course of events in their lives (122), remarking on the protagonists' vulnerable nature through their exposure to uncontrollable events that changed their destinies forever. This echoes Ganteau's (2017, 445) idea that 'the traumatic logic of the subject's endangered autonomy, [is] put to risk by his/her ontological and social vulnerability'. Yet in this novel, this vulnerability is not only social but also has a transgenerational nature.

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This communal lack of sovereignty over external events is in fact emphasised through the original figure embodying vulnerability in the novel: Jack Miller, a man who 'was *unlucky enough* to be among the three hundred and six who had the recommendation to mercy, where there was one, disregarded and quashed' (208, emphasis added). Nevertheless, the impossibility of the sovereign self during war times and under the effects of trauma (lived or inherited) is represented by most of the characters in the novel in different ways. The first generation represents it through Miller, the most obvious victim of war and the military system, and also through the soldiers whose duty it was to kill him. This is what Margaret realises when she starts doing some research on their grandfather's story:

> The guns that killed Private Miller might just as well have been firing themselves, without any human agency: no physical fingers on triggers, no tear-blurred eyes trying to focus down the sights at their disgraced comrade, no young men to fall out afterwards and vomit into a ditch. The individuals who made up the execution squads hadn't so much been expunged from the record – they had been worded out of it by abstraction and the passive voice. (Rohan 2010, 218)

Her words show that these soldiers did not have the sovereignty to decide their actions, they lacked the agency to choose the course of events freely and they passively executed external orders. She refers to the use of the passive voice she finds in the records recounting the firing squads episode as an indicator of the collective and intangible identity assigned to them in the course of history. This lack of individuality when referring to their intervention in these killings can be interpreted as a manoeuvre of the British institutions to remove their responsibility for the truncated lives of both the murdered soldiers and their murderers. But the narrative demonstrates that their lack of sovereignty did not liberate these soldiers from feeling guilty and traumatised as a result of contributing to the killing of their comrades. This is remarkably clear in Hoskins' words, recognising the ambivalence of his and his comrades' role in such killings: 'I were crying my eyes out [. . .] I didn't shoot straight, and what I hear is no more did the others, so in the end we didn't kill Jack Miller. We mutilated him, and left him' (224). They can never know who really killed Miller, but all of them, as a collective agent, were part of his so-called 'mutilation'. This way, Rohan's novel problematises their degree of responsibility in these murders when, at that time, soldiers did not even have the knowledge they were part of a World War, as Hoskins reveals: 'All we did know, when we were on the front line, was our bit of trench' (225)

In addition to this, the second generation also points at their absence of autonomy on different occasions. Pam often refers to her militancy in the Communist Party in terms that signal the need to lose one's sovereignty for the benefit of the collective: 'it's a collective thing. You can't just decide off your own bat whether what's been done is right or not because it's always more complicated than people think' (111). Furthermore, the individual also loses sovereignty in the face of such mental illness as dementia, which Pam suffers in her last days (126–132), and finally, when death arrives, as Roy tells in front of her auntie's dead body, 'Corpses can't object. They don't jump up with their hands over their faces. They don't tell you to bugger off' (136). Comments like this seem to indicate that the loss of sovereignty of the first

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generation is transmitted to the next one. Nevertheless, this loss of sovereignty is not so straightforward in the third generation since, although Roy and Margaret are second- and third-hand inheritors of past trauma-induced vulnerabilities, they at least have some power about the way in which they can handle their ancestors' legacy. In this sense, talking about the relationship with his wife, Roy believes that 'There's a hell of a lot I can give Gina – her special treatment – but I can't give her my past, I can't give her my childhood. It's like old soldiers – they can only really talk to each other' (125), claiming that attachment to family memories can give the self some sense, albeit limited, of sovereignty, in this case exclusively shared with his sister.

4. Transgenerational Trauma and Interconnectedness

Having demonstrated that, in Rohan's text, trauma acts as a fruitful trope shaping these political, historical, family and personal subjects' dependence, with their subsequent loss of sovereignty, and interdependence (Ganteau 2017, 448), it is time to analyse how this 'trauma-induced vulnerability' (Sarıkaya-Şen 2017, 55) is transmitted across generations in Rohan's novel. Looking at current theories about the transgenerational transmission of trauma, it is generally admitted that the children and grandchildren of trauma survivors usually face contradictions between their desire to forget their families' past and their moral obligation to remember it. Critics such as Efraim Sicher (1998), Marianne Hirsch (2008) and Ernst van Alphen (2006) have explained that subsequent generations tend to become the addressee of their ancestors' traumatic memories, through their silences or repetitive stories, and of the collective memory of the disturbing historical events their relatives went through. As has been mentioned, Rohan makes explicit this disturbing inheritance in Roy and Margaret's legacy, as it is physically contained in Pam's box. However, she does not explicitly focus on the second generation – although Pam and her brother also received the traumatic burden in different ways: Pam knew the history about Hoskins and Miller but kept it secret for their nephew and niece to discover posthumously, and Bill died from a weak heart after recognising that he, like his father, was not soldierly enough (200–201) – but on the third generation. Margaret and Roy accept this role and become aware of their need to be together as the only two inheritors of their family traumatic memories when they say: 'And now who's left? [. . .] You and me. We're left' (159).

The narrative also makes explicit this transgenerational dimension through different narrative mechanisms. Repetitions are a constant trait in this work, since the subsequent generations seem to repeat the events their ancestors went through and several parallels can be found across the multiplicity of time dimensions. When the main characters are living through the Second World War, they make conscious connections between the nature of this war and the previous one, as Pam says: 'This was just like 1914 all over again, another imperialist war run by the capitalists using the workers as their pawns in the struggle for world domination' (17). Moreover, just as Miller was executed because he was accused of cowardice, his

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son Bill is depicted as a coward too, as a deserter who did not want to participate in the war (92). Further, the consequences for his wife Annie are similar to the ones Edith had to assume in the previous generation, ending up as widows with two children (25).

Yet the most relevant repetition concerns Roy, as it is revealed that he also had some military involvement. During his military service, he went through a similar experience to the one lived by Hoskins, though with very different results. Readers come to know about this event through the acting-out process Roy suffers when he thinks about taking a picture of Pam's dead body as a way to remember her. Suddenly, the traumatic episode he lived as a young soldier is involuntarily activated by his auntie's death (LaCapra 2001, 21–22), as he explains: 'without thinking I'd backed off until I was pressed against the opposite wall [. . .]. It wasn't the old Leica in my hands any more but a service rifle, and it was [. . .] Scottie who was in my sights. [. . .] Complaining all the time that we were stuck in a RAF Wilmslow' (138–139). His description continues telling the way in which, when he was about to shoot this soldier due to his unbearable behaviour, he had a flashback and thought about the analogous experience their granddad had told them so many times. This again seems to demonstrate that this is the founding family myth and, in consequence, the origin of their shared exposure to trauma and vulnerability:

> But then suddenly it wasn't Scottie, but some faceless guy with a blindfold on him in my sights [. . .]. And for the first time, I understood. Here I was, ready to squeeze that trigger, wanting to, really wanting to, but with Granddad they'd made him. No choice. And the man he and the others had fired on had simply been too frightened to go on fighting [. . .]. The exhilaration went. [. . .] [A]nd I was empty and ashamed, though not because of Scottie. I dropped the rifle and they locked me up. And I was happy enough about that. (Rohan 2010, 139–140)

This uncanny repetition directly connects Roy with his granddad's generation and shows how big the impact of this execution was for the development of his personality, even if this was an event he had not directly witnessed. Roy dropped the rifle when the traumatic story inherited from his (fake) grandfather came into his head, and it was at that moment that he was truly able to put himself into Hoskins' place. By impersonating the traumatic experience Hoskins went through, Roy demonstrates that, as he cares for his granddad (Ganteau 2017, 452), he manages to display the necessary empathy to comprehend what Hoskins should have felt during that difficult moment. In consequence, the trauma of the *perpetrator–victim* figure, embodied by Hoskins, reappears in the victim's progeny.[6] But its impact is even greater because Roy becomes a double-folded victim: on the killed man's side, as Miller's biological grandchild, and on the killer's side, as Hoskins' adopted grandchild. Moreover, the generational difference between these two related events can also be appreciated. Roy wanted to shoot but in the end he had a choice and did not do it, but Hoskins did not have that option. Offering the contemporary character

6. As Ganteau (2017, 448) has explained in relation to the intergenerational trauma represented in Alan Moore's (2016) novel *Jerusalem*.

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the capacity to choose not to shoot in a context in which the three family generations – in the form of Pam's corpse, Miller–Hoskins and Roy – are reunited, transcending time and space boundaries, may be read as an act of trying to work through, or at least repair, the original family trauma. Roy tries to alleviate the vulnerability to which Miller and Hoskins were exposed by deciding not to turn into another perpetrator, but it remains to be seen whether or not he is successful in his attempt.

Along with this, narrative discontinuities, digressions and belatedness have already been described as part of the recurrent characteristics in this trauma novel, but it is my contention that these chronological ruptures are also meant to symbolise the generational conflicts lying at the heart of the novel. These struggles may be said to begin with Roy and Margaret's fear of losing the family memories once Pam has disappeared, as Roy admits: 'If I didn't take a photo now, she'd only ever have existed on paper, and in our minds, Mig's and mine, and maybe in the memories of one or two of the old comrades' (125), along with their understanding that their lives had consisted of seeing their loved ones die generation after generation (159). Furthermore, the characters recognise the importance of bonding with their relatives and they are aware of the struggles implied in this process, as Margaret explains in relation to her nephew: 'How was I to know how I would feel from my very first viewing of my nephew? Even now I struggle with the sentiment to pin it down' (143). What is more, once Roy and Margaret discover the true identity of their grandfather, they question the biological criteria that connect them with their previous generations, pointing at memories and shared experiences as more important factors by which to be bonded to someone than mere biology (207). Thus, this novel makes explicit the challenge to the family roots and myths that usually occurs to the inheritors of traumatic memories (Hirsch 2008, 109): 'Was he now not Granddad because he was not Bill's and Pam's actual, biological father? He had behaved like our grandfather. He was Nana's husband. He had loved us. [. . .] Everything we had been brought up with, all the stories that made our *family-creating myth*, had been a lie' (197, emphasis added).

The questioning of the family origins is especially relevant in the episode when Roy and Margaret visit the family house after Pam's death and Roy fantasises about bringing the three family generations together, 'I get this idea in my mind of a portrait I might put together, three generations in one frame, but two of them never met' (165), but he admits this is not possible as the war traumatically broke the family links. Roy imagines himself using Photoshop to create a portrait of all the generations together, even including the fourth generation embodied by his son; thus, he could imaginatively repair and fill the gap that the war left so many years ago:

> photoshopping an all-male threesome: grandfather, father, son. Of course, I'll come over as the grandfather, won't I, and Bill will look a complete prat, mooning down at nothing. Unless that's where I insert Dougie. [. . .] Best would be if I had a snap of Granddad as well, get the four of us in, but we've never had one. (Rohan 2010, 166)

Again, this fantasy points at the chain of traumatic deaths that gave way to the trauma-induced vulnerability first inherited by Pam and Bill and later by Roy and

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Margaret, producing a family history full of gaps which Roy can finally put together: 'at least I have got a picture of my grandfather now, so I could edit him in and do the four generations after all' (202). However, the discovery of their grandfather's identity does not lead him to a final reconciliation with the congenital trauma and vulnerability, embodied in the possibility of using technology to make the four generations reunited, but it does make him defy the true meaning of what family bonds are: 'It would be like kicking Granddad out. Jack Miller was my grandfather, poor little sod, but Granddad was Granddad' (202).

Therefore, Roy concludes that the firing squads created a gap and a trauma-induced vulnerability at the centre of this family, which would never be completely filled and healed. Although it has been explained that Roy tried to repair Hoskins' damage when he decided not to inflict pain on another soldier, the alleviation of this transgenerational trauma and shared vulnerability cannot be complete: the past cannot be altered and thus the generational disconnections cannot be bridged. However, these disconnections can also be read in a more positive light, as *The Small Book* seems to prove that what unites this family in particular, and larger societies in general, is a shared vulnerability that gives way to the characters' awareness of their interconnectedness and their need to empathise with the previous generations' traumas. This is especially evident when Hoskins admits in his diary that feeling bonded to Miller's grandson led him to feel so close to Miller that he was able to feel love both for his deceased comrade and his kin: 'The closer I felt to him [Roy] the more he made me think of Jack Miller, and I came to love that lad so very much' (235). For Hoskins, bonding with Roy and loving him is the only way in which he can alleviate, if not heal, his guilt.

In this regard, this pattern of intersubjectivity is not only achieved by the transgenerational dimension put forward by the novel, but is further fostered by the multidirectional model of memory developed in Rohan's work. Considering Michael Rothberg's well-known definition of multidirectional memory as 'subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing; as productive and not privative' (Rothberg 2009, 3), this multidirectional arrangement gives way to the connections between diverse traumatic events which are seen as interrelated, since all of them have caused suffering to, in general, marginal social groups. Multidirectional memory thus 'cuts across genres, national contexts, periods, and cultural traditions' and, although it emphasises collective and historical memories, it is never separated from individual stories (Rothberg 2009, 14–18). Endorsing these ideas, Rohan's text makes explicit the association between diverse traumatic episodes that happened in different places and times on the grounds that they emanated from the same original traumatic event. Likewise, different generations become united through a common critique of the maladies of war for soldiers and civilians alike, and visions of solidarity and empathy become those social mechanisms that can help to alleviate the pain inflicted by trauma-induced vulnerability. Pam makes explicit these multidirectional connections when, for instance, she links her father's attempts to persuade British workers not to contribute to the unfair cause of the Second World War by loading weapons aimed at killing people in Poland with her support for

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the Communist campaign, launched in order to reutilise all the houses that had become empty during the war and that homeless people were squatting in:

> Father was down at the docks day in and day out to persuade the dockers they shouldn't load any ships with munitions bound for Poland, and in the end there was a strike, and they didn't. [...] Now I'm not saying our squatting campaign was the same [...] but while it was going I'd say the satisfaction wasn't much different, the sense that we were doing the right thing, and that we were doing it together! [...] comradeship [...] you even get to feel warmly about some folk you wouldn't care for otherwise. Maybe that's how soldiers feel after a while. (Rohan 2010, 43)

The human need to feel bonded to the other in need and experience the feelings of comradeship that she describes in these lines, also connecting these feelings to the interdependence and communality displayed by soldiers during the war, can be explained in terms of Ganteau's belief that 'interdependence, generally thought in terms of solidarity, is one of the main values that holds groups and societies together' (Ganteau 2017, 447). For Rohan's characters, feelings of comradeship do not only hold society together, transcending time and space dimensions, but they also keep this family together across generations. This way, not only are trauma and vulnerability inherited by Miller's descendants, but so are the empathic feelings, the capacity to look at the other's suffering (Levinas 1998) by making use of multidirectional memory and the attempts to fight for peace and social justice are passed down to the following generations, as demonstrated by the fact that Pam and Margaret are active militants in the Communist Party, just as Hoskins was before them.

5. Conclusion

This novel thus comes to demonstrate Nussbaum's belief that, in order to put up with our own welfare, we are urged to 'develop confirming associations with other human beings' (Nussbaum 2001 [1986], 1), and this urge becomes especially evident during times of crisis when our vulnerability comes to the surface in more disruptive, clear, and even transgenerational ways. Furthermore, attending to more formal aspects, the principle of interdependence that delineates present-day notions of vulnerability also appears in this novel to be 'encoded in the narrative organisation [...] indicating that any act is bound to entail consequences and reactions, and inscribing the dynamics of interaction high on the novel's ethical agenda' (Ganteau 2017, 448).

All these things considered, both the content and formal aspects that have been examined in Rohan's narrative seem to postulate that human beings are inherently connected through a common vulnerability, which increases its visibility during traumatic and risky situations where the subject is more exposed to being wounded. *The Small Book* leads readers to identify 'the primacy of interdependence: between plot strands, countries, periods and individuals' (Ganteau 2017, 449). Therefore, it 'both thematises and performs' (Ganteau 2017, 449) a model of humanism that longs for interdependence and the human capacity to generate feelings of empathy, social

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justice and collective bonding out of trauma, loss of sovereignty, and alienation. Rohan's initial alliance with trauma's formal traits, which have also been read as vulnerable narrative forms, seem to set the basis 'for an ethics and a politics of prevention and reparation', referring 'to a vision of the subject as radically (inter-)dependent and relational' (Onega and Ganteau 2017, 7–8).

By giving voice to the multifarious and transgenerational victims of a silenced and marginal episode of British history during the Great War, Rohan's novel puts forward what Ganteau (2017, 454) has described as 'a new distribution of visibilities [. . .] a politics of literature'. Such trauma and vulnerable fictions as *The Small Book* have the capacity to make explicit the multidirectionality and interconnectivity entailed in all kinds of suffering perpetrated in armed conflicts. Polyphonic narratives like this one make clear that all humans are interconnected, but this is even more the case when they have to face the perils of warfare, trauma and guilt. By focusing on the communal aspects behind the loss of sovereignty and trauma-induced vulnerability, *The Small Book* fosters a sense of collectivity that extends the powers of empathy and solidarity fostered by the fictional characters to the reality outside the narrative diegesis. This helps to connect us readers with the other's suffering and be aware of our shared vulnerability, either as possible passive victims of trauma or as active agents capable of bonding to others. This dual nature of vulnerability is reflected in a committed literature, of which Rohan's *The Small Book* is a good representative, which makes use of specific literary forms that give voice to those vulnerable, and at the same time influential, voices in the margins of history.

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