

Silvia Pellicer-Ortín. 2015. *Eva Figes' Writings: A Journey through Trauma*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing. vii + 281 pp. ISBN: 978-1-4438-8026-6.

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Since the 1990s, Trauma Studies have become an important tool of analysis for texts and other media produced after the atrocities of the Second World War. Starting with Adorno, who said that it was barbaric to have written poetry after Auschwitz ([1997] 2003), the question of representing the horror of the Shoah has been dealt with by many scholars and artists, such as Claude Lanzmann, Maurice Blanchot, Elie Wiesel and Arthur Cohen, among others (35). Most of these critics have arrived at the contentions that, first, the trauma caused by the Holocaust is irrepresentable in realist modes, and, second, that ethics and aesthetics must go together when representing such a traumatic event. The truth is, however, that many sufferers, including second- and third-generation children of people affected by the Holocaust—what Marianne Hirsch coined “the generation of postmemory” (Hirsch 1992)—are still trying to come to terms with the horrors that they or their relatives suffered, and with how this has affected their present-day identities.

Trauma Studies was fostered by Holocaust Studies scholars when trying to identify and analyse how trauma is conveyed (or not) through narrative. Among the most prominent pioneers are Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub and Cathy Caruth, inheritors of the Yale School of Poststructuralism, who theorised an approach to the representation of the trauma of the Holocaust following Freud's, Pierre Janet's and Joseph Breuer's theories on trauma memory and its healing. According to Caruth, trauma is “a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (or avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event” (2008, 4). Judith Lewis Herman in her book *Trauma and Recovery* (1992) lists, among other symptoms, hyperarousal, intrusion and constriction, and these responses will be returned to throughout Pellicer-Ortín's in-depth analysis of Eva Figes' work (20). The main stages that Pellicer-Ortín uses to put her analysis in motion are drawn from Dominick LaCapra's *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (2001),

namely, “acting out” and “working through.” “Acting out” is “the compulsive repetition of the traumatic event” (quoted on page 25); whereas “working through” marks the beginning of the healing process which is “based on the understanding and structuring of the traumatic event in an ordered and logical way” (25). Following Pierre Janet, the final stage of healing would consist of transforming the traumatic memories, which the subject is constantly avoiding, into narrative memories.

But there needs to be a listener for these memories, or a witness, as Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub contend (1992), since, as Herman argues, “[t]rauma cannot be healed in isolation” (1992, quoted by Pellicer-Ortín on page 47). The traumatised subject needs a community to share his/her experiences with. As Kirby Farrell argues in *Post-Traumatic Culture* (1998), “trauma is an injury not just to the central nervous system or to the psyche, but also to the culture which sustains body and soul” (quoted on page 22), that is, it deeply wounds the community of the traumatised subject because it questions how and why that suffering has been allowed to happen. Although trauma is never individual, but rather collective, since it tears apart the support system of the subject who suffers it, this idea takes on a special significance in an event with the dimensions of the Holocaust as the way it is incorporated in history has to take into account and respect the suffering of hundreds of thousands of people. We must therefore take responsibility by being, as Felman terms it, “*subjects of history*,” that is, those “who were [...] neither its perpetrators nor its most immediate and most devastated victims, but its historic *onlookers*: its *witnesses*” (1992, 96; emphasis in the original). And one way of being a witness is by being a critical reader and scholar, a task that Silvia Pellicer-Ortín superbly tackles in this volume.

Pellicer-Ortín’s main task is twofold: on the one hand, she attempts to bring to the fore and contextualise the importance of the *œuvre* of Eva Figes (1932–2012), a writer mostly forgotten by mainstream literary criticism because she did not adjust to the literary conventions of her time—she was rather a late modernist as well as sharing some of the tenets of post-modernism. On the other, Pellicer-Ortín contends that Eva Figes’ writings evolve following the different stages of trauma until reaching a kind of healing obtained through the practice of “scriptotherapy” (98–101). The term was coined by Suzette Henke in *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women’s Life-Writing* (2000), and follows Freud’s theory of the “talking cure.” According to Henke, by articulating unspeakable experiences, “[s]ubjective reconstruction can take the form of aesthetic vocation, personal liberation from a cloying domestic or social environment, or successful integration into a larger discursive community” (Henke, 2000, xv).

After establishing a solid theoretical foundation, Pellicer-Ortín introduces the life and works of Eva Figes. Born in Berlin in 1932, Figes was a Jewish-German writer who exiled in Great Britain with her parents when she was seven years old, after the Second World War broke out. She continued to live in Britain until her death in 2012. Following her divorce in 1962 she supported herself and her two children

through her writing, producing a variety of texts including fiction, non-fiction—she was a prominent feminist activist during the early stages of her career—newspaper articles and radio plays. Her fiction explores the themes of identity, the effects of war and the Holocaust, women's issues, and memory and the past (89). Pellicer-Ortín divides Figs' fictional production into three subgroups, namely: novels of a great modernist imprint dealing with feminist issues; psychological novels, closer to postmodernist concerns; and trauma novels, which deal directly with the after-effects of trauma (89-101). It is the works of this last group that are analysed in detail by Pellicer-Ortín, who follows the chronological order of publication, and emphasises the fact that the content of the works, considered in this way, also coincides with the three stages of trauma over time.

The study thus divides Figs' work into three chapters, the first corresponding to Figs' early and more experimental period, highly influenced by modernism and specifically by Virginia Woolf's stream of consciousness techniques and preoccupation with the perception of time, as well as by the French *nouveau roman*. In this chapter, Pellicer-Ortín analyses Figs' *Winter Journey* (1967) and *Konek Landing* (1969) as fictional examples of the phase of "acting out" trauma. The male protagonist of each work experiences the symptoms of relieving a past traumatic experience that was left unresolved. Pellicer-Ortín parallels the protagonists' acting out of trauma with Figs' own acting out, since the two books fit into the category of fiction and are not autobiographical (99).

The second part of the analysis comprises the autobiographical *Little Eden: A Child at War* (1978) and *Tales of Innocence and Experience* (2003) as representations of the phase of "working through" the traumatic experience. These works present "a radical break with previous ones, both in terms of form, and content" (99). Figs tries to both place and narrate the "unspeakability" of trauma in the past, in order to assimilate and cope with the events that she and her family went through, such as "migration, death and loss, during and after the Holocaust" (98). The articulation of trauma becomes a key step in the stages of healing, the first of which is laying the foundations for "safety," explained, following Herman, as "the feeling experienced once the problem has been recognised and named, and the subject recognises that s/he needs to gain control over his or her life" (47). The second stage is termed "remembrance and mourning" and is where "the subject explores his or her own traumatic memories in order to turn them into an integrated and coherent narrative" (47). This, according to Herman, is the moment when the survivor is able to place the trauma in the past, their next step is creating a future by coming to terms with their identity, their community, and even making sense of their own life by becoming an activist or a writer who gives voice to injustice (47).

The last chapter analyses *Journey to Nowhere: One Woman Looks for the Promised Land* (2008), where the final stage in the healing of trauma is reached. *Journey to Nowhere* is the case of a "limit-autobiography," a term coined by Leigh Gilmore in

*The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony* (2001). Gilmore explains that this kind of autobiography features experimental techniques in order to render traumatic memories into words, so as to “help to explain how the past remains present” (quoted on page 230). The main task of these autobiographies is to transmit these stories to future generations as well as to the community. In other words, their main task is to *testify*, which for Felman means “to *address* another, to impress upon a listener, to *appeal* to a community” (Felman and Laub 1992, 204; emphasis in the original). That is, to go beyond the traumatic experience and to have an impact on the community in order to establish a sense of identity in relation to it which assimilates the trauma.

Pellicer-Ortín’s book is a rich, highly inspirational piece of research on the work of a writer who had been unjustly forgotten by critics. There is virtually no previous scholarship dedicated to Figes, besides some minor critical reviews of her work in studies of contemporary Jewish-British authors and a special issue of the journal *Critical Engagements* in 2012, guest edited by Silvia Pellicer-Ortín and Sonya Andermahr (Tew and Phillips, 2012). This work is indeed the first thorough study of Figes’ work seen through the lens of Trauma Studies. Its claims appear firmly grounded by the theoretical background of Trauma Studies with an emphasis on Holocaust and Diaspora Studies, through which the works are analysed. It will be of interest to scholars belonging to the field of Trauma Studies and British and/or Jewish contemporary women writers, since it presents a different way of categorising an author’s work by linking psychological phenomena with their literary representation. Although the question of otherness, namely being a German Jew in Britain, and Figes’ outspoken and polemic anti-Zionist position, is dealt with in depth, from my position as a scholar of Gender Studies and *mimetic* Trauma Studies, I would have appreciated a more complex approach to memory whereby categories of vulnerability were taken into account when assessing the diverse impact of trauma. Regardless of the nature of the event itself—and without disregarding such a sensitive event as the Holocaust—I concur with Susannah Radstone that “it is not an event, which is by its nature ‘toxic’ to the mind, but what the mind later does to memory.” (Radstone 2007, 17). I would have liked greater clarity in how Eva Figes’ identity as an Other—a Jew, a (divorced) woman writer and a German growing up in Britain—shaped the way that trauma was interiorised in her autobiographical writings, rather than it being the other way round—she reflecting upon her Otherness as a consequence of her traumatic experience, coming to terms with her identity once she is able to verbalise trauma. Overall, I think this book satisfies its main aim: that of fostering discussion on the work of Eva Figes and around the representation of trauma, how trauma affects the individual and the collective, and, most importantly, how it can be healed, if at all. However, the ever-present question keeps being asked: can art heal? The answer remains elusive, prompting thought-provoking responses in art and criticism, so, whether art heals or not, it makes room for verbalising, witnessing and sharing pain and memories in order to build a better history.

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