

## **EVA FIGES' WRITINGS: A JOURNEY THROUGH TRAUMA**

Silvia Pellicer-Ortín

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What is most controversial about contemporary trauma fiction is the paradoxical nature of trauma representation and presentation. Dori Laub and Daniel Podell argue that “only a special kind of art, which we shall designate ‘the art of trauma’ can begin to achieve a representation of that which defies representation in both inner and outer experience” (1995: 992). Similarly, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub cogently argue that, in accessing trauma, art and literature play a primary role “as a precocious mode of witnessing —of accessing reality— when all other modes of knowledge are precluded” (1991: xx). Silvia Pellicer-Ortín’s *Eva Figes’ Writings: A Journey through Trauma* (2015) is a book among many of the last few years that give much-needed attention to the representation of trauma and ways of coping with trauma. The book mainly focuses on the traumatic experiences of the Holocaust and ways of coping with trauma in Eva Figes’ writings, especially in *Winter Journey* (1967), *Konek Landing* (1972), *Little Eden: A Child at War* (1978), *Tales of Innocence and Experience: An Exploration* (2004), and *Journey to Nowhere: One Woman Looks for the Promised Land* (2008). Pellicer-Ortín’s distinct study has three main arguments. The first is that trauma studies are the perfect means to analyse the representation of individual and collective traumatic affects not only in fictional but also autobiographical works in which particular narrative techniques are used. The second is that the representation of the Holocaust and of Jewish identity in Figes’ works address ethical and historical questions. Finally, the

study argues that Figes' writings present us with the evolution of the forms of coping with trauma, which is germane to the alteration in the forms of representation. Pellicer-Ortín's book analyses Figes' writings in terms of the evolution of narrative techniques which resonate with different stages of traumatic affects; from acting out or repetition compulsion towards healing or working through. It is this approach of the book that makes it thought provoking and different from earlier studies of Figes' writings. Also, the wider grouping and inclusiveness of the book is indicative of how comprehensive and illustrative it is not only for literature but also for trauma studies scholars.

The book is distinctive for how it reads the evolution of narrative techniques in Figes' writings as mirroring the developmental stages of the trauma of the Holocaust from acting out towards working through. Pellicer-Ortín argues that there is a relationship between "the Modernist techniques and the fragmented aesthetics informing Figes' narratives of the 1960s with the process of acting out" (5). Further, she draws a correlation between the autobiographical and historical turn in Figes' oeuvre from the 1970s onwards with attempts at working through trauma. Also, she argues that Figes moves from stream-of-consciousness technique towards political memoirs, which demonstrates that Figes manages to verbalize her individual traumatic experiences of the Holocaust inextricably connected with collective wounds.

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Chapter One provides us with the theoretical aspects of trauma studies in their relation to the analysis of literary works. In this regard, the book adopts trauma theory based on a psychological understanding of trauma proposed by its forerunners such as Sigmund Freud, Josef Breuer and Pierre Janet and carries the research over into literary trauma theory which has been developing since the 1990s. Pellicer-Ortín draws attention to the fact that although interest in trauma studies started with the after-effects of traumatic events such as the Holocaust, the Vietnam War, and the Gulf War, it has now extended to more individual forms of trauma (13). More importantly, she underlines the belief in the agency of literature in healing trauma (53).

Chapters Two and Three are devoted to Figes as a child survivor of the Holocaust and a writer articulating her wounds. Chapter Two provides us with Figes' biographical account, career, the literary context she was writing in and the writers who influenced her work. Chapter Three presents us with an overview of Figes' literary production inclusive of non-fictional and fictional texts in order to provide a picture of her literary world which comprises various styles ranging from nouveau-romanesque to historiographic metafiction. The remaining sections of Pellicer-Ortín's study are an inquiry into Figes' five novels which portray a journey from acting out towards working through trauma.

In Chapter Four, the initial phase of the journey takes the reader to the acting out phase of trauma as represented in the self-fragmentedness of the male characters in two nouveau-romanesque novels, *Winter Journey*, the story of Janus Stobbs, a veteran suffering from PTSD, and *Konek Landing*, the story of Stefan Konek, suffering from traumatic memories. Outlining two main approaches to the representation of the Holocaust—the realist and anti-realist traditions—, Pellicer-Ortín argues that Figes’ *Winter Journey* and *Konek Landing* reject the realistic representations of trauma and employ the experimental language of the Modernists instead (104). In Pellicer-Ortín’s words, the pivotal element of *Winter Journey* is the duality between story time and narrative time: “the ‘action’ that takes place in *Winter Journey* develops along one single day, while the narration is full of digressions and analepses or flashbacks, connecting an ordinary day in the present of Janus and his past experiences” (107). In this way, the novel is divorced from conventional time sequence. Pellicer-Ortín also states that the novel has recourse to narrative techniques ranging from free association of ideas to direct and indirect interior monologues, ellipses, anachronisms, anaphora, anacoluthon, and the figurative use of images (111-120). Similar to *Winter Journey*, *Konek Landing* revolves around the acting out phase through its employment of fragmentation, dislocation, intertextual allusions, and the blurring of spatio-temporal boundaries. Thus, Pellicer-Ortín brilliantly outlines the common points of both novels: information gaps, disrupted temporality, contradictory discourses, stream-of-consciousness technique, and failure to work through trauma (153-154).

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Chapter Five focuses on Figes’ *Little Eden* and *Tales of Innocence and Experience* which are more concerned with healing trauma by encountering and transmitting the past. Pellicer-Ortín argues that, in both of these autobiographical texts, the author-narrator remembers her childhood and adolescence characterized by the traumatic impact of the Holocaust. With the publication of *Little Eden*, Figes verbalizes her pain while in *Tales of Innocence and Experience*, she goes one step further and presents the transmission of her traumatic past to her granddaughter under the guise of story-telling. As Pellicer-Ortín states, *Little Eden* “interweaves the local history of Cirencester, the town Figes’ family moved to when they arrived in England, with the ever-present experience of war and childhood, focalized from the perspective of the adult Figes” (169) while *Tales of Innocence and Experience* revolves around “a grandmother telling her granddaughter stories combined with her memories of the Holocaust, her migration, and the tense relationship with her mother, amongst other traumatic experiences” (185). Although different, Pellicer-Ortín underlines her argument that both of these novels are salient examples of “scriptotherapy”, a way of healing through the act of writing (201). *Tales of Innocence and Experience* is different from *Little Eden* in that the author-narrator’s familial bonds are strengthened whereby she gains the power to heal her wounds (201).

Chapter Six reads Figes' *Journey to Nowhere* as the last step of the journey in which Figes presents us with the healing of the trauma of the Holocaust. The novel achieves this by covering a wide range of events and countries such as England, Germany, the US, and Israel, and by blending various genres such as history, testimony, memoir, biography, and political essay (238). By using the story of Edith, her family maid, Figes represents the Jews surviving the Holocaust and moving to Israel because of the Zionist cause (203). Pellicer-Ortín describes the novel as "a limit-case autobiography", a blending of autobiography, biography, memoir, history, and testimony whereby not only individual traumatic memories are transformed into narrative memories but also collective and national traumatic stories are verbalized and dealt with (225).

In conclusion, Pellicer-Ortín's study is of considerable scholarly value showing as it does the evolution in Figes' literary representation of trauma, which is in accordance with the different stages of trauma from acting out towards working through. There are some typographical errors in the book which do not interrupt the flow of reading. Although students new to trauma studies may find some of the chapters difficult to understand, Pellicer-Ortín's study enhances our understanding of literary representations of traumatic experiences and ways of coping with them, especially the Holocaust and its after-effects as represented in Figes' works.

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## Works Cited

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