

right in front of Dickens's House too. And it was a big bomb. And it was a big bus. And it was a big crowd. And it was a very big explosion. But the remarkable thing is that never in similar situations had surgeons started operating so quickly on the wounded as in that particular case. And the reason was simple, so very simple: *The British Medical Association* in the Dickens House possessed an operation table, and everything that goes with it, and it was wheeled out into the middle of the street, and surgeons started operating there and then on the many wounded within less than minutes, right there, in the middle of the street, right next to the badly damaged bus, desperately trying to see how many lives they could still save. The British courage and stiff upper lip was omnipresent. The way Charles Dickens had always wanted it to be. The Dickens optimism is all-pervasive.

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### **EVA FIGES**

(15 April 1932 – 28 August 2012)

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#### ***Eva Figes' Last Journey***

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“She continued on her journey, as we all must do. And I, having listened to her story all those years ago, decided it was worth recording. Now, while there is still time” (Figes, 2008: 181). These words close the last semi-autobiographical work written by Eva Figes in 2008, entitled *Journey to Nowhere: One Woman Looks for the Promised Land*, and I wanted to start this obituary by recalling them, as they signify the main impulses that fostered Figes' production until the very last moment of her life: her constant interest in depicting those minority (hi)stories that had been kept silenced by the official and universalising versions of history, like the traumatic testimony of the Jewish maid Edith to which she alludes in this passage, and her incessant desire to always keep on the hard

journey of life. However, her life's journey came to an end on 28<sup>th</sup> August 2012 when her heart ceased to beat, leaving behind a legacy made of the difficult life experiences she had to go through and a vast literary *oeuvre* for the contemporary readership and critics to appreciate and understand.

At the age of 80, the British-Jewish writer Eva Figes resided in Northern London, the city where she lived since her youth and which turned out to be her adoptive home, and had become the mother of two relevant contemporary writers and critics: Orlando Figes is a well-known historian, who teaches history at Birbeck College (University of London) and has published extensively on Russian history; and Kate Figes writes non-fictional works on contemporary women's issues and experiences such as motherhood. They gave their mother the most precious present of her life, according to her own words, the experience of being a grandmother. She declared on a great number of occasions that this had changed her life for the better, since it allowed her to establish the familial ties she needed to overcome some of her traumatic childhood memories: "For me, being a grandmother has a very particular poignancy. [...] I am constantly aware of echoes, repetitions. The old pain stirs, but now with an unexpected sense of healing" (Figes, 2003). Figes always stated the importance her family has had in her assimilation of her difficult past, as when she said that: "For me, nothing matters more in my life than my children and grandchildren, and as I get older, the other things fall away" (2001: 2). The special links established with the subsequent generations are persistent motifs in her fictional and non-fictional works and they even become one of the narrative strategies Figes used to represent the healing of trauma in many of her literary creations.

Although it is always useful to know a writer's background in order to fully understand his or her literary production, in Figes' case, it is unavoidable, since she always made clear that her work was deeply rooted in her own life experiences. Eva Figes (*née* Unger) was born in Berlin on 15<sup>th</sup> April 1932 into a family of assimilated German Jews. She and her brother received a good education in a German school, without getting religious instruction as Jews, and the family led an ordinary life in Berlin until the outburst of the Second World War. In March 1939 they were forced to migrate to Great Britain because of their Jewish origins, escaping from the Nazi regime of annihilation. In fact, Eva's father was imprisoned in the concentration camp of Dachau on the well-known *Kristallnacht* of November 1938, but he was able to escape and obtain a visa for England just some weeks before Eva's seventh birthday. This was the last time Eva saw her maternal grandparents, who died later on in the concentration camp of Trawniki — the image of the last time Eva saw them "waving goodbye" at the airport is a recurrent topos in most of her works (1978: 131; 2004: 132-133; 2008: 10). Figes always recalled her first years in England with a traumatic ring, as she was treated with certain hostility because of being a German Jew exile. The traumatic experiences lived in this period gave rise to her most autobiographical work, *Little Eden: A Child at War* (1978), where Figes focused on the period of her life when she attended the boarding school in Cirencester. She depicted the feelings of strangeness she suffered at the time, as she was marginalised because of her Jewish identity, despite the fact that she did not even understand the meaning of being "a Jew" (1978: 131). This is the knowledge that she sadly acquired as a teenager, when she discovered the real significance of the concentration camps and the horrors endured by many other Jews, like the members of her own family. It was also during this early stage of her life that Figes became aware of her passion for language and her fascination for the world of art. A passion that accompanied her during all her life, as she told me in the interview we held in 2009 that she felt more alive when she was writing. She attended Kingsbury Grammar School between 1943 and 1950 and then, she

entered Queen Mary College (University of London), where she obtained a B.A. in English with honours in 1953.

However, her profession as a full-time writer began only in 1966, with the publication of her first novel, *Equinox*, just after her divorce from George Figes, whom she had married in 1954, and it continued throughout her life with the publication of 13 novels, 3 semi-autobiographical works, 4 works of literary criticism, short stories, radio and television plays, children's books, a dozen of French and German translated works, and plenty of articles of social and literary critique in well-known British magazines and journals, such as *The Observer*, *The Guardian*, *The Times* and *The Times Literary Supplement*. I would like to remark that a number of her novels were selected for some relevant literary awards in the UK and she also won several prizes. For instance, she won the Guardian Prize in 1967 for her novel *Winter Journey*; she was awarded the C. D. Lewis Fellowship in 1973; she held an Arts Council fellowship between 1977 and 1979, and she was conferred the honorary degree of Doctor of Letters by Brunel University, London, in 2002.

These acknowledgements emanate from the great range of works that Figes produced throughout the last five decades, a very long period of time that makes it even more difficult to name her production under a single label. Depending on the prism used to approach her *oeuvre*, we could define this writer as a second-wave fierce feminist, considering her feminist manifesto *Patriarchal Attitudes* (1970) or a novel like *Equinox* (1966). She could also be known as a pioneer British-Jewish writer since, among writers like Anita Brookner, Elaine Feinstein, Bernice Rubens, Linda Grant, Anne Karpf, she was one of the first British-Jewish women authors who spoke openly about her feelings of alienation in Great Britain and who criticised the British, European and American policy after the Second World War, as shown in her autobiographical works *Little Eden* (1978) or *Journey to Nowhere* (2008). Also, she could be defined as a neo-Modernist writer, because she was clearly influenced by the Modernist aesthetics, mainly by Virginia Woolf, and the *nouveau roman*, together with the Existentialism of Franz Kafka and Samuel Beckett, as works like *Ghosts* (1988), *Days* (1974) and *Light* (1983) illustrate. Or she could be understood as a Postmodernist writer if we look at the works she published at the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, which are clear inheritors of Postmodernist historiographic metafiction, as observed in her novels *The Seven Ages* (1986) and *The Tree of Knowledge* (1990). However, although I always emphasise the difficulty in ascribing her huge production to a single movement, I tend to place Eva Figes within the generation of writers that provided a kind of link between Modernism and Postmodernism in Great Britain. Alongside John Fowles, Anthony Burgess, William Golding, Lawrence Durrell, A. S. Byatt, Ann Quin, Gabriel Josipovici, B. S. Johnson, Christine Brooke-Rose, and Paul West, Figes is part of this group of writers who started to publish in the 1960s, experimenting with literary forms that went back to the spirit of their Modernist forerunners, as their best way to represent a society that had witnessed two World Wars and the Holocaust and to depict the decadence of humanity afterwards. Figes described these ideas when she argued that: "The English social-realist tradition cannot contain the realities of my lifetime, horrors which one might have called surreal if they had not actually happened" (1978b: 39). Just as it is impossible to label her style in a clear-cut way, her literary work is also very diverse. Yet for the purpose of offering a general overview of her literary creation, one could divide it in four main groups: experimental novels about PTSD and male traumatised war veterans, Holocaust survivors, Nazi soldiers and war bystanders — *Winter Journey* (1967) and *Konek Landing* (1969); feminist novels that describe female experiences of submission under

patriarchy — *Equinox* (1966), *Days* (1974), *Waking* (1981), *Light* (1983), *The Seven Ages* (1986), *Ghosts* (1988), *The Tree of Knowledge* (1990) and *The Knot* (1996); psychological and metafictional mystery novels about Postmodernist issues — *B.* (1972), *Nelly's Version* (1977) and *The Tenancy* (1991); and liminal autobiographical works in which she represents her own opinions and her dealing with the trauma of war and the Holocaust and the process of transgenerational transmission of trauma — *Little Eden* (1978), *Tales of Innocence and Experience* (2003), and *Journey to Nowhere* (2008). My classification helps to show that, as Eva Figes was writing for a very long period of time, her works speak to a wide and universal readership that can identify with the variety of topics and experiences portrayed. The traumatic experiences undergone by soldiers, war victims, their families and the bystanders; the repression suffered by women across history; the role of the artist and the process of creation; the feelings of foreignness and alienation endured by the Jewish communities; the transgenerational transmission of trauma across various generations of Holocaust survivors; the testimonial experiences of Holocaust survivors... are only some of the many complex issues that Figes tackles in her works and that may be of a great interest for the contemporary readership and for our understanding of local and individual (hi)stories.

Nevertheless, in spite of the valuable quality of her work, Eva Figes was not able to catch the attention of a great number of literary critics, and the number of studies on her work is really small. The complexity and extreme experimentalism of some of her works, mainly those published at the beginning of her career, together with her foreign origins may have had something to do with this lack of recognition in the critical sphere. We cannot say that her work went unnoticed, but it can be asserted that her literary creations have not received all the attention they really merit. In fact, Eva Figes was a key figure in the British literary scene of the 1970s, when the publication of *Patriarchal Attitudes* turned her into a leading figure of Second-wave feminism; but her presence in the literary arena weakened in the last decades of the twentieth century. However, in her last years, her name had started to be heard again because of the controversial nature of her last works which deal with her traumatic experiences as a Jewish-German refugee and the traumas she and many other Jews have endured after the Holocaust. The re-discovery of this writer is also related to her appearance on TV and radio programmes after the publication of her political memoir *Journey to Nowhere* and of various subsequent articles revealing her tough and contentious opinions on Israel and US politics. Also, the reconsideration of this writer should be related to the initiative undertaken by the British Library of London, which decided to acquire the rights of all her archives in October 2009. Referring to this event, Figes indicated the influence that her ethnic background may have had as a writer in Britain:

One of my first reactions when I heard that the British Library had acquired my archive I said: "At last, I am British!" [*laughter*]. I have been British since the 1940s, since the war ended we were given British nationality [...]. And when I met Jamie Andrews, the responsible for buying the stuff, in a symposium I told him that it was the first time I felt British... since 1939! [*laughter*]. I have been accepted at last and in a much better way than I expected! (in Pellicer, 2009: 8)

Given the significance of the project, this recognition by the academia should be appreciated, despite all its belatedness. Further, other recent initiatives to promote her study have been the International Conference "Trauma Narratives and Herstory, with special emphasis on the work of Eva Figes", co-organised by Dr Sonya Andermahr and myself at the School of Arts, University of Northampton on 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> November 2010. At this conference, a significant number of scholars met to discuss Figes' work, among

other women writers, and all of them agreed that more initiatives like this should be encouraged to give Figes the place she deserves in the contemporary literary canon. Indeed, two publications have derived from this conference: a monographic issue on the work of Eva Figes in the British peer-reviewed journal *Critical Engagements*, and a collection of essays on *Trauma Narratives and Herstory* to be published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2013. Also, the Research Group “Contemporary Narrative in English”, headed by Professor Susana Onega and based at the University of Zaragoza (Spain), have recently tried to revitalise Figes’ work, and the Aragonese publishing house Jekyll & Jill is working on the translation into Spanish of her novel *Nelly’s Version* (1977). Personally, after having written my PhD thesis on the work of this author and having talked about her creation in national and international scientific forums, I must say that I really hope that the acknowledgement of her career has only started.

To conclude, my main claim is that the work of quite unnoticed writers like Eva Figes may provide very fruitful insights to all those readers, whatever their nationalities, who want to obtain a deeper understanding of our more recent history and of humanity itself. We are going through convoluted times in which many individual and communal identities have been damaged by the disastrous effects of wars, discrimination, abuse or marginalisation; we are witnessing the moment when many first generation survivors of the Holocaust and other traumatic collective experiences are passing away and transmitting their traumatic legacies to their ancestors and to the rest of the society; we are going through a moment in which the formation of collective memories are being put to test. In other words, we live at that very crucial stage in which art, and, in this particular case, Eva Figes’ work, may offer some kind of ethical insight into all these troubling aspects. Thus, I would encourage the reading and revalorisation of Figes’ works in order to face many of these ethical dilemmas and I would encourage readers and critics to do it “Now, while there is still time” (Figes, 2008: 181).

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