

## **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).

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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## **VICTORIANOMANIA: REIMAGINING, REFASHIONING, AND REWRITING VICTORIAN LITERATURE AND CULTURE**

Simonetta Falchi, Greta Perletti, Maria Isabel Romero Ruiz, eds.

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As stated in the introduction, this volume aims to gain insight into the manifold ways in which Victorian culture can be revisited and reimagined from a contemporary perspective. While the focus of attention is necessarily the Victorian period, one of the main characteristics of this collection is that it regards the term Victorian in a broad sense, encompassing all the literature and culture of the nineteenth-century, as well as moving beyond the geographic boundaries of England. Bearing in mind the postmodern origins of Neo-Victorianism, this volume thus defends an inclusive rather than an exclusive approach to the phenomenon, as long as Neo-Victorian manifestations present a self-conscious engagement with the act of revising and reinterpreting the past. Given the current proliferation of texts of diverse natures adapting the Victorian past and the increasing interest in the academic discipline of Neo-Victorian Studies since the publication of novels like Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) and John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1967), which sanctioned the beginning of Neo-Victorian discourses, this book acknowledges the importance of some groundbreaking critical volumes previously published in the field of Neo-Victorianism, such as Robin Gilmour's *Rereading Victorian Fiction* (2000), Cora Kaplan's *Victoriana: Histories, Fictions, Criticism* (2007), Rosario Arias and Patricia Pulham's *Haunting and Spectrality in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Possessing the Past* (2009), Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn's *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in*

*the Twenty-First Century* (2010), Nadine Boehm-Schnitker and Susanne Gruss' *Neo-Victorian Literature and Culture: Immersions and Revisitations* (2014), and the monothematic volumes within the Neo-Victorian Series edited by Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben, which have been published regularly since 2010.

All the articles collected in this volume comprise analyses of contemporary texts of different genres, ranging from novels and films to digital rewritings, which share a self-conscious engagement with diverse aspects of Victorian discourses, but which also reflect upon how processes of repossession can shed light on how to make sense of our contemporary reality. In this respect, as a result of the emphasis placed on metafiction, the fragmentation of truth, and the politics of representation in Neo-Victorian fiction, the critical theory of postmodernism is often regarded as the theoretical framework in which Neo-Victorian discourses are grounded, especially as the earliest studies focused on contemporary reappropriations of the Victorian tradition—like John Kucich and Dianne F. Sadoff's *Victorian Afterlife: Postmodern Culture Rewrites the Nineteenth-Century* (2000) and Christian Gutleben's *Nostalgic Postmodernism: The Victorian Tradition and the Contemporary British Novel* (2001)—followed a postmodern approach. In tune with the concern about the incomplete quality of truth that characterises postmodernism, this volume underscores how Neo-Victorian texts often bring to the fore those marginalised or deviant voices that were silenced in Victorian times, but also underpins how Neo-Victorian adaptations present a dualistic approach, as these textual reinterpretations of the past look back in time either through subversive criticism or through nostalgic compliance.

Some of the articles included in this collection highlight the critical approach towards the ethical and social discourses pertaining to the Victorian period that Neo-Victorian textualities often present. As a case in point, Andrzej Diniejko's article focuses on John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* as an early representative of Neo-Victorian fiction and as a postmodern metahistorical novel, which disrupts stereotypical notions about the period and criticises its limitations, while it also emphasises the existentialist message that individuals should struggle against determinism, and instead, advance to freedom through self-awareness. In her interpretation of Sarah Waters' novels *Affinity* and *Fingersmith*, Maria Isabel Romero analyses how the author resorts to the Victorian past as suggestive of the silent discourse that has determined same-sex relationships in order to reconstruct a new sexual and gender identity for lesbian women based on multiplicity and diversity, which also serves the purpose of questioning the sexual politics of the postmodern era. Within the context of the movement of steampunk—which reinterprets the Victorian era through the incorporation of contemporary elements, such as equality of gender roles and cross-dressing—Marta Alonso provides a

comparative analysis of the character of Mina Harker in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and Stephen Norrington's film *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*. Noticing how the steampunk movement reproduces Victorian values, but also adapts them to contemporary ideals, Marta Alonso plausibly argues that, if Mina is characterised as the emerging epitome of the New Woman in Stoker's novel, in Norrington's film she is physically portrayed through cross-dressing in order to suggest her eminently masculine features. Francesca Di Blasio focuses on Emma Tenant's novel *Two Women of London: The Strange Case of Ms Jekyll and Mrs Hyde*, which involves a reinterpretation of the male fictional world of Stevenson's classic, rewriting it from a female perspective and endowing it with a female protagonist, but also transforming the Victorian dichotomy between good and evil in Stevenson's text into the postmodern obsession with beauty and physical decadence. Pilar Somacarrera analyses Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* as a historical novel whereby Atwood explores Victorian Canada through its Scottish literary and political legacy, taking Walter Scott's novels as a model to follow, with the ultimate purpose of amalgamating different texts and documents in order to give voice to hidden historical testimonies of individuals, in particular within the private sphere of women. In her study of the Egyptian writer Ahdaf Soueif's novel *The Map of Love*, Silvia Lutzoni identifies the ambivalent attitude of postcolonial writers regarding Western Victorian canons. Being educated in Victorian literature, Soueif does not intend to undermine the Western literary canon, but to bring to light those texts that remain silent, thus supplying an alternative version of history and creating a fusion between Eastern and Western traditions. According to Silvia Lutzoni, in *The Map of Love*, the aesthetic values of Victorian literature are confirmed, but its imperialistic discourse is necessarily subverted. Through the study of Neo-Victorian films such as Christopher Nolan's *The Prestige* and Neil Burger's *The Illusionist*, Alessandra Violi focuses on the metaphors of fakery and magic explored in these films to bring attention to the inherently deceptive quality of Neo-Victorianism, owing to its necessary distortion of the Victorian past through contemporary preoccupations, and to place emphasis on the processes of reflection and reconfiguration of our present in the light of a Victorian past which was left unexpressed but which still inhabits our time as an anachronism.

By contrast, the rest of articles collected in this volume focus on texts that revisit the Victorian era through unquestioning reinterpretations, placing a strong emphasis on nostalgia and the aesthetic portrayal of the Victorian past. Anna Stevenson examines the depiction of Victorian women in film musicals, such as Baz Luhrmann's *Moulin Rouge*, Tim Burton's *Sweeney Todd*, and Tom Hooper's *Les Misérables*, through the recurrent use that directors make of the metaphor of the caged bird, which underlines the constraints placed on women at the time, but leaves Victorian gender roles unquestioned. In her article about Andrew Davies'

film adaptation of Charles Dickens' *Little Dorrit*, Simonetta Falchi underscores the simplified attitude towards gender issues that this film mostly presents—regardless of a veiled reference to Miss Wade's possible homosexuality— together with its neglect of the social discourses tackled in Dickens' novel, since, according to Falchi, this adaptation mostly seeks to reproduce the glorious aura of the Victorian past. Claudia Cao focuses on *Great Expectations* as the most frequently adapted of Dickens' novels, and emphasises how fan communities rewrite literary classics, as in the case of the Twitter version of *Great Expectations*. In Claudia Cao's view, in these communities, the reader becomes a consumer as well as a producer, bringing attention to secondary characters or subplots, rewriting the novel through colloquial language, and underlining aspects such as the comic, sensational, and gothic elements of the original novel. Nonetheless, Cao also emphasises the superficial quality characterising these Neo-Victorian adaptations of *Great Expectations* emerging in the web, which, in her view, disregard the social criticism pervading the original text. In her article on Susanna White's and Cary Fukunaga's recent film adaptations of Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre*, Sarah R. Wakefield notices how these Neo-Victorian texts regard the affair between Jane Eyre and Edward Rochester as their main focus of attention, and even though they portray the character of Bertha Mason in a pitiful way in comparison with Brontë's original text, they still tend to silence her, thus paying no heed to the centrality that early Neo-Victorian adaptations, such as Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*, had attached to Rochester's first wife.

This collection of articles is a significant contribution to the field of Neo-Victorianism, particularly because, instead of favouring a theoretical approach, like many previous compilations in this area, this volume presents a series of case studies and interpretations of Neo-Victorian texts of an eminently practical nature that put to the test the tenets of Neo-Victorianism. Likewise, this book favours a broad concept of the term Neo-Victorian, comprising all sorts of textualities set in the nineteenth-century, bridging the gaps between high and low culture, and drawing attention to processes of appropriation and self-reflexivity through a postmodern approach. However, in spite of envisioning Neo-Victorianism as encompassing any works set in the nineteenth-century, this collection overlooks prolific contemporary adaptations of the works of indispensable nineteenth-century authors, such as Jane Austen, Emily Brontë, Arthur Conan Doyle, H.G. Wells or Oscar Wilde, to name a few; it does not bestow much attention on some literary genres, such as science fiction and the detective novel, which arose precisely at the time, while it also omits the study of contemporary writers that have published works with significant Neo-Victorian traits, such as A.S. Byatt and Peter Ackroyd, or even Anne Perry and Susan Hill. And yet, this collection can be regarded as a representative compilation addressing different kinds of Neo-



Victorian textualities, and should be welcomed for hinting at the significant dualistic assumption that Neo-Victorian texts look back to the Victorian past either through a critical approach giving voice to silenced discourses at the time or with the mere aim of recreating the appealing aesthetics of the period to suit contemporary audiences.

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