

# Eva Figs' Writings



# Eva Figes' Writings:

## *A Journey through Trauma*

By

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## INTRODUCTION

Thinking about the first words that should appear in this book I considered the idea of starting with some grandiloquent praise of the life and career of the British-Jewish writer Eva Figes; however, I changed my mind. If you have chosen to read this book you probably belong to that sector of contemporary readership who has felt intrigued by the powerful, puzzling, complex, and rewarding literary world of this writer. Or perhaps you are one of those many critics, readers, and students that have felt attracted by the new paradigm emerging at the turn of the century, that is, the trauma paradigm.

In my case, the choice of Eva Figes as the subject of this study was based on various considerations. Although she was a very talented and respected writer, Figes was never very well-known by academia, she seemed to have failed to attract their interest due to the difficulty in understanding some of her works, the excessive experimentalism of her first novels and, probably too, her liminal ethnic background, which is the reason why there is very little in-depth criticism of her literary production. Another reason for her lack of impact in critical circles may be that Figes was the victim of two sorts of marginalisation: she suffered the exclusion associated with the German-Jewish exiles in a time of war that had to live in a foreign country, and she experienced the social and cultural isolation imposed on women by patriarchal structures. These personal aspects influenced her literary production to the extent that her work can be regarded as an excellent example of the way in which different traumatic experiences of marginalisation and isolation can be represented in literature. These facts made me realise that her work could fruitfully be approached from the perspective of Trauma Studies, the main theoretical approach that is used throughout this study. Indeed, I believe that Eva Figes is a writer that deserves much more attention than she has received so far, and I hope this book will contribute to her reconsideration within the literary canon. A reconsideration that is even more necessary after her death in 2012, since a writer with such a prolific and vast career deserves at least some kind of posthumous homage that may keep her works alive for posterity.

As will be explained in detail in the biographical section, Eva Figes was born in Berlin in 1932 in a family of assimilated German Jews. She

and her brother received a good upper-middle class education without religious instruction. In 1939, due to the outbreak of the Second World War, she was forced to migrate with her family to Great Britain, where she settled. Needless to say, it was their Jewish origins that made the family flee from Nazi Germany after Eva's father's release from the concentration camp of Dachau, where he had been sent after having been arrested on the *Kristallnacht* of November 1938. Soon after their flight to England, Eva's maternal grandparents died in the concentration camp of Trawniki. The traumatic memories of these events that took place during her childhood, her feelings of inadequacy due to her position as a German-Jew living in foreign Great Britain, and her position of being a woman in a strongly repressive patriarchal society, are recurrent motifs in her work. Moreover, the fact that Figes was writing from the end of the 1960s to the turn of the millennium (her last book was published in 2008), may allow readers and critics to see her literary career as a mirror, both of the evolution in the British literary panorama of the second half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty first, and of the way in which literature and art have reflected the socio-political changes that have taken place in our contemporary age.

Figes produced a wide and varied compilation of written works: thirteen novels, three (semi)autobiographical works, four critical works, various short stories, radio and television plays, children's books, about a dozen translations of French and German novels, and numerous short critical pieces published in journals and magazines. Considering this vast production, it would have been very difficult to analyse in depth every one of her works in a study like this. Therefore, I opted for the analysis of five of her works, the ones which can be more successfully approached from the perspective of Trauma Studies and which show the aesthetic and thematic evolution of her works in a clear way: the novels *Winter Journey* (1967) and *Konek Landing* (1969) and the more autobiographical works *Little Eden: A Child at War* (1978a), *Tales of Innocence and Experience: An Exploration* (2003) and *Journey to Nowhere: One Woman Looks for the Promised Land* (2008a). However, constant allusions will be made to the rest of her writings and at the end of this book readers will be satisfied with a general picture of this writer's production of work.

The main aims of this book can be summarised as follows: Firstly, I would like to prove that Trauma Studies can provide useful methodological tools for the analysis of the representation of trauma in fictional and autobiographical works, bringing to the fore specific narrative techniques in order to represent both individual and collective traumas. Secondly, I will tackle the question of the representation of the

Holocaust and of Jewish identity in literature in general and in the works of Eva Figes in particular, taking into account the ethical, historical and controversial questions this subject always brings to the fore. Thirdly, I will attempt to demonstrate that literary manifestations are able to mirror the evolution of the forms of coping which societies have utilised in dealing with pain and suffering through the evolution of the forms of representation and the creation of new genres. The evolution of these forms and genres, like the birth of the various literary movements that have shaped the twentieth century and the changes experienced in the literary panorama of the last decades, especially in the contemporary British context with which this study is concerned, might arguably be closely related to the need to voice the traumatic historical events that have taken place in our recent history.

In keeping with this third goal of my research, in recent years, there has been an increasing critical tendency to establish correspondences between the different literary movements of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and the unprecedented traumatic historical episodes witnessed by society. For instance, in the particular case of the Holocaust, in his illuminating work *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation* (2000), the historian Michael Rothberg rethinks the categories of realism, modernism, and postmodernism as socio-aesthetic categories which can help to “pinpoint the significance of the Holocaust in terms of contemporary intellectual debates and practices”(8).<sup>1</sup> In fact, Rothberg's ideas have important elements in common with the theories exposed by Hal Foster in *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (1996), where he coined the term “traumatic realism” to describe the works of avant-garde artists such as Andy Warhol, whose serial pictures are analysed in terms of the compulsion to repeat, reproduce, and also produce the traumatic effects of a society based on serial production and consumption. Hal also analyses each artistic movement (realism, modernism and postmodernism) in close relation to its predecessor, and as the expression of the belated response to previous collective traumatic experiences that have afflicted societies at different moments of time (1996: 207). Rothberg, on his part, establishes a correlation between the demands of Holocaust representation, “for documentation, reflection on the formal limits of representation and for the risky public circulation of discourses on the events” (2000: 7), and the modalities of this representation: realism, modernism and postmodernism. He signals the contradictory realist and anti-realist attitudes towards the representation of the Holocaust as the root of the evolution of contemporary culture, and the progression of different aesthetic modes at

different moments of history. Thus, he contends that “the categories of realism, modernism and postmodernism are best thought of not only as styles and periods, [...] Rather, realism, modernism and postmodernism can also be understood as persistent responses to the demands of history” (9). In the course of this book, I will apply Rothberg’s ideas to the specific question of literary representation in Figes’ works, with a view to establishing the evolution of the modes of representation in the works under analysis. In his study, Rothberg describes the appearance of a new genre that he terms “traumatic realism”, which he considers to be the most suitable aesthetic response to the demands of representing extreme events in a work of art. In his own words: “traumatic realism provides an aesthetic and cognitive solution to the conflicting demands inherent in representing and understanding genocide” (9). He situates this genre in an intermediate position between proper historical realistic works and the extremely experimental anti-realist works of Modernism. One of his main premises is that the events of the Holocaust are so unprecedented and extreme that their representation demands the creation of new aesthetic modes that can accommodate for such a terrible and unspeakable reality (103). This principle informs a great part of my research, as I will demonstrate that the evolution of the aesthetics employed by Figes to depict trauma are a result of the need to find a referential mode of representing trauma and the experience of surviving the Holocaust. In a later article dealing with these issues, Rothberg explained that the coining of the term “traumatic realism” was meant to designate an epistemological and social category that would enable the working through of the dilemmas of Holocaust representation (2002: 56). Although I do not pretend to claim that Figes’ works should be analysed as examples of this traumatic realist genre, I will illustrate whether the generic evolution in the representation of trauma drawn by Rothberg can be applied to Figes’ literary evolution from her initial Modernist phase to her later realist position.

My main starting premise is that Figes’ works deal with the trauma of war and the Holocaust experienced by her as an individual, as a member of the German-Jewish community, and by post- Second World War society as a whole. By addressing formal issues concerning the narrative strategies that allow the representation of trauma in literature, I will demonstrate that the evolution of narrative techniques used by this author in the course of her career mirror the different stages in the individual and collective processes of recovery from traumatic experiences, from the initial process of “acting out”, or repetition compulsion of trauma, to the eventual healing phase of “working through” trauma. These terms will become some of the

basic pillars of this project and will reappear on several occasions throughout its pages. Going back to Freud, the historian Dominick LaCapra defined the two main stages in any traumatic process: as “acting out”, which describes the stage in which the traumatised individual or group compulsively repeats the traumatic and disturbing events and lives stuck in the traumatised past (2001: 21), and “working through”, which makes reference to the integration and assimilation of the traumatic memories, allowing the subject or group to distinguish between the traumatic past and the present (21-22). With these concepts in mind, it is my contention that a relationship exists between the Modernist techniques and the fragmented aesthetics informing Figes’ narratives of the 1960s with the process of acting out. I then associate the autobiographical and historical turn that Figes’ work experienced from the end of the 1970s to the last steps of her career with the individual and collective attempts to work through trauma. And finally, we will see if her evolution from writing stream-of-consciousness fiction towards the much more realistic genre of political memoir could be interpreted as evidence that Figes has been able to give voice to her own traumas in the course of her maturation process as a writer and as a human being. The final question to answer will be whether or not her last works succeeded in performing a final process of working through by transforming Figes’ traumatic memories into narrative memories, which constitute the key to any process of healing trauma.

In summary, the main questions that will emerge throughout this book should be: Are Eva Figes’ fictional and autobiographical works appropriate tools to carry out a process of self-healing and liberation? Does the evolution of Figes’ work echo the evolution of the way in which twentieth-century literature and society have expressed and released suffering and traumatic experiences? Can literary works illustrate the healing process of trauma through writing? Can writing be considered as a tool to heal individual and collective traumas? Are there any specific narrative techniques which are particularly appropriate for putting the unspeakable into words, as many trauma critics have argued? Can we, as literary critics, prove that the literary evolution of a writer’s career may mirror the evolution in her or his process of coping with traumatic experiences? What would be the collective implications of this demonstration? Has the way in which writers deal with and express human suffering, changed in the last five decades? Can this evolution be traced in contemporary literary panorama in general?

In order to answer these questions, I will have recourse to the tools provided by the field of Trauma Studies and its different approaches –

psychological, psychoanalytical, anthropological, neurobiological, social and mythical – to the question of individual and collective psychical trauma. In summary, Trauma Studies bring to the fore just how literature has often been used as a healing tool for writers, social minorities and society in general. The awareness that literature can give voice to pain and suffering, begs for a new conception of fiction, history, reality, time and the workings of the mind capable of taking into account the traumatic elements hidden in words. As Geoffrey Hartman explained in “Trauma within the Limits of Literature”, “Trauma Study in the arts explores the relation between psychic wounds and signification. [...] As a specific literary endeavour trauma study explores the relation of words and wounds. Its main focus is on words that wound, and presumably can be healed, if at all, by further words” (2003: 257, 259). The task of the trauma critic is to discover these wounds in the words provided by literary texts, as well as in non-literary accounts, dealing with traumatic experiences. Traumatic events cannot be incorporated into narratives in an easy way, since they are the product of an individual or collective struggle between the opposed need to deny the traumatic event, and the necessity to release traumatic memories so as to overcome the traumatic experience. Consequently, my study focuses on one of the main concerns of trauma criticism: the analysis of the mechanisms through which unrepresentable and unspeakable traumatic events can be represented, uttered, and transmitted through literature.

More concretely, my analysis develops out of the working hypothesis that narrative and story-telling can contribute to the healing of the traumatised person and for collectives. In the following theoretical subsection, I will explain in more detail key concepts like Freud and Breuer’s talking cure (1991a: 57, 68) and Pierre Janet’s differentiation between traumatic memory and ordinary narrative memory (1928: 421-433; 1901: 278-365). These concepts, like Carl Jung’s (1990: 117) conviction that the healing of trauma starts when the traumatised person is able to transform traumatic events into a chronological narrative, are classical examples of the view that the main step for the recovery of trauma is to verbalise the experience of suffering. In the same line of research as Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (1992: xix-xx), Hartman equates the function of literature to that of the talking cure (2003: 259). Drawing on this, Suzette A. Henke has coined a very illuminating term for this book: “scriptotherapy”, which is the process that she defines as the “writing out and writing through traumatic experience in the mode of therapeutic re-enactment” (1998: xii-xiii). This definition points to literature as a healing mechanism, both for writers and readers, to reconstruct the self after a traumatic process. To

put it another way, it is thanks to the act of writing that the traumatised subject can reconstruct his or her fragmented soul and, I will argue, this can be extended to the collective level. Therefore, in the last few decades, contemporary literature has also shown a great concern with the potentialities of trauma narratives to disclose silenced versions of history; experiment with the ways in which trauma can be represented; and attempt to cope with these experiences of human suffering. Just as Kirmayer, Lemelson and Barad explain that trauma has become “a narrative theme in explanations of individual and social suffering” (2007: 1), writing may be said to have become a site to voice the traumatic experiences of minority groups and to provide a healing mechanism for the transformation of traumatic memories into narrative ones. It is within this context that the writing of Eva Figes emerges in a powerful way.

Together with the premises of Trauma Studies, the theoretical frameworks and the relevant background literature applied to the analysis of the texts, are derived from many other related disciplines; an aspect which provides this study with quite an interdisciplinary background. These include: ethics; theories of artistic representation; theories about the representation of suffering, (fundamentally the representation of the two World Wars and the Holocaust in art and literature); questions of identity concerning Jewishness and the specific status of Jews in Britain; the British-Jewish literary tradition; intertextuality; literary theory; and contemporary history and philosophy. Further, narratology and close-reading are used to satisfy the intrinsic purpose of Trauma Studies, but at the same time Trauma Studies are used to provide new insights into narratology in order to discover how literary techniques are put into service by contemporary writers like Eva Figes. Thus, both the methodological tools and the theories that shape this study are hopefully reinforced and renewed, in a mutual process of revitalization by the end of the book.

Readers will soon realise that the structure of the book runs parallel to my main working hypothesis, as it shows Figes' evolution in time in relation to her literary representation of trauma. Together with this introductory section, Chapter One, provides an explanation of the methodology applied to the study, that is to say, the theoretical aspects concerning Trauma Studies. In it the most important authors and researchers in this area are summarised, from the coining of the concept of trauma, up to the present day, together with the different trends that can be found within this field of study, and the main theories that support the idea that narratives have a strong healing potential. After the Introduction, Chapter Two is devoted to a biographical account of Eva Figes' life, her

career, the literary context wherein her work can be framed, and the main influences that have informed her literary world. Chapter Three gives a general overview of Figes' non-fictional and fictional texts, in an attempt to provide a frame of reference for the works under analysis: her ideology, her position with regards to the literary canon, and her general stylistic, thematic and ideological features, and creates a general picture of this prolific writer's production. Chapters Four, Five, and Six constitute the corpus of analysis of this study, as they offer a chronologically ordered analysis of five of Figes' works according to the different stages in dealing with trauma, following a close-reading method aimed at interpreting them both formally and thematically. The final chapter summarises the conclusions obtained after the in-depth analysis, and invites readers to enter the mysterious fictional world of this baffling writer.

To finish these introductory remarks, I would also like to mention some of the anticipated problems that this study has had to face. Firstly, the distinction between the real author and the autobiographical narrator in Figes' last works is very difficult to make on many occasions, as the author represents some of the traumatic events that she lived through herself. Consequently, I try to avoid providing a psychoanalytical interpretation of Figes' psyche outside the texts. Rather, I consider her works as textual constructions and so, I concentrate on what the texts represent and say to the readers as objectively as possible. Secondly, the blurring of genres in these last works can also be quite problematic as they do not belong clearly in a single genre, be it the memoir, the autobiography or the historical, the testimonial, and realist fiction. Rather, they are the result of a fusion of genres, which increases the difficulty of interpreting Figes' literary production. And lastly, the historical and ethical implications contained in the representation of the Holocaust, the dangers of trivialization, reductionism and sensationalism that threaten any critical comment or representation of this barbaric historical episode have always been taken into account as a point of departure for this study. However, in spite of these possible flaws, I would also like to emphasise the significance of this research. This book tries to give Figes the attention and importance she deserves, and provide her with a place in the literary canon. Given the fact that her work is analysed from a rather innovative perspective, I hope the conclusions achieved are original, and that my study will help to reveal Eva Figes as an extremely important contemporary British writer, whose work is paradigmatic of how human beings have dealt with trauma in the aftermath of the Holocaust. If, as I hope to have done, am able to prove that the evolution in the



techniques used by Figes to depict trauma go hand in hand with the evolution of the traumatic processes themselves, it will become evident that Trauma Studies can be used to read Figes' work and, conversely, that Figes' work can be used to read Trauma Studies. Finally, as the relationship between writing and self-healing, and the collective voicing of the unspeakable is put to the test, relevant conclusions concerning the role of literature in our era are brought to the fore, and used as a further step in the traditional debate on the role of literature in society. The implications and conclusions of this study are, therefore, potentially relevant for many different disciplines. This book attempts to demonstrate that the changes in the styles, techniques and literary movements which arose in the last fifty years run *pari passu* with the evolution of human attempts to deal with the most terrible events of our history, and that literature is not detached from society and the problems endured by human beings across the centuries. On the contrary, it will prove the connection between artistic manifestations and human lives. Literature and art should have a more social and political role instead of the abstract and marginal role that has sometimes been assigned to them. Literature should thus become a more active agent in changing the socio-ideological structures underlying our societies, by denouncing and coping with the traumatic episodes undergone by individuals and groups in our contemporary era.

# CHAPTER ONE

## TRAUMA STUDIES, LITERATURE, AND HEALING

### **Key Concepts of Trauma Studies**

#### **Definition and History of Trauma Studies**

Trauma Studies have become an important critical trend since the mid-1990s. As Roger Luckhurst states, trauma theory emerged in the United States at a time “when various lines of inquiry converged to make trauma a privileged critical category” (2006: 497). Since then trauma theory has addressed both public and private theoretical questions that are relevant for psychology, philosophy, ethics and aesthetics, and combines resources from a number of other critical schools, including Freudian psychoanalysis, feminism, New Historicism and deconstructionism.

What we know today as Trauma Studies first appeared when a group of critics associated with the Yale School of Deconstruction, as in Cathy Caruth, Geoffrey Hartman and Shoshana Felman, began to adapt medical ideas on psychic traumatic processes and apply these ideas to the analysis of narrative texts, thus inaugurating Trauma Studies. Critics such as Paul de Man, Barbara Johnson, J. Hillis Miller and Harold Bloom also worked at this prestigious University at some time in their careers further contributing to the development of deconstructive theory. As Luckhurst further explains, Shoshana Felman and Geoffrey Hartman “turned from work on the undecidability of interpretation in literature to publish work on Holocaust memory and witness in the early 1990s; [while] Cathy Caruth signalled that trauma as the limit of knowledge was a continuation of the Yale project” (2006: 497). In general terms, what these critics accomplished was a transposition of their earlier worries about reference and representation, and the limits of language, to the analysis of trauma. Trauma theory continued problematizing the nature of textual reference and representation. Already in 1995, Hartman made the claim that “there is something very contemporary about Trauma Studies reflecting our sense that violence is coming over nearer, like a storm — a storm that

may have already moved into the core of our being” (in Luckhurst, 2006: 503). He further explained that the main task of the trauma critic (2003: 257, 259), which I will perform throughout this book, is to identify the traces of these wounds in the text, since it is assumed that the effects of trauma can be observed in the narrative devices employed by writers.

As mentioned above, the three main representatives of this school are Cathy Caruth, Geoffrey Hartman and Shoshana Felman. Cathy Caruth has become one of the most prominent figures of Trauma Studies: her work has been extensively quoted, as she was one of the first critics to apply psychoanalytical terms to the analysis of trauma in literature. In her path-breaking works, either as an author in “Introduction to Psychoanalysis, Trauma and Culture” (1991a: 1-12) and *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), or as an editor in *American Imago: Studies in Psychoanalysis and Culture* (1991b) and *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995), Caruth goes back to Freudian theories to define the nature of traumatic experiences. On the whole, she applies psychoanalytical concepts to conceptualise trauma and analyse cultural manifestations from the perspective of Trauma Studies, thus providing key definitions of the main tenets of trauma theory. In the “Introduction” to the edited collection, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Caruth, following Paul de Man, offers a definition of trauma as a pathology, consisting “solely in the *structure of its experience* or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its *possession* of the one who experiences it. To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event” (1995: 4-5, original emphasis). As Caruth further explains, the traumatic experience is never fully assimilated, it is a paradoxical event that moves constantly between the knowing and not knowing of the real event that has caused the subsequent psychological disorder. Also using Freudian terminology, Caruth employs the term “latency” to designate “the period during which the effects of the experience are not apparent, Freud seems to describe the trauma as the successive movement from an event to its repression to its return” (7). And, in keeping with her deconstructionist background, she defines the belatedness of trauma as an “aporia” in Derrida’s sense of the term. Belatedness, latency, the difficulties of gaining access to the traumatic story, and the unspeakability of trauma implicit in its aporetic nature, are some of the essential concepts she constantly emphasises for the understanding of the representation of trauma in literature. What becomes clear when studying her work is her firm belief that literature is the site where the dialectic process of knowing and not knowing the traumatic past can be represented and analysed by psychoanalytical methods.

Geoffrey Hartman is another leading figure of Trauma Studies. Most of his work has been devoted to issues concerning the possibilities or impossibilities of representing the Holocaust in literature and other cultural manifestations; he was the co-founder and project director of the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at the University of Yale. As pointed out in the Introduction, Hartman started his career as a deconstructionist, together with Paul de Man, J. Hillis Miller and Harold Bloom, and then moved on to Holocaust Studies in the 1990s. For instance, in his work *The Longest Shadow: In the Aftermath of the Holocaust* (1996), Hartman foregrounds the difficulties and limitations of Holocaust representation, but he has always defended the idea that art can “create instruments to record and express what happened” (2002: 1). Hartman is representative of the current crop of critics who believe in the power of art to represent the unspeakable, whilst always respecting certain limits.

Shoshana Felman also started her critical practice by mixing psychoanalytical and deconstructionist tools to explore the way in which some texts generate ambiguity and aporias of meaning. Her most important contributions to Trauma Studies are her works on the nature of Holocaust testimonies, especially, the book she published with Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crisis of Witnessing, Psychoanalysis and History* (1992). In this work, both critics remark that contemporary societies live in the age of testimony, and are experiencing a crisis of witnessing, due to the traumatic historical events that took place in the twentieth century which require oral or written testimonies to be worked through. In this work, Felman enhances the usefulness of testimonies in the individual and collective working through of trauma, and the preservation of historical memories for future generations. Her definition of testimony will be applied to some of Figs’ creations:

To testify [...] is more than simply to report a fact or an event or to relate what has been lived, recorded and remembered. Memory is conjured here essentially in order to *address* another, to impress upon a listener, to *appeal* to a community. [...] To testify is thus not merely to narrate but to commit oneself, and to commit the narrative, to others. (1992: 204, original emphasis)

With this definition, Felman underlines the necessity of testimonial acts for the survivor, in order to come to terms with the traumatic past and for future generations to keep those memories alive. A major contribution of Felman’s work is her inscription of testimonial works in her own teaching practices, and her analysis of the reactions of students when confronted

with the horrors described by victims of the Holocaust. Felman and Laub also support the idea that contemporary art has the power to transmit and convey trauma (xix), and that literature can be seen as another mode of witnessing and accessing reality (xx).

Another area of development of Trauma Studies in the 1990s was the study of the psychological aspect of trauma in social groups that had been affected by such traumatic events as the Holocaust, The Vietnam War, The Gulf War, and other armed conflicts, or terrorist attacks like those of the Twin Towers and the Pentagon on 11<sup>th</sup> September 2001. More recently, the study has been extended to more individual forms of trauma, produced by marginalisation or racial and sexual abuse. The importance of trauma theory in literary studies has increased year after year, since literary works are especially equipped to be privileged sites to give voice to trauma, providing as they do a healing mechanism for the transformation of traumatic memories into narrative memories. As Emily Sun has argued: "It is a commonplace to think of literature as something that gives expression to the voiceless or to that which could not make itself heard before" (2007: 1). Trauma Studies have brought this to the fore and, consequently, the importance of this field of study in the critical panorama has grown since its birth, whereas literary works have increasingly become privileged spaces for the representation of the effects of individual and collective traumas in our contemporary age.

However, the appearance of Trauma Studies should not be considered an isolated phenomenon, since it is closely linked to the "ethical turn" that took place in the 1980s in the fields of literary criticism and philosophy. As David Parker, amongst others, has explained, the turn to ethics in the critical field ran parallel to "a turn to the literary within ethics" (1998: 14). This ethical turn manifested itself as a revival of interest in the ethical potential of literature, an issue that had come to a dead end in the previous decades with the demise of humanism. This renewal of interest in the ethical value of literature, two decades after the traditional humanist approach to art had been dismissed by (post)structuralist theory and Postmodernist thought, was triggered off by the generalized rejection of the extreme relativism practiced by such radical Postmodernist thinkers as Jean-François Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard. As Michael Eskin explains in the Introduction to a special issue on "Ethics and Literature" of *Poetics Today* (2004), there are other internal factors that have contributed to this "ethical turn" in criticism, such as the growth of feminism, the beginning of queer theory, and the rise of postcolonial and multicultural studies. Closely related to this ethical turn is the figure of Emmanuel Levinas, one of the main philosophers that inspired the return to ethics through his anti-

totalitarian “ethics of alterity”. This brand of ethics demands the subject’s responsibility towards the other as a basic tenet for the functioning of society (1961; 1996). In fact, the Levinasian mode of thinking has been considered as the most genuine attempt to reshape philosophy after an event as horrific as the Holocaust. On the whole, there is a clear connection between the targets of ethical criticism, and the study of trauma in literature, as ethical criticism and Trauma Studies are both centrally concerned with the individual and the demands of otherness (Craps, 2005: 9). This way, the study of trauma in literature may be regarded as a branch of the study of ethics in its different artistic manifestations.

Going back to its origins, the word trauma is derived from the Greek word for wound; “trauma” was first used in English in the field of medicine in the seventeenth century, whereby it always referred to a physical injury caused by an external event. Nowadays, most scholars agree that the origin of the current concept of trauma is inextricably linked to the main technological innovation of the 1860s: the railway, which caused so many accidents during its first decades of use. Nineteenth-century medics studied the behaviour of victims of railway accidents who had not been physically injured, but continued to suffer from different forms of mental distress long after the event. Jean-Martin Charcot was one of the first to contemplate the idea of a psychical harm caused by an overwhelming event, in this case, a railway accident that the subject could not assimilate rationally (1887; 1889). He inaugurated the research on the ways in which traumatic events could alter the normal functioning of the human nervous system by provoking physical and psychical disturbances in patients. Some of the symptoms displayed by these victims became the main indicators of posterior theories of trauma, such as: “disordered memory, disturbed sleep and frightful dreams, and various types of paralysis, melancholia and impotence, with a particular emphasis on the sudden loss of business sense” (Luckhurst, 2008: 22).

After these first attempts to define trauma as a mental illness, the theories of William James, Pierre Janet, Sigmund Freud and Joseph Breuer broke new ground in this area. In fact, although Freudian theories have become canonical, Freud inherited many of the ideas formulated in *The Principles of Psychology* (1886-1891) by William James, who was a disciple of Charcot and a follower of Pierre Janet’s practice. The latter focused his study on the functioning of memories since, for him, the memory system was the central organising machinery of the mind integrating all our experiences into the psyche. In some of his most important works, such as *The Mental State of Hystericals: A Study of Mental Stigmata and Mental Accidents* (1901), *The Major Symptoms of*

*Hysteria* (1907), and *Subconscious Phenomena* (1910), Janet distinguished habit memory, (where the subject integrates the new experience into the subconscious without paying much attention to what is happening), from narrative memory (a unique human capacity, since, unlike animals, human beings can pay conscious attention to memorise something well). If the experience that is happening is familiar and unthreatening, the subject is able to assimilate it with normality; however, Janet also distinguished between traumatic memory and narrative memory. In the first, the traumatic events are distorted and fragmented; they do not follow a logical order and reappear once and again as a result of the process of repetition-compulsion (Janet, 1984, vol. 2: 274). A kind of dissociation takes place within the unified self when the traumatic event is of such an overwhelming nature that the psyche cannot assimilate it in rational terms; so that the subject feels possessed by the traumatic memory as a kind of *idée fixe*, constantly reliving the traumatic event (Janet, 1901: 278-365). Traumatic memories do not correspond to real external time; they are inflexible, invariable and do not have a social component, as ordinary memories do.

In their path-breaking works “On the Psychical Mechanism of Hysterical Phenomena” (1893) and *Studies on Hysteria* (1895), Freud and Breuer endorsed Janet’s contention that dissociated events are usually stored in the human unconscious. In their early writings, Freud and Breuer studied the cases of patients suffering from hysterical symptoms, mainly caused by sexual traumas; their main findings suggested that hysteria was produced by traumatic experiences which had not been fully integrated into the psyche. They pointed to the failed “abreaction” of a first shocking event as the origin of the later development of hysterical neurosis (1991a: 59). This definition focuses on the belatedness of the traumatic experience as, according to Freud and Breuer, the original traumatic event takes place without the traumatised subject noticing it (53, 60). Later on, Freud and Breuer (1895), Freud alone (1915), and other psychiatrists such as F. W. Mott (1919), and C. S. Myers (1940), analysed the case of soldiers who suffered from so-called “shell-shock neurosis” in England after the First World War. It was then that, by insisting on the psychological and physical causes and consequences of trauma, psychoanalysis reinvented the terms of the already heated dispute between rival theories on the origins of trauma. Until that moment, the soldiers suffering from traumatic symptoms had been accused of being effeminate, weak, or degenerate, and were consequently unable to integrate into society when they came back from the front. Roger Luckhurst mentions the Battle of the Somme (1916) as the turning point in the First World War, since this was the first time

that soldiers suffering from shell shock were not branded as cowards and condemned to death. The term “shell shock” was first coined by Myers in February 1915 when he studied the cases of three soldiers whose mental injuries were due to their physical proximity to shell bursts. As Luckhurst further notes, when experiencing this kind of shell-shock neurosis, “he [the patient] has little or no idea of time and place, and his powers of recognition and comprehension are greatly impaired. He may be deaf or mute or a deaf-mute” (2008: 80-81). Nowadays, the figure of the shell-shocked soldier has become an iconic figure among trauma victims in the twentieth century, yet this was the first time that trauma acquired such a collective dimension, affecting numerous soldiers who had fought in the First World War.

Some of the theories on trauma formulated by Freud have become foundational tenets for the progress of Trauma Studies. For instance, drawing on Freud and Breuer’s ideas, Luckhurst defines trauma as:

something that enters the psyche that is so unprecedented or overwhelming that it cannot be processed or assimilated by usual mental processes. We have, as it were, nowhere to put it and so it falls out of our conscious memory, yet is still present in the mind like an intruder or a ghost. (2006: 499)

Several years after having developed the idea of belatedness, and after naming the process of “repetition compulsion” to characterise the traumatic re-enactment of the initial shocking event, Freud created a second line of inquiry about trauma in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). Here, he provided a more abstract explanation of trauma as structural, (*i.e.* something inherent in the human condition,) which he saw as an eternal struggle between the desire to continue living, and the “death drive”, in the desire to return to the state of inorganicism prior to birth. Further, in *Moses and Monotheism* (1939), Freud returned to Janet’s model of dissociation in order to postulate the notion of a “period of latency”, that is, “the time that elapsed between the accident and the first appearance of the symptoms”, a sort of “incubation period”, prior to the appearance of the symptoms of trauma (Freud, 2001b: 67-68, original emphasis). This period of latency is a necessary phase, in the traumatic event mastering over the unexpected event that has broken the subject’s psychical defences. It is after this period that the traumatised subject starts to compulsively repeat the original traumatic experience (2001a: 36-38). Freud also explained that a second traumatic event, or “deferred action”, is usually needed to activate the memory of the initial shock, thereby forcing the subject to repeat it compulsively. These notions have become



foundational for Trauma Studies. For instance, Cathy Caruth has also drawn on Freud's theories to explain the belatedness that characterises traumatic events: "the period during which the effects of the experience are not apparent, [...] the successive movement from an event to its repression to its return" (1995: 7).

These early studies on trauma forerun the two traumatic disorders, Post-traumatic Stress Disorder and Multiple Personality Disorder, which were formulated by the American Psychiatric Association in the *Diagnostic and Statistic Manual* of 1980. The first emerged from the treatment of Vietnam War veterans, but with the passing of time, it has been applied to other traumas caused by similar events, such as assaults, accidents, or natural disasters. PTSD was characterised in terms of "intrusive symptoms (such as nightmares, flashbacks and persistent memories), avoidance symptoms (such as emotional numbing, withdrawal from the world and avoidance of reminders) and symptoms of overarousal (such as insomnia and irritability)" (Bracken, 2001: 733). As Whitehead explains, it was only after the Vietnam War that the American Psychiatric Association decided to accept the idea that "a psychiatric disorder could be wholly environmentally determined and that a traumatic event occurring in adulthood could have lasting psychological consequences" (2004: 4). But there were also other socio-political reasons that fostered the study of trauma from the 1980s onwards. As Luckhurst notes:

the advocates were self-consciously comparative, seeking out links to studies of the psychological reactions of those who survived Hiroshima bombing, the victims of the Nazi persecution, the consequences of slavery and segregation on African-American identity, and women who had suffered incest or rape trauma.(2008: 61-2)

It is within this framework that the emergence of Trauma Studies must be contextualised, since from the 1980s, many of these notions which were present only in psychological and psychoanalytical discourses, flooded into the social, political, cultural and artistic realms. The general public is today familiar with terms that come from the field of Trauma Studies, and concepts such as trauma, PTSD therapy, or healing are now concepts that we see in the newspapers and use in our daily vocabulary. During the last three decades society has witnessed the voicing of many events that had previously been repressed at individual and collective levels. Genocides of such magnitude as the Holocaust, Cambodia and The Gulag have been progressively spoken about in the public sphere together with many other abuses and conflicts suffered by minority groups around the world. The study of individual trauma fostered by psychoanalytical practices has

evolved in cultural and collective notions of trauma. Initial interest in the formation of memories in the individual mind, has given way to theories on the formation of collective memories. The early methods of healing have developed into a great variety of therapies which go from the individual to the collective, and from Western ideas of curing trauma to Eastern spiritual healing practices and questions about the possibility of narrating traumatic events have taken the lead in the critical realm.

Even more so, it could be said that at the present moment we are to some extent living in the deconstruction of Trauma Studies since, after bursting into the critical realm over the last two decades, more and more critical voices have emerged pointing out some of the disadvantages presented by the discipline. These critical voices highlight that most of the dominant models of trauma, and the possible therapies to overcome it, come from Western conceptions of the subject and the mind, which limits the context whereby these concepts should be applied. And they denounce the negative effects of generalising models of trauma, in favour of more concrete and individualised notions, as every culture and every nation may deal with traumatic events in a very different way depending on their own ideologies, traditions, and other cultural factors. Also, these negative views argue that the psychoanalytical Freudian model has become the paradigm in the field of Trauma Studies, when there are more possibilities which could provide alternative, and perhaps more effective, ways of understanding how trauma affects individuals and societies.<sup>2</sup> For instance, in *Understanding Trauma: Integrating Biological, Clinical and Cultural Perspectives* (2007) Kirmayer, Lemelson, and Barad point out the globalised nature of the phenomenon of trauma in general, and more particularly, at the generalisation of the concept of PTSD in these terms:

The metaphor of trauma draws attention to the ways that extremes of violence break bodies and minds, leaving indelible marks even after healing and recovery. But the notion of trauma has been extended to cover a vast array of situations of extremity and equally varied individual and collective responses. Trauma can be seen at once as a socio-political event, a psychophysiological process, a physical and emotional experience, and a narrative theme in explanations of individual and social suffering. (1)

All the contributors in this volume try to decentralise the concept of PTSD in current discussions on trauma. As the editors argue, “the emphasis on PTSD casts a long shadow in current discussions of trauma, organizing experience, simplifying causal explanations, and directing attention to symptoms in ways that may give a useful focus for treatment, but that may also distort a complex human and social predicament” (4). Voices like this

suggest that for some cultures, explicit talk about a traumatic event should be avoided; for others, it is a necessary step. Applying medical Western labels to all kinds of social suffering and traumas has so many negative effects, that at this moment of our research we should be very careful when using this terminology: victims may be pathologised and stigmatised; trauma may become the founding myth of a community and used for political purposes, and so forth. That is to say, not everyone who suffers a traumatic experience develops PTSD, and this is the message that should be changed: “most people should be told that they are resilient, not just because it is a healthy message, but because it is the legacy of our biological evolution and is usually true” (326). If we summarise all of these critical voices in general terms, the criticism on Trauma Studies suggests that we should be careful in turning Trauma Studies into a new “master narrative” which would devoid the field of its original meaning, turning it into an ideological construction that may be negatively used for political purposes.<sup>3</sup> These more recent ideas on trauma theory claim for more transpersonal and transcultural visions of memory and trauma (Cetinic, 2010: 287). They move towards an understanding of trauma in which the subjects may have recourse both to affects (one such being Silvan Tomkins the inspirer of the “Theory of Affects” in the 1950s, as a response to the Freudian focus on drives, instead considering human affects as a significant source to understanding psychical trauma), and to the capacity of resilience (Cyruhinik, 1999), as alternative ways to understand, cure, or even avoid the negative effects of traumatic experiences.

Leaving these critical views aside, if there is a feature of Trauma Studies on which all critics might agree, it is its interdisciplinary nature, since it encompasses a wide range of fields approaching the various psychological, ethical, philosophical aspects concerned with the representation of trauma. As Luckhurst argued, Trauma Studies are interdisciplinary themselves as they include “many fields, focusing on psychological, philosophical, ethical, and aesthetic questions about the nature and representation of traumatic events. These concerns range from the public and historical to the private and memorial” (2006: 497). In fact, since its origins, Trauma Studies has evolved into many diverse approaches depending on the discipline from which we analyse the phenomenon of trauma. In their “Introduction” to the volume *Between the Urge to Know and the Need to Deny* (2011), Dolores Herrero and Sonia Baelo-Allué relate this to the ethical confrontation which occurs when one approaches a trauma narrative. In their own words:

Reading [trauma] must keep on responding to the other, while also accepting and admitting that, in bearing witness to the other, one cannot

master, control, determine or domesticate the other though some normative ontological or epistemological process. [...] Reading trauma as a material manifestation of the other in a given text may demand the use of such different disciplines as psychoanalysis, history and ethic, but it is ultimately irreducible to any of them. No disciplinary economy can exclusively account for the traumatic. (12)

Thus, supporting this interdisciplinary need in the field of Trauma Studies, I will briefly expose the various approaches to trauma and the key concepts that will reappear throughout this book.

To begin with, following the path-breaking works of Freud, Janet and Jung, a strong psychoanalytical approach to trauma developed during the last few decades of the twentieth century; one could even argue that it has become the prevailing model applied in Trauma Studies. This branch focuses on how trauma operates in real life, and on the mechanisms that take place within a traumatised subject's mind. It aims at identifying the various stages in a traumatic process; the factors that determine the development of a trauma by individuals or groups; and the creation of possible therapies to overcome it. Many research centres for the study of psychical trauma have arisen around the world, several journals have been created to disseminate knowledge gathered by these centres, new innovative therapies have been implanted to help the traumatised subjects in Western societies, and many self-help books have been published to direct attention to the importance of psychical health. Of the vast number of psychologists and psychiatrists that have published their works in the last years, I will mainly have recourse to the works of Judith Lewis Herman (1992), J. H. Wearden (2006), and Dori Laub (1995, 1992). In particular, the theories and practices of Judith Lewis Herman, exposed in her book *Trauma and Recovery* (1992) will be displayed throughout the analysis, as she reviews the main traumatic disorders from neurosis and shell shock to PTSD, applied not only to combatants but also to other victims of genocide, and victim of sexual abuse. She establishes the three main symptoms of traumatic disorders, which echo the three main symptoms listed by the APA in 1980 as: "hyperarousal", "intrusion" and "constriction" (2001: 35). As will be further developed, Herman also distinguishes three main stages in the recovery from trauma: "safety", "remembrance and mourning", and "reconnection with ordinary life" (155). Echoing Pierre Janet, she points out that the last two stages can be represented in literature by showing characters that struggle to transform their traumatic memories into narrative memories.

Together with this, there is the neurobiological approach which focuses on the neuronal and physical processes that occur in the brain of the

traumatised person, and the damage that trauma may cause on the structure of the subject's mind. In the last few years, many studies have focused on: the analysis of the biology of fear in patients that have undergone some experience that threatens the defensive walls of their psyche; on the way genes and environment interact with each other in order to create vulnerability and/or resilience in the face of trauma; and on the way early trauma can deform later psychological developments. Some of the best known neurobiologists who have focused on the specific biological formations of traumas are Bessel A. van der Kolk, Onno van der Hart, Vinuta Rau, Michael S. Fanselow, Gregory J. Quirk, Mark Barad, Christopher K. Cain, J. Douglas Bremner, and Emeran A. Mayer.

In the last few years the disciplines of sociology and anthropology have also fostered a critical view, albeit in a very different approach, towards Trauma Studies. These fields of research have been strongly critical of the psychological perspectives associated with the PTSD model of the 1980s, which only focused on trauma as an individual phenomenon. Their research is intimately linked to the journal *Social Science and Medicine*. Some of these theories have been formulated by Alan Young, Patrick J. Bracken, Hanna Kienzler, Arthur Kleinman, Joan Kleinman, Paul Farmer, Veena Das, Margaret Lock, and Lars Weisaeth amongst others. Their main contributions share the common aim of rejecting the universalised and Western notions of trauma and PTSD practised by psychologists and psychoanalysts from the end of the nineteenth century, and of instead affirming that "the task of the psychological anthropologist is to understand the influence of culture on the dynamics of individual experience" (Kirmayer et al., 2007: 295). In works such as Alan Young's *The Harmony of Illusions: Inventing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder* (1995), and Patrick Bracken's "Post-modernity and post-traumatic stress disorder" (2001), it is argued that PTSD is a cultural construction, produced in a specific context, at a given moment of time, in the Western world. Young and Bracken are two of the critics who have fostered a new conceptualisation of trauma focused on the specificities of each person's and every community's suffering. Also, the essays collected in Arthur Kleinman, Veena Das and Margaret Lock's *Social Suffering* (1997) underline the cultural appropriation of suffering that has taken place in Western societies in order to be used as a kind of socio-political tool by powerful sectors of society. They also argue for a new terminology that rejects the notion of "trauma" in favour of that of "suffering", a term that they provide with a social and collective dimension. Hanna Kienzler specifically defends the idea that the notion of PTSD is a cultural construction, and/or a product of history (2008: 219). Her definition of

“social suffering” illustrates the change that this anthropological view of trauma attempts to bring about in contemporary criticism: “to explain social suffering, one must embed individual biography in the larger matrix of culture, history, and political economy and find how various larger scale forces come to be translated into personal distress and disease” (225). Her work also emphasises the fact that PTSD is a Western concept that should not be used when talking about the suffering of non-Western societies and, especially, that should not be applied to non-Western victims living in our Western societies, as their systems of belief are totally different from ours.

Closely related to the sociological and anthropological perspectives are the cultural approaches to trauma provided by anthropologists, sociologists and physicians such as Laurence J. Kirmayer, Allan Young, Jeffrey C. Alexander, Kai Erikson, Ron Eyerman, Bernhard Giesen, Neil J. Smelser, Piotr Sztompka, Paul Antze, Michael Lambek, Antonius C. G. M. Robben, Marcelo M. Suárez-Orozco, and Kirby Farrell. All of whom have analysed how individuals make sense of their experiences of suffering within social institutions, how traumatic symptoms are interpreted and constructed by culture and society, and how trauma can be ideologically manipulated and exploited. Thus, in *Post-Traumatic Culture* (1998), Kirby Farrell argues that “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” (xii). From this perspective, trauma becomes “psychocultural” (7). He distinguishes trauma as both a clinical concept and a “cultural trope” (14) that can be used to interpret the past, individual and collective history, and to provide explanations about our world (x). According to Farrell, then, besides referring to a real injury that affects the lives of many individuals and groups, the concept of trauma has been appropriated by cultural discourse, becoming a new fiction through which humans try to explain the chaotic reality outside. Bearing in mind Alan Young, Arthur Kleinman, Patrick Bracken, and Kirby Farrell’s notions of collective trauma, for the purpose of this study, I will follow Kai Erikson’s conceptualisation of collective trauma as it appears in her book *Everything in Its Path* (1976), and in her article “Notes on Trauma and Community” (1995: 183-199), where collective trauma is defined as:

a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality. The collective trauma works its way slowly and even insidiously into the awareness of those who suffer from it, so it does not have the quality of suddenness normally associated with ‘trauma’. But it is a form of shock all the same, a gradual realization that the community no longer exists as an