

TESTIMONY AND THE REPRESENTATION OF TRAUMA IN EVA  
FIGES' *JOURNEY TO NOWHERE*

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The main aim of this study is to show that the triggering force for the contemporary destabilisation of traditional life-writing genres is trauma. In *The Limits of Autobiography. Trauma and Testimony*, Leigh Gilmore argues that the 'limit case autobiography' has been born out of the complicated relationship between trauma and testimony. I will prove that the autobiographical work of the British writer Eva Figes' *Journey to Nowhere* belongs in this category. The mixture of elements of autobiography, biography, memoir, history and testimony aims at working through the author-narrator's experiences of the Holocaust and denouncing the consequences of the creation of Israel after the Second World War. The analysis of the various testimonial levels and of the healing stages represented in the narration shows that it is the conflict between the representation of trauma and the self that has demanded the writing of this 'limit case autobiography'. Figes' testimonial project proves that the need to represent trauma has affected the production of fictional narratives and non-fictional testimonies, which has exposed the need to develop new critical approaches such as Trauma Studies.

Keywords: Eva Figes; testimony; Trauma Studies; Holocaust; limit-case autobiography; contemporary literature

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LOS GÉNEROS TESTIMONIALES Y LA REPRESENTACIÓN DEL TRAUMA EN  
*JOURNEY TO NOWHERE* DE EVA FIGES

*El principal objetivo de este artículo es exponer que el conflicto entre la representación del trauma y del yo ha introducido cambios considerables en los géneros autobiográficos. En el transcurso del artículo, intentaré demostrar que Journey to Nowhere, de la autora británica Eva Figes, pertenece al nuevo género designado por Leigh Gilmore como 'autobiografía límite'. El análisis de los diferentes niveles testimoniales y de las fases de curación de los procesos traumáticos representados en el texto demostrará que la fusión de elementos de autobiografía, biografía, memorias, historia y testimonio responden a la necesidad de la autora-narradora de superar las experiencias traumáticas vividas durante y después del Holocausto y de denunciar las consecuencias de la creación de Israel después de la Segunda Guerra Mundial. Este estudio ayudará a comprender cómo el concepto de trauma ha cambiado la producción de narrativas de ficción y de testimonios no ficcionales y a su vez, ha mostrado la necesidad de crear nuevos enfoques críticos como los Estudios de Trauma.*

*Palabras clave: Eva Figes; testimonio; Estudios de Trauma; Holocausto; autobiografía límite; literatura contemporánea*

### 1. “Stories about the past”

I am a grandmother now and, like all grandmothers, I have a head full of stories about the past. But my stories are not like other people’s, which makes them more fascinating for my descendants, if not always easy to talk about. All of them are strange, in one way or another, but so were the times. (Figs 2008: 1)<sup>1</sup>

These words set up the autobiographical journey to the past that the German-Jewish born British writer Eva Figs will perform in her latest book, *Journey to Nowhere. One Woman Looks for the Promised Land* (2008). The story Eva Figs narrates in this book is set in 2008 when, already a recognised writer, she felt the necessity to tell her own memories of the time when she and her family had to leave Germany as a result of the outbreak of the Second World War and, more particularly, to tell the story of her family’s maid. Edith’s story can be read as an exemplary account of all those Jews who survived the Holocaust in Germany and were later attracted by the Zionist cause and moved to Palestine, where they were unable to find their place because of their German origins. Figs has declared that she decided to write this book because she felt angry about what Israel was doing to Palestinians; she has explained that, although she was afraid of revealing her political views, she felt this was the time to denounce the political decisions made by the European and American political institutions after the war (in Pellicer-Ortín 2009: 15).

The connection between the creation of individual identities and writing has become increasingly important after structuralism. Already in 1977, Roland Barthes, in his famous essay ‘The Death of the Author’, argued that the self is the result of writing rather than its cause and thus the self can be constantly recreated through the process of writing. In recent decades we have observed a proliferation of life-writing in its different manifestations: autobiography, literary biography, biography, autofiction and memoir. Critics such as Alison Light (2004: 751) assert that literary biography has become the most successful literary form among the British readership since the 1960s. Roger Luckhurst considers that a “memoir boom” has invaded the literary panorama since the 1990s (2008: 117), while Leigh Gilmore asserts that “memoir has become *the* genre in the skittish period around the turn of the millennium” (2001: 1). Although most critics have read *Journey to Nowhere* as a memoir (Feigel 2008: 30; Karpf 2008: 7; Cross 2009: 26), focusing on the personal and traumatic component of the stories contained in the narration, it is my contention that this label is too narrow for such a complex work.

In her article ‘Writing Lives’ (2004), Alison Light outlines the evolution of life-writing genres in Britain. As she explains, in the 1970s autobiographical genres attempted to assert collective identities, while ‘confessional’ poetry verbalised the internal suffering of many writers. In the 1980s, novelistic experimentation became the norm and fictional reports of true lives multiplied. In the 1990s, literary memoirs produced by well-known writers became the new trend, and the blurring of boundaries between fiction and reality has predominated in present-day life-writing genres (Light

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2004: 765). Light and Luckhurst are two of the many critics who believe that most of the autobiographical genres published in recent decades deal with problematic aspects concerning the narrativisation of what Figes refers to as the “strange” events and times of her childhood (Light 2004: 764). *Journey to Nowhere* will show that traumatic events cannot be incorporated into narratives in an easy way, since they are the product of the internal struggle between the needs to deny and to release the traumatic memories. Figes' author-narrator defines this internal conflict as a complicated process when she asserts that “remembering brings problems” (Figes 2008: 139).

Autobiographical works like Figes' *Journey to Nowhere* respond to the double need to voice the collective and individual traumatic experiences triggered by the Holocaust and of providing a healing mechanism for the transformation of these traumatic memories into narrative memories. Certain contemporary critics, particularly those associated with Yale University in the 1990s, such as Cathy Caruth, Geoffrey Hartman or Shoshana Felman, adapted the medical ideas on psychic traumatic processes to the narrative analysis, thus inaugurating trauma studies (Whitehead 2004: 4). As Geoffrey Hartman explains, the task of the trauma critic is to discover the ‘psychic wounds’ in the words provided by literary and non-literary accounts dealing with traumatic experiences, since the effects of traumatic processes can be traced in the narrative devices employed by contemporary writers of different genres (2003: 257, 259). As literary critics, we have witnessed the proliferation of life-writing genres blurring the traditional boundaries between fiction and reality and between fictional narratives and autobiography, thus complicating the representation of the textual self.

The main aim of this article will be to show that the triggering force for this destabilisation of traditional life-writing genres is trauma.<sup>2</sup> Trauma begs for the representation of the unrepresentable and works against any coherent narrative representation of the self. Drawing on this, Leigh Gilmore (2001) argues that a new life-writing genre has been born out of the complicated relationship between trauma and testimony: the *limit case autobiography*. These liminal autobiographies blur the boundaries between “autobiography and fiction, autobiography and history, autobiography and legal testimony, autobiography and psychoanalysis, or autobiography and theory” (Gilmore 2001: 14). They are the product of the paradoxes resulting from the conflict created when the representation of the self and trauma overlap (2001: 19), a conflict that darkens the distinction between literature and testimony.

As Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (1992) argue, our societies have experienced a crisis of witnessing due to the traumatic historical events that took place in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and which required oral or written testimonies in order to be worked through. Freud and Breuer's (1991a: 57, 68) talking cure and Carl Jung's (1990: 117) conviction that the healing process begins 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 research line as Felman and Laub, Hartman equates the function of literature

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<sup>2</sup> Traditional autobiography is understood as a text in which the biographer offers a detailed and complex narrative of his mind and the events that took place during a great part of his or her life (Buell 1991: 47-69).

to that of the talking cure (2003: 259). Drawing on this, Suzette A. Henke has defined the term *scriptotherapy* as “the process of writing out and writing through traumatic experience in the mode of therapeutic re-enactment” (1998: xii-xiii). Thus, one of the main aims of traumatic life writing would be to articulate some unbearable emotional crisis that has become unspeakable for the writer, so that what cannot be spoken may be written (1998: xviii).

The narrativisation of traumatic experiences becomes even more problematic when the traumatic events refer to the Holocaust and the post-Holocaust years, as happens in *Journey to Nowhere*, given the ethical connotations of the Holocaust and the recent controversies surrounding its fictionalisation (Lang 1988: 38; Henke 1998: xiii). According to certain specialists in Holocaust Studies, one of the reasons this topic still generates so much debate is the human incapacity to confront the facts of the Nazi genocide (Langer 2000: xv). Another lies in the limitations imposed by history and the dangers of sensationalism that hover over any artistic representation of the singular events that took place in the Holocaust (Hartman 2002: 36). However, critics such as Hartman (1996: 133-72) and Felman and Laub (1992: 57-74) consider that oral and written, literary and non-literary testimonies are useful tools for the individual and collective working through trauma as well as for the preservation of historical memories for future generations.

In *Journey to Nowhere*, Figes appears to have followed these premises, since she yielded to the power of stories to reveal truths about the Holocaust and to heal those who survived it. In keeping with this, her work should be studied in relation to the vast number of Holocaust narratives that have appeared in recent decades, from the early testimonial works of Primo Levi (1947) or Ellie Wiesel (1958) to the current explosion of autobiographical and fictional narratives targeted at representing the traumatic nature of these historical events (Whitehead 2004: 6; Schwarz 1999: 4; Lang 1988: 1-15). In particular, Figes’ autobiographical works are representative of the contemporary group of Anglo-Jewish writers such as Ronit Lentin, Dan Jacobson, Gabriel Josipovici and George Steiner, who have attempted to narrativise in their literary works their traumatic experiences and their identity conflicts during and after the Holocaust (Cheyette, 1998: xliii-liiii). More concretely, *Journey to Nowhere* should be analysed in relation to preceding autobiographical works such as Anne Karpf’s *The War After* (1996), Leila Berg’s *Flickerbook* (1997), Jenny Diski’s *Skating to Antarctica* (1997) or Linda Grant’s *Remind me Who I am, Again* (1998). All were published by Anglo-Jewish female writers who, like Figes, tried to make sense of their own and their families’ traumatic experiences of immigration and the Holocaust in their autobiographical writings (Behlau 2004: 107-22). However, Figes’ earliest works, published between the late 1960s and 1970s, were not autobiographical; rather, they were inheritors of the Modernist stream-of-consciousness techniques and interest in the individual. It was not until 1978 that Figes published her first autobiographical work, *Little Eden: A Child at War*, in which she started to verbalise her traumatic experiences in the Second World War and abandoned her experimental style. In her following autobiographical work, *Tales of Innocence and Experience* (2003), she narrated the transmission of her childhood memories to her granddaughter through the act of story-telling. And finally, in *Journey to Nowhere* Figes succeeds in combining the narration of her and her family’s

traumatic experiences in post-Holocaust Great Britain with her opinions on the creation of Israel in 1947.

Figes' political and testimonial work demonstrates that trauma has influenced the production of fictional narratives and non-fictional testimonies by breaking the frame of traditional representation of the self. Thus, after analysing the mechanisms of trauma representation and the testimonial dimensions present in the narration, I will attempt to show that it is the conflict between self-representation and the representation of trauma that has driven the writing of this 'limit case autobiography'.<sup>3</sup> My initial hypothesis is that the mixture of elements of different literary genres is targeted at working through the author-narrator's traumatic experiences of the Holocaust and denouncing the negative consequences brought about by the creation of Israel after the Second World War. *Journey to Nowhere* has a complex structure, since the main narrative layer combines the retrospective testimonial account of the author-narrator's childhood memories with political and historical issues.

Many of the aspects that turn this work into a limit-case autobiography are rooted in the testimonial nature of Figes' text. Leigh Gilmore argues that limit cases are testimonial projects by nature because these narrations always require a listener, apart from a speaking subject. As one of the harms of trauma is the impossibility of saying "you" (Gilman 2001: 31), the subject needs to find another to whom the narration can be addressed in order to try to initiate the overcoming of trauma. In Figes' work, the structure is complicated by the embedding of various testimonial acts, which start from the individual account of the author's experiences and end with the collective voicing of the Jewish traumatic experiences represented by Edith's story. Following Shoshana Felman's definition of the testimonial act:

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, emphasis in the original)

It becomes clear that in any act of bearing testimony the speaker/writer commits an emotionally charged testimony to a listener/reader, who becomes the recipient of the truth lying at the core of the painfully transmitted shocking events. All these elements are represented in *Journey to Nowhere*.

At the same time, I will try to show that the testimonial dimensions present in the narration run parallel to the stages in the overcoming of trauma represented in the text. As regards the healing of traumatic processes, Dominick LaCapra has had recourse to the Freudian notion that the original traumatic event must "find a way out through speech" in order to introduce it "into normal consciousness" (Freud and Breuer 1991a: 68) when he explains that the "working through" of trauma starts when the subject is able to arrange chronologically the fragmentary pieces that come to the conscious mind

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<sup>3</sup> Together with the works analysed by Gilmore (2001): Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992), Mikal Gilmore's *Shot in the Heart* (1994), Jamaica Kincaid's *The Autobiography of my Mother* (1996) and Jeanette Winterson's *Written on the Body* (1992).

as nightmares or flashbacks (2001: 21-22). According to the psychiatrist Judith Lewis Herman (2001), there are three stages in the healing process: safety, remembrance or mourning and the reconnection with ordinary life, which are embodied in Figes' work.

## 2. Safety

In the first pages of *Journey to Nowhere*, readers confront the author-narrator's statement that: "But the angle of vision changes with time, and at that moment, driving down Lisson Grove half a century later, Edith's story suddenly seemed worth telling. Just because it went against the grain, the in-built prejudices of a lifetime" (2008: 3). These words bring to mind Gilmore's contention that limit-case works usually begin in mourning when the narrator recognises that there is something absent in her life that needs to be sought (2001: 93). At the beginning of her book, Gilmore states that *trauma* is what "breaks the frame" (2001: 8, my emphasis) in contemporary narrative self-representations.

It was not until the second half of the nineteenth century that medics started to broaden the notion of trauma to the psychical harm caused by an overwhelming event that the subject could not assimilate in rational terms. First applied to the victims of railway accidents (Charcot 1887) and then to the 'shell-shocked' soldiers of the First World War (Mott 1919; Freud 2001a; Myers 1940), the notion of psychic trauma came to public notice thanks to the works of Sigmund Freud, whose conceptualisation of traumatic neurosis is still present in contemporary trauma critics such as Cathy Caruth (1995, 1996) or Roger Luckhurst, who has described psychical 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 ghost. (Luckhurst 2006: 499)

This definition focuses on the belatedness of the traumatic experience. This idea also has its basis in Freud and Breuer's inaugural line of thought which explains that the original traumatic event takes place without the traumatised subject noticing it (Freud and Breuer 1991a: 53, 60). In their path-breaking works 'On the Psychical Mechanism of Hysterical Phenomena' (1991a) and *Studies on Hysteria* (1991b), they pointed to the repression and failed "abreaction" of this first shocking event as the origin of the posterior development of hysterical neurosis (Freud and Breuer 1991a:59). In *Moses and Monotheism* (1939), Freud developed this idea by defining the so-called *period of latency* as follows: "the time that elapsed between the accident and the first appearance of the symptoms is called the 'incubation period', a transparent allusion to the pathology of infectious disease . . . It is the feature one might term *latency*" (Freud 2001b: 67-68, original emphasis). These notions have become foundational for trauma studies, as Luckhurst remarks that "this two-stage theory of trauma, the first forgotten impact making a belated return after a hiatus, has been central to cultural trauma theory" (2008: 8), and 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).

This trauma-related belatedness typifies the narrative structure of Figes' book, as the author-narrator starts admitting that there is something absent in her present life which she has to look for in her past and in Edith's story in order to go on with her life. Thus, it will become evident that one of the main impulses behind this work is the author-narrator's need to cope with the traumatic past experiences that were not fully assimilated at the time the initial shock took place and have continued to haunt her ever since. The fact that until 2008 Figes has not managed to address her personal story so directly or to tackle issues concerning the history of her homeland, Germany, and of the Jewish people who emigrated to Palestine, reinforces the Freudian theory that some time has to elapse in order for the trauma survivor to try to integrate the traumatic memories into her self. In Figes' case, the sudden encounter with a place of the past activates the mental processes that make the author-narrator conscious of the unsolved traumas hidden in her soul. Her act of remembering corresponds to her need to understand the past and perform the process of transference of traumatic experiences (Gilmore 2001: 73). As Anne Whitehead clarifies, buried memories must be uncovered for the subject's soul to heal and "the delayed action of remembering... allows the past to develop, to evolve along with changing circumstances over time" (2009: 91).

This is the first testimonial dimension identified in Figes' work. It corresponds to the prologue and the epilogue, where the *I* of the flesh-and-blood author becomes patent and Figes explains that this is a testimonial text motivated by her feeling that she owes Edith a debt that she cannot repay (Figes 2008:3). As she further explains, this work is also based on the research she carried out in order to understand the political events that took place after the Holocaust (Figes 2008: 3-4). She uses her own voice to dedicate "this story of survival, and the sorrow it so often brings. To Edith and thousands of others, who were betrayed by the victors of a terrible war, and who were expected to fight for a homeland most of them did not even want" (2008: 4). In this part, the identities of author and fictional narrator merge explicitly, the author bears witness to her self in order to arrange her thoughts and reflect on the political goals that motivated the writing of the book. This first testimonial dimension corresponds to the first healing stage described by Herman: 'safety' or the feeling experienced once the problem has been recognised and the subject tries to gain control over her life.

### 3. Remembrance and mourning

In the second testimonial dimension readers become witnesses to Figes' memories thanks to the "testimonial power of language" (Felman and Laub 1992: 29), which allows her to perform a writing-healing process of working through (Henke 1998: xii). However, at this stage we have to distinguish two different narrative strategies. On the one hand, the traumatic events that took place between 1939 and 1948 are often rendered by the adult narrator from her adult perspective, trying to impose a logical order on the fragmentary memories of her disturbing past. This quotation can clarify this point: "I knew he was smiling because of us, the children. I had begun to divide the human race into people who smiled at children, and those who did not... I was growing up, suddenly and very fast" (2008: 22). In this example, the adult Figes is both narrator and focaliser. She looks back at her childhood experiences and makes evaluative

comments on the effects these events had on her maturation process. However, there are also some moments when the adult-narrator assumes the perspective of the child she was, as happens in episodes like this:

The Gedachtniskirche already had its Christmas tree, lights sparkling. Why did we not have one? At the other end of the long corridor I could hear whispering: Edith and the nursemaid were discussing some sort of secret. Had my father done something wrong, was he in prison? (2008: 13)

In these instances of child focalisation, the author-narrator can remember German words, the language of her childhood, and readers may grasp the way little Eva perceived all the changes in her family when the war broke out.

On the other hand, when the narrator wishes to provide readers with information of the historical events, she focalises the episodes from her adult perspective, from which she has more historical knowledge to criticise the political decisions made in the post-war period. These historical passages appear especially at the end; they deal with the creation of Israel, the conflict in Gaza, the politicians who influenced the course of events and writers who, “like Primo Levy had started to voice their Holocaust experiences” (2008: 141). In general, Figes alternates historical with autobiographical remarks, introducing testimonial pieces containing the opinions of key socio-political figures of that moment. This is a fruitful device to lend credibility to the historical events narrated and to turn them into something tangible.

As Ann Karpf argues in her review of *Journey to Nowhere*, the book is crowded with various individual and collective traumatic stories such as “the story of Israel’s birth, told here polemically, sometimes simplistically, but also courageously; the story of how Figes adapted to life in England; and, most problematic, the story of her troubled relationship with her mother” (2008: 7). In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), Freud explains that, after the period of latency, the traumatised subject starts to repeat compulsively the original traumatic experience (2001a: 36-8). Dominick LaCapra takes up this idea by formulating various symptoms of this compulsion to repeat or “act out” (LaCapra 2001: 22), such as nightmares, a general state of anxiety and unknown fears that can lead to self-mutilation and other forms of self-punishment. During this phase, the subject’s sense of temporality becomes distorted, so that “in acting out, tenses implode, and it is as if one were back there in the past reliving the traumatic scene” (LaCapra 2001: 21). Echoing this, Figes’ autobiographical narrator is constantly haunted by the traumatic shock of her “young life” (Figes 2008: 18), when she was forced to emigrate to Great Britain, leaving behind her grandparents. As a result, she suffers from recurrent nightmares and intrusive memories that take her back to that moment, as she describes: “Always the same dream: the day of departure, a grey March morning, small figures waving from the edge of the airfield as we waited for the plane to take off” (2008: 10). These flashbacks create a narration full of digressions which interrupt the logical flux of the telling. This sort of convoluted narration evoking the stagnation of traumatic time is a key feature of limit cases.

*Journey to Nowhere* constantly emphasises the separation between the present and the past, thus enhancing the importance of the passing of time to assimilate traumatic events, as in the following example: “A lifetime separates the events I have been

describing from the present day, a time of recollection" (2008: 139). Figes' use of her childhood's past is related to Gilmore's (2001: 65) contention that liminal stories are often told from a child's perspective or allude to traumatic episodes that occurred during the protagonist's childhood. In this case, the original traumatic event is constantly re-enacted in Figes' narration and became comprehensible to her when her mother sent the child to the cinema to watch a newsreel about Belsen. The horror of the images of the concentration camps marked Eva forever and she admits that she has never been the same person afterwards (2008: 40).

Another aspect of the author-narrator's trauma is the strained relationship with her mother due to her mother's difficulty in "coping with" the horrible events the family had gone through (2008: 49). At the heart of this relationship lies the process of transgenerational transmission of trauma that her mother exercised on her when she mistreated and blamed her, as the author-narrator notes: "She became first depressed, then increasingly resentful of the whole situation, and she took it out on me" (2008: 45).<sup>4</sup> Readers also access the trauma undergone by other relatives; for instance, Figes explains that her father had constant nightmares about his experience in the concentration camp of Dachau and one of her mother's cousins is described as suffering from PTSD, "living in a gilded cage, hating everybody" (2008: 111). All these characters experience a common reluctance to talk about these events — "an unspoken rule in our household was silence" (2008: 7). Since these characters find themselves living an acting-out process, they are constantly struggling between remembering and forgetting the past (Whitehead 2009: 121). Nevertheless, as the author-narrator comments: "My need to know what had happened to my maternal grandfather and his wife was matched by my mother's need not to know" (2008: 10). She needs to know her family past and the historical events that occurred during and after the Holocaust in order to work through her own trauma of separation, reinforced by the traumas of the other members of the family that had been transmitted to her.

Finally, Edith's individual trauma comes to the fore through Edith's own narration of her exile from Germany to Israel after the Second World War and her eventual further exile to Britain in order to work for Figes' family again. Like other traumatised characters, Edith shows great distress when she tries to render those horrible events (2008: 78); however, she is finally able to tell little Eva the unspeakable fact that she found herself totally displaced when she tried to live in the new Israel of 1947. Edith relates all the hardship she suffered during the Holocaust in Berlin, how she was marked as a Jew and forced to move from one place to another to avoid being found by the Nazis. Her story is full of images of decadence, as is shown in the following comment: "We [the Jews] must have been pretty smelly, but the whole city stank. Gas leaks, bodies under the rubble" (2008: 96). Her narration also makes reference to the feelings of loneliness she experienced when she decided to go to Israel, which even made her regret having survived the Holocaust,<sup>5</sup> as the author-narrator records: "Edith

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<sup>4</sup> This is the trauma transmitted to posterior generations that did not live the traumatic events as such but have inherited the trauma from their family and experience traumatic symptoms in a direct or indirect way as if they had suffered the trauma themselves.

<sup>5</sup> This is a feeling expressed in many other Jewish survivors' works (Brauner 2001: 11-13).

had never been so depressed. She had survived the war, the deportations, the relentless bombing of Berlin, but for what? . . . she was quite alone in the world” (2008: 119).

Edith’s individual trauma mirrors the collective trauma undergone by many people who were not able to find a place to rebuild their lives after the Holocaust.<sup>6</sup> As Edith’s description illustrates, the actual experience of living in Israel ran contrary “to the smiling faces I had seen on the newsreels” (2008: 107). This fact would explain why Figes felt compelled to go back to Edith’s story as a way to give voice to the troubling burden of “collective responsibility” (2008: 82) that being a German-Jew meant for her. As the narrator explains, she made use of Edith’s story in the confidence that it “would help to expose the truth” (2008: 109) of the emigration of Jewish people after the Holocaust. She believes that recalling Edith’s memories “is not just a personal story, a memoir of private events; it involves what is now history, and our view of important events inevitably changes with the passing of time” (2008: 139). By telling the story of a common Jewish housemaid, readers are provided with a perspective on world history that casts light on aspects of the past that had previously been neglected on the grounds of unreliability. Her work thus proves that individual stories can show that the private formation and evolution of the traumatised self may be transferred to the public sphere, another instance of limit cases (Gilmore 2001: 13).

At the same time, *Journey to Nowhere* confirms that limit-case autobiographies have a strong political orientation (Gilmore 2001: 147). Figes’ memoir aims to make a severe attack on U. S. policies after the Second World War. She argues that the creation of the new State of Israel was an error and that the U. S.’s international policy of immigration and its political interests were the main causes that encouraged so many Jews who survived the Holocaust to go to Palestine. She likewise criticises the violence exerted by Israel upon the Palestinians and, as a Jew, wishes to detach herself from the politics practised by Israel from that moment.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the mature author-narrator reveals such harsh opinions as: “The true story of the creation of Israel is ugly, which is why it has, with time, been conveniently forgotten and replaced by the myth of global guilt at the murder of millions of innocent Jews” (Figes 2008: 149). Her book is targeted at revealing new versions of the history of Israel and replacing traditional myths by the real stories of those people who endured that troubled historical period. It is remarkable, then, that the political and collective dimension Figes gives to her testimonial work highlights the intertwining of individual, cultural and political traumatic experiences. This connection demonstrates that “trauma is never exclusively personal” (Gilmore 2001: 31). Rather, all the individual traumatic experiences represented in Figes’ work have a collective dimension that the writer does not want to

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<sup>6</sup> Kai Erikson has defined collective trauma as “a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality” (in Caruth 1995: 187).

<sup>7</sup> Figes’ political views should be related to the group of British Jewish intellectuals who came together in February 2007 to sign the declaration of ‘Independent Jewish Voices’ in which they established some basic principles of their ideology, such as: “putting human rights first, rejecting all forms of racism, respecting international law, and treating as equally legitimate the Palestinian and Israeli quests for a better . . . future” (Karpf et al. 2007: ix).

ignore. In fact, these interactions between individual and collective processes can contribute to resilience and reconstruction after a group has gone through a traumatic experience (Alexander 2004; Robben and Suárez-Orozco 2000).<sup>8</sup>

This second testimonial dimension corresponds to the second stage described by Herman as “remembrance or mourning”: the subject explores her traumatic memories in order to turn them into an integrated coherent narrative, that is, the process whereby “the survivor tells the story of trauma” (2001: 175). This is present in this second testimonial act performed by the author-narrator of *Journey to Nowhere* when she decides to narrate all these experiences in order to “confront ghosts from the past” (Figes 2008: 139).

#### 4. Reconnection with ordinary life

Finally, the third dimension of testimony is placed at the heart of Figes' narration where readers contemplate the true testimonial relationship established in 1948 between Edith, the witness-bearer, and Eva, the addressee of her traumatic narration. The reporting of Edith's testimony is integrated into the narrator's exercise of returning to her past memories. In order to carry out this difficult task, Figes combines different techniques.

Direct speech reporting is used in the early representation of the conversations they held so many years before, as in: “It was my last job in service, she said finally” (Figes 2008: 75). On certain occasions, Edith's story is interrupted by the author-narrator, who assumes the narrative role and gives information about the maid's life and her feelings for her, as when she comments: “Edith was poor and single” or “Edith was family” (2008: 33, 59). Later, there are passages in which reported dialogue brings these past conversations to life, as in: “So you still went out, in spite of everything? Of course, said Edith, getting up to throw the peapods into the bin, then adding hot water to the teapot. It was the only way to keep sane” (2008: 92). On other occasions the *I* of the author-narrator blurs as the narrator adopts Edith's position and fuses her own identity with that of the maid, rendering the maid's own words in free indirect speech, with no clear transition between the herself and Edith. The following is one of the many passages in which the author-narrator starts narrating Edith's account in the third person but then changes to the first, thus expressing her own troubled state of identity, as Edith's speech now controls the narration, as in 1948.

*She* was talking about Jews, *I* knew, who were legally obliged to employ only Jewish maids, if they lived in and were under the age of 45, to avoid the possibility of sex between master and servant, thus defiling the purity of Aryan womanhood. But *I* managed to get by for quite a while, doing unofficial jobs. . . . Once *I* even helped out in a family grocery shop. It had a room at the back where *I* could sleep. (2008: 76, emphasis added)

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<sup>8</sup> As has been explained, in Figes' text the collective trauma is that of the Jews who were killed during the Holocaust, of the ones who had to emigrate leaving part of their families behind and of those who suffered the consequences of the wrong political decisions made at the time when they tried to find their place in the new state of Israel. Individual traumas are these of the writer herself, her relatives and Edith. For more information on the notion of cultural and collective trauma see Kirmayer Lemelson and Barad 2007 and Anzte and Lambek 1996.

This part of the book responds to Freud's talking-cure, with the little child as the only possible witness to Edith's testifying act. At the end of the book, the adult narrator explains the nature of this relationship as follows: "And there she sat, day after day, waiting for me to come home from school, telling me her story, which nobody wanted to hear, except an immature schoolgirl who had begun to learn, the hard way, that life has things to teach us that are seldom in the textbooks" (Figs 2008: 180-81). In this passage a contractual relationship between speaker and listener is established, based on the assumption that the speaker reports some event that is not easy to talk about while the hearer assumes the responsibility for that listening. Edith's testimony is initiated by the innocent question that Eva poses about the situation in Berlin after she and her family emigrated. The bearer of witness usually finds it very difficult to release her feelings; however, after several conversations, and just as in the relationship between psychiatrist and patient, Edith feels more relaxed due to her growing intimacy with the child. Thus, she eventually manages to unveil her true opinions, for example, that in the new Israel everybody hated everybody else (2008: 107). As Felman (1992: 47) explains, the vital function of testimony is to liberate the self from pain. In this case, the greatest liberation occurs at the moment of intense crisis when the author-narrator describes how Edith collapsed during her narration: "Her voice petered out. For the first time since her arrival I looked up to see her crying" (Figs 2008: 132). It is at this moment that Edith's pain is finally released.

Eva's reaction to this crisis is one of sheer bafflement: "What Edith told me about the newly created state of Israel left me puzzled and incredulous" (2008: 133); this exemplifies the interior crisis undergone by the addressee of testimonial narratives (Felman 1992: 47-52). Theoretically, the addressee of a traumatic testimony should not identify with the victim or appropriate her experience; rather, she should empathise with her and feel the other's suffering to some extent (Levinas 1996: 19). This reaction to the traumatic experience on behalf of the witness can be related to the Levinasian "face-to-face relationship" (1991:13) that takes place throughout the narration when the author-narrator witnesses Edith's pain and assumes her responsibility by including the maid's story in her own testimonial book. From this perspective, the blurring of first- and third-person voice may be said to echo at the narrative level the unsettlement experienced by the author-narrator as the addressee of Edith's testimonial account. Both speaker and listener feel changed after the testimonial act. Edith transfers her painful recollections to Eva, who decides to tell this story for the sake of all those "countless faces without names who [like Edith] had been part of a vanished world" (2008: 100-01). Figs' testimonial project succeeds in turning the unspeakable into the speakable and in voicing some silenced versions of the historical events of the Holocaust and its aftermath.

The third phase of recovery, *reconnection with ordinary life*, the process whereby the survivor comes to terms with him or herself, with the others and with the external world by trying to find "a survivor mission" (Herman 2001: 207) materialises when Figs finds the mission of being a writer. This is the best means to denounce such terrible events as those endured by the collective that Edith represents. Although she felt afraid of the polemic her work might raise, Figs decided that she had to assume this task: "I did what I had to do, asked for and got the necessary information, but the tears,

kept back for so long, refused to stop. I decided I had no alternative other than to write a book, being a writer" (Figes 2008: 84).

Finally, I would like to emphasise the self-conscious testimonial nature of *Journey to Nowhere* since it is full of references to traumatic processes themselves which echo Freud's ideas and the discourse used by trauma studies. In one instance, the author-narrator describes her traumatic memories of the past as "a *wound* that would not heal", or remarks that she had been told that "men are less deeply affected by the *trauma* of displacement and loss" (2008: 42, emphasis added). Here, Figes makes use of the language of trauma to represent her painful experiences, another trait shared by limit-case autobiographies (Gilmore 2001: 67). Furthermore, comments like "This is not just a personal story, a memoir of private events; it involves what is now history" (2008: 139), show the author's belief in the power of testimonies to address historical issues. In other words, *Journey to Nowhere* narrates and represents Figes' and Edith's testimonies and transmits them to the readers while, at the same time, bearing witness to the act of bearing witness itself. This second facet gives the text as a whole a performative function in unveiling the way in which testimonies are rendered and received. Therefore, it could be stated that the performative engagement of consciousness and history, characteristic of the literature of testimony, works at two levels in Figes' work. At the most explicit level, it represents the oral communication between the two women, while less explicitly, it self-consciously mirrors and sets on abyme the testimonial project carried out by the work as a whole.

##### 5. "Made my peace with the country"

Taking all these aspects of *Journey to Nowhere* into account, some relevant conclusions might be derived from the analysis. Firstly, since the events the author-narrator needed to unveil were too horrible to be told in realistic terms, following traditional principles of autobiographical writings, she attempted to work through her traumatic experiences of the Holocaust by having recourse to the mixture of elements of autobiography, biography, memoir, history and testimony. Thus, trauma has proved, once again, to break the frame of self-representational writings.

As regards the process of working through, there are certain points in the narration where readers can presume that the healing function of the narrative has been achieved, as in: "I have made my peace with the country in which I was born and acknowledge the fact that I was born there, without caveat" (Figes 2008: 82). Or in: "Perhaps that is their function [of the new generation], or part of it. Asking the difficult questions... What Grandmother remembers has become part of history, and it is, after all, their history too" (2008: 140), where the author-narrator makes reference to the transgenerational transmission of trauma as one of the main mechanisms for healing her soul. In fact, this transmission of history and trauma is not limited to the third generation embodied by Figes' granddaughters, since it is extended to all the people the book bears testimony to. However, although writing this limit-case autobiography has been essential to work through her past experiences, Figes admits that a complete overcoming of the traumatic experience is never possible: "now I am quite open about my past, and have to reassure a younger generation that, really, they have nothing to feel bad about... but even that is not

always enough to heal old wounds” (2008: 84). It may be stated that the connection between healing trauma and bearing witness has been demonstrated: written and oral testimonies are able to transmit historical and political reflections; they can also be useful for unveiling individual and collective traumatic experiences. Furthermore, Henke’s theory of scriptotherapy is corroborated by Figes’ memoir, since this life-writing project brings into being a healing narrative that restores the fragmented self to an empowered position of psychological agency (Henke: 1998: xvi).

*Journey to Nowhere* may be claimed to be a limit-case autobiography, since it is a testimonial project which offers new alternatives to the traditional autobiographical genres. That is, although neither traditional nor new autobiographical genres attempt to provide universal versions of history, limit cases are more concerned with the relation between history and individual stories. The fusion of various literary and non-literary genres makes *Journey to Nowhere* a perfect example of limit cases. This blend of genres has served as a tool to narrativise individual, familial and national stories at the same time (Gilmore 2001: 72) and to denounce the way trauma ruptures the boundaries of simple representations of the autobiographical *I*. Figes also makes use of other liminal features, such as autobiographical experimentation, the use of self-conscious comments on trauma and the construction of an embedded narrative made of the testifying acts which self-reflexively call attention to the testimonial nature of life writing itself. Also worth noting is the fact that, from Gilmore’s perspective, these self-representational projects may be “open ended, susceptible to repetition, extendible, even, perhaps, incapable of completion” (2001: 96). As Figes’ last words before the epilogue confirm, “She [Edith] 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” (2008: 181). These reflections express the need to continue transferring these individual stories of pain and survival so that they cannot be blotted out of our collective memory. The book, then, does not finish when readers reach its ending, as its message must continue to be spread generation after generation.

Trauma has emerged as the main destabilising force in contemporary literature in general and, more concretely, in testimonial projects. Trauma has generated a new relationship between literature and testimony and has brought about the appearance of new life-writing genres, as happens in *Journey to Nowhere*. Figes’ concrete case can be extended to many other contemporary writers who have organised their autobiographical narrations around the exposure of a concealed trauma (Luckhurst 2008: 132). In short, Figes’ political and testimonial work confirms that the need to voice trauma has opened up new narrative possibilities that render these experiences speakable; hence, the explosion of narratives dealing with traumatised lives has increased the importance of studying trauma itself and its different manifestations in literature. The emergence of these new miscellaneous literary forms has fostered the development of the new critical and analytical tools provided by the school of trauma studies, which may allow literary critics to unveil the individual and collective conflicts present in these narrations.

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