

EVA FIGES: AN INTERVIEW

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Eva Figes was born in Berlin in 1932 but when she was only six years old her family emigrated to Britain, where she has lived ever since. As a writer of fiction, her experimental work has been associated with both modernism and postmodernism. Her novels, which have been awarded or shortlisted for some of the most prestigious literary prizes in Britain, include *Winter Journey* (1967), *Days* (1974) *Nelly's Version* (1977), *Light* (1983), *The Seven Ages* (1986), *The Tree of Knowledge* (1990), *The Tenancy* (1993) and *The Knot* (1997). As a critic she has also produced several pioneering works on feminist issues. In *Patriarchal Attitudes: Women in Society* (1970), and *Sex and Subterfuge: Women Novelists to 1850* (1982), for example, she advocated a revisionist and defamiliarizing attitude towards history and literature, which is particularly evident in her ability to present the perspective of figures who have been traditionally marginalized. This interest for the non-canonical, recurrent in some of her novels, can also be found in her other important critical work, *Women Letters in Wartime: 1940-1945* (1994). She has also written short stories and plays for the radio, and translated from French and German, which gives her a particular insight into and awareness of the European tradition.

This interview took place in the context of the Second Seminar on Postmodernism, held at the University of Seville on the 21st, 22nd and 23rd of October 1999, where Eva Figes was invited as a keynote speaker.

We already know you are not very fond of this question of "the death of the author", but supposing we could bring the author back to life, could you talk about your own evolution as a writer?

I think I began really very young because I changed languages as a small child, and when I mastered English I got very excited by being able to understand it and I

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immediately wanted to be a writer. But I first really wanted to be a poet and it was only in my early twenties that I realized that was not going to work, I didn't think poetry was going anywhere. I was also interested in theatre but, because I didn't have a job in the theatre, that died. But then I began to see the possibility of writing works which incorporated poetry or in which language was used in a poetic way in the hope that that was something I would be able to do. That's how I began, really.

But talking more specifically about your career as a novelist, do you see yourself moving away from a modernist aesthetics into a postmodernist one?

I think it is not as simple as that, I think a writer has to have something to say and one thing leads to another. You get interested in a subject. Occasionally I've written a book which seems very unlike me because I get interested in a certain subject and that required a certain kind of technique in order to do it, and obviously there are younger writers doing lots of unconventional things and occasionally you get an idea from them, but on the whole I don't like to impede myself. I very often, when I'm beginning to get an idea for a novel I think of the various ways it could be done and I reject one or two ideas because that's a technique I've already used and I'd be bored if I did it again, and so I have to think of something else. Sometimes you know right away what you have to do, but other times you have to have several attempts until you find the right form.

Viewing the complexity of the literary allusions and the rich web of references in your works, what kind of reader do you have in mind? Surely, someone very well-acquainted and familiarized with all these intertexts...

I think every writer would tell you that they write for an ideal other, somebody who is really themselves, and in a way you write a book that you wish somebody else had written, but they haven't, so you have to do it. I don't think of allusions as a difficulty, they help me because they express another dimension, which would not otherwise be there, or I'm simply influenced by a particular writer, say T.S. Eliot, who has influenced me a lot. But sometimes you get a reader who likes your work and who does not really know where it comes from. Anyway, I can think of a wonderful editor I had once in NY who was going on at great length how wonderful a passage was, and he did not realize it was in fact T.S. Eliot slightly changed. But it did not stop him from realizing that it said something very special.

*You have produced both creative literature and literary criticism, and in your novels there is a strong presence of theory. In *The Tree of Knowledge* for instance, we find a considerable number of icons of literary criticism (*the Father's Law, the question of the male/female gaze, the canon and its margins*). Do you ever use psychoanalytical, feminist or poststructuralist theory as background for your fictional writing? And, ultimately, how do you see the relationship between fiction and theory?*

I don't actually see myself particularly as a critic and I think I became a literary critic mainly because of my feminism because I began to realize that women writers were either neglected or misunderstood and I wanted to write something about not particularly the new writers but the classical canon anyway. I mean, I felt I had been taught Jane Austen quite wrongly when I was in school and that it had to be taught differently, and there were lots of things of that nature that interested me. *The Tree of Knowledge* again had a feminist basis, because when I was writing *The Seven Ages* which is all history from the women's point of view I got very interested in the Civil War period in England which seems to me a fascinating one. I was particularly interested in Milton, who I hate....

So do most of our students...

Luckily I never really liked his poetry, I preferred Donne and Marvell and people like that, but I really hate him and obviously, having read about the way he treated his family I hated him a lot more. But what interested me was the fact that he was a man who was so involved in getting rid of the king but at the same time such a tyrant in his own family, and I wanted to do something about that. I tried writing a play and it didn't work and then I discovered that his youngest daughter, Deborah, had in fact lived to a great age and had been rediscovered by people like Addison who then interviewed her and I thought that's the way to do it, for her to speak in her old age about what it was like in the past, and that was the reason I wrote that particular book.

*This, by the way, seems to be a recurrent topic in your work, the contradiction between the public and the private life of a man, specially of a great artist, that is, someone who on the one hand is able to create a world of beauty, and on the other, is a tyrannical and patriarchal figure in his own private life. We are particularly thinking of Milton and Monet in *The Tree of Knowledge and Light* respectively.*

Well, obviously artists are not perfect human beings. But Monet is a person I actually quite like, I mean, I can see that he was a bit of a *paterfamilias* and so forth, but in fact I was very interested in his obsession. But I was also interested in the whole ambiance of the family and that of the *Belle Epoque* and so forth, and that sort of idyll, and I was interested mainly also in the children, because it is a kind of vision of a summer's day that everyone has from their childhood and I wanted that in as well, and I think in an early novel called *B* I also had this thing about a man who was so busy writing his novel he doesn't notice his wife has disappeared but then, I'm afraid writers are like that when they are working. Women writers are too, you ask my children.

*Still with this question of history, there has been a striking proliferation of historical novels in Britain over the last two decades, but reading *The Tree of Knowledge, Light or Nelly's Version*, one would say that you clearly prioritize*

story over History, the private over the public, memory and apocrypha over official records. Do you feel history needs to be retold in these terms? Do we need alternative stories/versions?

It is quite true that I am mainly interested in the interior of the individual but I do feel, History, again, because of women, has to be re-angled. I called *The Seven Ages* the flip-side of History, because, you know, half the population is never mentioned in official History. It's also, one has to say, quite fun to do, because it's so nice not to have to invent everything, to take the original texts, the original facts, and you can find some amazing things you would never invent. You think, this is crazy, people really did this? And then, do something with it, and of course from a feminist point of view, what Monet is trying to do is to show what women were actually doing when men were killing each other or going for power or whatever. And that was really the reason for that book, but it was also fun to do, and it is nice to escape from the self, you know, because so often, one is writing about the interior self, which inevitably is part of oneself as well. But to be able to actually read texts and then weave something out of it is really quite fun, but the main reason is, or in that case was, to present a woman's perspective.

As a female writer have you had problems to find a tradition of your own (which seems to be a major concern for women novelists), or do you feel indebted to a tradition that has been consistently patriarchal (and thus dispossessing)? Again we are thinking of The Tree of Knowledge where we find a chronicle of dispossession, of usurpation, of exclusion.

I think, in a way, I was born too early, because I started writing before feminism appeared on the scene, and even though people say I was one of the people who invented it, nevertheless I was in a different place when I began to write and I found it a very big handicap to be a woman. And in the early days I nearly always had male protagonists, and this was because I felt if women were not important enough they weren't whole people, and if you worried about women you just wrote about babies and cooking and love, and things like that. So it seems to me impossible to get any sort of universality if you write about women. And that changed for me and because I didn't know any liberated people, I liberated myself, and it gave me the freedom and from then on all my main characters have been women and the point of view is that of women's. And it is in fact very enriching, because there's so much territory of human experience that nobody has written about simply because either men dominated the scene or women were writing the way I was writing, you know, when I first began. In other words, women didn't dare say certain things, and so I think that is not a handicap at all today, I mean today you have *carte blanche*, really, you can say whatever you like.

Where do you place yourself in relation to this female tradition? You hold a pioneer position because you started writing in the late 60's, so how do you see the evolution of the women's movement over these 40 years?

You mean as a writer?

Yes, and as a feminist.

As a feminist I feel the battle is no longer mine, and the younger generation have to go on. It's no longer my problem, you know, there comes a time in life, what your son calls third age, when it no longer affects you one way or the other. As a writer I don't like to be labelled that way. It seems to me that the things I'm writing about are things that affect all human beings, whichever gender they are. I think there are very serious issues to be written about which have nothing to do with whether you are a man or a woman and I really do not want to be labelled, I mean, I sometimes got attacked by other women because I say "this is not a feminist issue", you know, death is not a feminist issue; they tend to think it is! And that seems to me a very simplistic view of the world and also you get very tired of it. In the same way that Virginia Woolf was a feminist but her work appeals to men and women, probably not equally, but that's men's loss. Probably the same thing happens to me, that I am read by more women than by men, and I'm sorry about that, and I hope it will change but it's not what I'm aiming for at all.

This is very much related to what you have just said. In what direction do you predict the evolution of feminism? What is your view of the so-called postfeminism? What do you think of the poststructuralist advocacy for the dissolution of gender identity?

I can't read the future, but looking back on the history of feminism, there have been active phases and then there have been phases when nothing much has happened. At school I began to realize that my female teachers were earning less than my men teachers and I began to think, why? And then I had the same issue of being told you can either have a career or you can marry, but you can't do both. So I really think that feminism, like democracy, is one of those things that is always going to resurface in one form or another. But there will be times when everyone feels everything is o.k., and I suppose this is one of those times there is not a lot to worry about, but there is bound to be an issue. Very obviously the problem of work and child care is the big issue which hasn't been resolved in England; and the problem of paying for child care, and absent fathers paying for their share in that care is a big issue which is very far from being resolved. So there will always be problems that women will have to fight for, because of the fertility issue, you know, they are the only ones who can have children, and this is always going to create problems, I'm sure. Exactly when they will arrive and what the actual terms will be I don't know, but I'm used to this fact, that it goes in phases, the feminist issue, you know. The price of freedom is a time of vigilance and it applies to feminism, as it does to democracy as well.

To a great extent you can be considered as a postmodern writer, and, although it has been often claimed that postmodernist fiction is non-ideological, is

practitioners too concerned with abstract notions such as subjectivity, textuality or language, to be sensitive enough towards politics, history, community or the social, however this is not the feeling when one reads your novels where you seem to lend a voice to people in the margins of society and History.

Well, the label I'm given is not my problem, it is yours. But I was talking at great length yesterday of Günter Grass who I not only admire as a writer, but who is also a close personal friend, and he and I have absolutely the same attitude, and also in politics. And I suppose it's because we come from the same generation that witnessed what happened in Europe. And obviously I've always felt that a writer has a particular position in society which enables him or her to say certain things. I mean, every citizen has a duty to stand up for certain rights and certain values, but a writer not only has a duty as a human being but has the opportunity to express it either in journalism, or in novels, or in essays or whatever. I think it is lacking in responsibility if they don't do it. It also, I think, goes very deep, because if you have suffered injustice whether as a woman or as a Jew or whatever, you get very angry and this in itself inspires what you say and it can quite often choose your subject matter for you, you know, in the sense that I always feel that a subject matter for a book is not the one that you choose but the one that chooses you. You know, it's an idea that will not go away, so one day you realize, I have to write about this; and obviously, if you are at all a political animal, this has to do, sometimes, not always, with things that make you very angry.

You have been said to be one of the last survivors of the experimentalist tradition and a rather "unusual writer". How do you feel about this? Do you really feel that alone?

I suppose I do feel alone, because when I was young and setting out there was this small group of us who were all writing differently and had the same attitude about the status quo of literature, our literary values were the same. There were four of us: two of us committed suicide the same year, one went to America and stopped writing, and that kind of left me... I now feel slightly as a sort of dinosaur, because I always thought that one of the good things about my situation is I'm ahead of my time, therefore when I get older I will come into my time, but that hasn't quite happened because of all these postmodernists who are playing all these tricks and doing all these things, so anything I can do is not very unusual and so you don't actually have to concentrate on what I'm saying which might be worth listening to. And unfortunately one tends to get increasingly neglected, and there's not very much I can do about that, except possibly die a dramatic death in which case I would have an immediate revival.

To follow up on this, what is your opinion about the new trends in contemporary British fiction?

Oddly enough, I meant to talk last night but sometimes you get sidetracked, I'm not very happy with the very obvious, I mean, I admire Angela Carter because she was doing things in very limited parameters; she was obviously very influenced by Hoffman. And I think Salman Rushdie has lost his way, he is like a balloon that the string has been cut and just up in the sky by himself. But I think there is a new writer, oddly enough he writes in German but lives in England. His name is W.G. Sebald, who I think is doing some very interesting work. He was born in Germany in 1944 but he's been professor of German Literature in Norwich, so he's lived in England well over 20 years. He writes in German and an initial translation is done by somebody else but then he works over the translation, and you cannot tell it's translated because his English is so good. He wrote a book which had a big effect on me called *The Emigrants* and it's now followed up by another book. *The Emigrants* was four stories about people who had been exiled and I found it very disturbing because although I thought about losing my family, I had not thought much yet about the pain of exile. The point about his book is that it's partly factual and partly he makes things up, and you can't really tell which is which, it all blends together. He has now written a book called *The Rings of Saturn* which is set up in East Anglia which is where he lives; again a lot of it is historical, you know, the architecture, villages that have disappeared to the sea ... some bits, inventions, I'm sure they are. There are also bits of Chateaubriand who lived here in the 19th century when he was exiled after the French Revolution. The result is very poetic and the overall feeling is of entropy. I think he's almost created a genre of his own. The memoirs is one of the things that is the fashion nowadays, but I think this writer seems to me to be doing something really different, which is very moving, very beautiful, and I hope he goes on... That's all I can say!

Now you mention the question of this writer and translation, yesterday you said that you speak several languages and we know you have also been a translator from German and French. We would like to ask you about this sense of extraterritoriality which refers to people who speak a different language, or when you are translating and speaking the "language of the other", and even, as it has been said, "inhabiting a different world".

I always said that I think one of the reasons why I became the sort of writer that I am was because of having to change languages at a crucial age, in other words, seven. And I'm very lucky because I know other refugees who have changed languages at fifteen, and they can't write either language properly, and that is a problem. I was just at an age in which my schooling had just began, so I was able to pick up English very quickly, but nevertheless it's always a bit of your brain that, you know, thinks in a certain way. And I think I became the sort of writer I was because I never took English for granted. I was always aware of language as something that is unique ... you know, English is unique, French is unique, Italian is unique, and you can't actually translate one or the other, or not totally. And I think that made me very conscious of language as something wonderful, and

something to be saved like a good wine that you like, or something like that. That, I think, has never left me, I mean, I very often don't read books because I just don't like the way the writer uses language, I mean, I look at the first page and shut it, and don't buy it... Somehow you have to have an ear for it. A composer once said to me, you hear it in your head, don't you? And I said yes, I do hear it in my head. You know, English has very particular cadences, and I don't think a lot of English writers who use it for everyday discourse are aware of it. And I remember once talking on the phone to a friend who is a poet and she said she was working and there was music on the background, and I thought, how can you have music on the background when you are writing? you can't because, you know, there are different sorts of noise coming in.

We see that the monologue seems to be one of your favorite narrative modes, why that preference? Do you try to convey solipsism, the failure of communication...?

Well, obviously if you write very often of what is a very internal thing, that is one reason. But I do think that a narrative where you say "I did this" has a kind of authority that a narrative saying "he did this" does not have. It's just a sort of immediacy about the first person narrative that the third person narrative simply does not have.

How do you see the value of tradition, specially literary tradition, as it manifests itself in your own work by means of what critics call "intertextuality"? Specifically we are thinking of the way tradition recurs in your work to provide a background or ordering patterns for your own texts.

Sometimes people say to me, here you are, you are not English at all and yet you are so terribly English. And I say, here you are, you have lived here thirty years or forty years or whatever and don't know anything about English culture, or history or politics, how can you?... I suppose I am very much in touch with Englishness, but it seems to me that, compared to other countries, England has a pretty honourable history, it also has the best literary tradition in the world, I don't think there's any doubt about that, really. So if you are using the language of people like Shakespeare you are very lucky, and I'm very aware of tradition, you know. I don't think any writer writes in a vacuum, and obviously although one is changing things, one carries on where other people left off. So, I think that really is the reason.

Now, about the question of tradition, and more specifically about the search for your own tradition, you have acknowledged Woolf, Beckett and Kafka as major influences in your work. How have they inspired your production?

Kafka, I read when I was in my early twenties and that was the moment I knew I wasn't going to write poetry. It was like having had the top of my head completely blown off. I had always thought the novel is quite entertaining but when I read

Kafka I realized anything was possible and I completely gave up any idea of being a poet. With Virginia Woolf there is a particular problem because she is a woman. I read her of course as an undergraduate and then I would say, "keep her away from me, keep her away from me, I don't wanna know", because there is this problem... She is actually in many ways very like me. I remember reading her diaries and I thought something and I turned the page and she said it on the next page, in other words, she got there first. So I was really quite scared of Virginia Woolf. It was only when I felt confident enough in who I was and what I had already written, that I could actually go back to Virginia Woolf and say, well, now let's have a look at you, and I remember reading *Orlando* before I wrote *The Seven Ages*, and I thought, she's done it all, there's nothing new under the sun, really. So then I felt secure enough of myself to let her wash over me. As for Beckett, you know, I have a very dark view of the world, really. I was in my early twenties when I saw *Waiting for Godot* and that, again, sort of changed everything. I think that for my generation Beckett was God, but he created a problem because it seemed he had gone as far as anyone could go, so how do you get, under him, round him? I think the thing is to know that he is there but he isn't you. I think I am a much more local writer than he is, and the fact that I am a woman makes a difference. He writes about men, and when he writes about women, like Winnie in *Happy Days*, he makes her an idiot. And women know about black holes as much as men do. With Beckett you just have to get round, and sometimes you gain. And I think in the long run this is no longer a problem, once you establish your own voice. The person who lately has had the greatest influence on me is actually T.S. Eliot. I love his formalism. The *Quartets* seem to me absolutely wonderful ... but I've also come to understand things that he says that I couldn't understand when I was younger, and now I have reached that certain age I begin to understand how right he was when he said certain things. So in that sense I think he's been a great influence. I think when you are a very insecure writer you are frightened of quoting or stealing or whatever you like, because you are doing your own thing but using material from the past, and it provides an extra dimension or simply echoes... But, you know, it's not a question of being frightened, one is sort of grateful for people who have been there before you.

Again considering the question of memory and the need to lend a voice to those who never had a voice in History, you mentioned yesterday the Holocaust and we were wondering if you have followed to any extent the Pinochet affair, and if you have, what is your opinion about it?

Well, I believe anyone who has committed gross human rights violations, and is guilty of murder or torture and everything, should face a trial. The question arises all the time, you know... They have to face their accusers, not because one is going to get justice out of them, because they will probably die of a heart attack somewhere, but because justice is justice, and I've always said I have no right to forgive anyone for the dead; only the dead can do that and they are not here to do it.

And also as an example to the world that this kind of conduct should not go unpunished, and people should be followed up even if it does take a long time. I think Germany has taken far too long because people turned a blind eye. But you are talking now of Kosovo or wherever, and certainly Pinochet.. I was very shocked that Pinochet had been coming to England for so long and shopping in Harrod's, and you know, VIP lounge, I was really appalled. And at the moment we have the head of China in Buckingham ... and the black taxi driver on the way to the airport said to me, "Well, why are they keeping Pinochet if this man dines with the queen? This is crazy". He is quite right, this is crazy!

There is one last question and we don't know whether it is the most important or the most impertinent question: have you ever worked for the university?

No, I've always been a writer.

Then, we would like to know your opinion about the academic world.

I had a couple of terms in the English Department —that's over 25 years ago— when Frank Kermode was Professor at the University College. And I have very vivid memories of the postgraduate seminars which were the highlights of the week. At first I couldn't understand anything anyone would say... I thought, what is this? what is a hermeneutic code?... I have no idea, no idea of what anyone is talking about! Then I gradually began to realize that everybody, there were twenty people in the room, was always waiting for somebody else to say something, and I realized that as a writer —I'm not an academic, you know— my career is not involved; I could say anything I liked ... and be sometimes very naughty. Also somebody suggested that one of my books should be taken, so we would all read it over the Christmas holiday. Oh, what a good idea, said everybody, in particular Frank Kermode. Then I said I was quite willing but my condition was that I wouldn't say anything until the last ten minutes, which was actually for me very funny. I and another postgraduate student chose a book rather carefully, one which is very tricky, and I realized that no-one had picked up anything, none of the clues I had actually planted, which I did for my own satisfaction, and not necessarily any reader would pick up. I suddenly realized they hadn't picked them up at all. What was also interesting was that before we went into the session everybody told me how much they liked the book but in the session no one person told something as simple as that: "I liked it" or "I think it's clever"... so I found it quite funny, really. I accept the fact that other people would see my work differently from the way I do; there's no reason why they shouldn't. And sometimes I do think of subconscious reasons that either I never find out or I only find out later... I suddenly realize why I did that. On the other hand, it seems to me that if I say "I did it this way because I do think it had some validity", they may say, "well, it doesn't come over that way", you know. But the odd thing is that as time passes and the book recedes in the background, what I remember is not the text, but why I did it; that is what stays in my mind. And if I open the book it seems like somebody else wrote it.