

More Premium than Life:
Expressing the Inexpressible in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything is Illuminated*

by

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Abstract

It is increasingly common for second- and third-generation survivors of the Holocaust to seek experimental forms when writing about the traumatic experiences of their ancestors during the Holocaust. These narratives often highlight fictive or imaginative elements of the stories rather than emphasizing the historicity of the events themselves. An example of such a break with convention, Jonathan Safran Foer's 2002 novel *Everything is Illuminated* plays with experimental forms by fusing together multiple narrative perspectives, writing in an unexpectedly comical tone, and presenting stories that contain elements evoking both mythical and magical worlds.

In the novel, the protagonist returns to a small town in the Ukraine where his ancestors lived before the Nazis destroyed it during the Holocaust. Throughout the novel, the history of the town Trachimbrod is unfolded as a fictionalized story that the protagonist composes after his travels. Foer inserts himself into the narrative as the protagonist, resulting in a novel that is not merely trying to give a historic account of how Trachimbrod's destruction unfolded, but which also shows the *author's journey* to unfold the complex history of his family, based on few remains of the town's past.

Everything is Illuminated comments upon how the Holocaust presented subject matter that is particularly difficult to represent in narrative form. This commentary is achieved by the variety of narrative forms that combine in the novel to explore the various modes in which the traumatic experience of the Holocaust can be passed on. It is difficult to find modes that adequately represent what happened, while rewriting the story into forms that are more accessible to those who did not experience the trauma directly. *Everything is Illuminated* therefore serves as a form of exploration for how the Holocaust might be remembered, even while perhaps deviating from historical fact in the construction of the narrative. This thesis examines how *Everything is Illuminated* represents the experience of the Holocaust in a manner that may not be factually true to history, but can nevertheless convey a sense of trauma that makes the experience more real and understood by those who did not experience it firsthand.

The first chapter explores how the novel demonstrates the particular difficulties that testimonial accounts of the Holocaust pose, for the reader or listener who hears the account and the survivor who must recall painful memories in order to give an account, as well. The shortcomings of testimonial narrative forms provide an explanation for why the protagonist of *Everything is Illuminated* constructs a highly fictionalized account of his family saga, in the absence of solid historical evidence about what really happened to them.

The next chapter looks in greater detail at this fictionalized saga constructed by the protagonist, utilizing many elements that might be classified as "magical realist" in nature. This chapter describes how the account becomes larger than life, but nevertheless arrives at a different sort of truth in its account of the Holocaust: a truth that captures the emotions of the experience rather than historical verisimilitude.

It is hoped that this thesis will demonstrate that even if *Everything is Illuminated* clearly fabricates much of the narrative and does not present Trachimbrod's history as it could have actually happened, it still contains grains of the truth in the emotions that it conjures and the feelings that it captures. Thus, the novel turns from a factual truth to a sensational truth in writing about the Holocaust. Though Foer reshapes the traumatic story, he refuses to let it die altogether, and that makes a clear case for the importance of this novel in Holocaust literature.

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Chapter I: Introduction
“The Persnickety of Memory”¹

Touch, taste, sight, smell, hearing...memory. While Gentiles experience and process the world through the traditional senses, and use memory only as a second-order means of interpreting events, for Jews memory is no less primary than the prick of a pin, or its silver glimmer, or the taste of the blood it pulls from the finger. The Jew is pricked by a pin and remembers other pins. It is only by tracing the pinprick back to other pinpricks...that the Jew is able to know why it hurts.

--Jonathan Safran Foer, *Everything is Illuminated*, p. 198

Of course, we could try to forget the past. Why not? Is it not natural for a human being to repress what causes him pain, what causes him shame? Like the body, memory protects its wounds. When day breaks after a sleepless night, one's ghosts must withdraw; the dead are ordered back to their graves. But for the first time in history, we could not bury our dead. We bear their graves within ourselves. For us, forgetting was never an option. Remembering is a noble and necessary act. The call of memory, the call *to* memory, reaches us from the very dawn of history.

--Elie Wiesel, Nobel Prize Speech

One consequence of the Holocaust was to bring into focus the absolute necessity of remembrance. Remembrance is a constant trope throughout much of Holocaust literature and scholarship. Menachem Rosensaft, the general counsel of the World Jewish Congress, summarizes, “The preservation and transfer of memory is the most critical mission that children and grandchildren of survivors must undertake so as to ensure meaningful and authentic Holocaust remembrance in future generations” (n.p.). This task, Rosensaft continues, becomes “ever more urgent” throughout the passage of time, “as the ranks of survivors steadily dwindle.” The question of how the Holocaust will be remembered has particular urgency in present-day attempts to make sense of the event. The Holocaust created a huge rupture in the memory of the victims who survived, so how will the ancestors of the victims come to make sense of the

¹ This phrase is borrowed from a chapter title of *Everything is Illuminated*, appearing on p. 258.

Holocaust? This question lies at the heart of the novel *Everything is Illuminated*, by Jonathan Safran Foer. As the above excerpt alludes to, Foer's novel suggests that Jewish self-identity is inextricably tied to memory. Yet though memory is of crucial importance to the sense of self, the Holocaust was such a traumatic experience that it defies representational forms available to ordinary memory, thus presenting a number of difficulties in remembering events that, as Wiesel points out, are *necessary* to remember. Hence, new forms of representation are increasingly sought out in order to preserve memories that otherwise risk being altogether forgotten. By making use of nonconventional narrative forms, *Everything is Illuminated* serves as a commentary on and exploration of new forms of representation in Holocaust literature.

The nature of the traumatic experience causes many of the difficulties in representation encountered by novels about the Holocaust. Cathy Caruth offers up a definition for what constitutes a traumatic event, writing, "the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it. To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event" (2-3). Similarly, Bessel van der Kolk and Alexander McFarlane write, "traumatic experiences can alter people's psychological, biological, and social equilibrium to such a degree that the memory of one particular event comes to taint all other experiences, spoiling appreciation of the present" (488). Note that in both definitions, the memories of the traumatic experience come back to haunt the one who experienced them, seizing his or her life and making it impossible to proceed forward with life as it would otherwise have been. Some form of reconciliation with the past is seemingly needed in order to move forward, but in the case of the Holocaust, which witnessed such an enormous scale of atrocity, what does reconciliation look like? In other words, how does one move forward without altogether forgetting the horrible past that they or their forebears endured? Indeed, a

victim or his ancestors may never come to terms with the experience of the Holocaust, but even if it is impossible to integrate it fully into one's consciousness, it is important not to forget the atrocity altogether.

Traumatic memories prove to be particularly problematic, because they resist integration into the self-identity of the victim. As the definitions of both Caruth and Van der Kolk and McFarlane suggest, traumatic memories have a sort of life of their own. They return unpredictably and feel hauntingly true to life, taking agency away from the victim that is possessed by traumatic memories. As van der Kolk and McFarlane write, "The past is relived with an immediate sensory and emotional intensity that makes victims feel as if the event were occurring all over again" (491). The emotional intensity and immediacy of traumatic memory may be one explanation for why traumatic experiences are particularly difficult to convey to others, either in writing or verbally. The retelling forces the victim to remember the event in such a way so as to restore it; these resulting memories may invoke pain in the victim. Moreover, the victim "may experience sensory elements of the trauma without being able to make sense out of what they are feeling or seeing" (van der Kolk and McFarlane, 493). If the victim himself cannot fully understand or assimilate the traumatic experience, then how is he to convey that experience to others?

The way that the Holocaust is written about and recorded over time will determine how the event is remembered. As James Young states, "None of us coming to the Holocaust afterwards can know these events outside of the ways they are passed down to us" (vii). One of the crucial ways that many victims and their ancestors have attempted to commemorate or make sense of the Holocaust is through literature. Literature therefore plays a central role in shaping how knowledge about the Holocaust will be preserved. Because of literature's importance in

determining how the Holocaust is remembered, certain critics have argued that Holocaust narratives should stick closely to historical fact. After all, if readers are made aware of the scale of the atrocity, might that serve as a lesson and prevent history from repeating itself? Particularly, writers who lived through the Holocaust and experienced it firsthand often felt the need to provide “testimonial evidence” (Young 17). These writers tended to write narratives that are less imaginative in form and do not stray far from historical fact. Elie Wiesel’s classic testimonial story of the Holocaust, *Night*, is an example of a work that attempts to convey the experience that Wiesel had as a teenager at Buchenwald in a straightforward manner. In his preface to a recent translation of *Night*, Wiesel spoke of his role of author-as-witness. He refers to his own work as a testimony of his awful experience, writing:

I only know that without this testimony, my life as a writer—or my life, period—would not have become what it is: that of a witness who believes he has a moral obligation to try to prevent the enemy from enjoying one last victory by allowing his crimes to be erased from human memory (viii).

Night is laudable for its attempt to bear witness by providing detailed descriptions of horrible events, no matter how excruciating it may have been to speak of. Wiesel attempts to articulate that which is impossible to ever fully articulate. By providing an eyewitness account, Wiesel saw his mission as a moral duty to help ensure that the crimes committed against his family, and against the Jewish people more broadly, were not forgotten.

Yet narratives that try to convey the experience closely to how it happened, as opposed to fictionalizing it, present specific difficulties for readers and writers alike. The Holocaust was so horrible, it is difficult to fully comprehend or describe the scale of the atrocity. Sidra Ezrahi writes:

Even the most vivid presentation of concrete detail and specificity, the most palpable reconstruction of Holocaust reality, is blunted by the fact that there is no analogue in human experience. The imagination loses its credibility and resources where reality exceeds even the darkest fantasies of the human mind; even realism flounders before such reality (3).

This excerpt speaks to the fact that the adequate language to speak of what happened during the Holocaust is often lacking. Advocates of testimonial Holocaust narratives might argue that realism is the most adequate form to do justice to the experiences endured by the victims. After all, the Holocaust is arguably unmatched in human history in the reach and enormity of the trauma experienced. Writing about an event that lacks a parallel in history, the Holocaust writer cannot “draw upon familiar models of human behavior and values” (Ezrahi 4). As such, how is literature to serve as an adequate stand-in to convey such awful experiences? As Ezrahi points out, “even realism flounders before such reality.” Perhaps this is one reason that Holocaust forms may delve into more fictionalized forms. Additionally, with the passage of time, there are fewer survivors alive today who can tell the experience as it occurred. Consequently, more and more often, the responsibility of telling stories of the Holocaust comes from those who did not actually live through it, but have come to know the stories second-hand. Are these secondary sources able to write adequately in a mode such as realism, when they cannot fathom what the victims actually endured?

The question of how the Holocaust will be remembered by later generations is a crucial one that this thesis will begin to address by examining how the narrative form in Foer’s *Everything is Illuminated* represents the Holocaust. Because of the difficulties encountered in representing the Holocaust—where realism itself may “flounder”—Holocaust narratives

frequently may delve into territory of literary experimentation to convey the experience of the Holocaust. For example, Art Spiegelman's 1986 work *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*, takes the form of a graphic novel. *Maus* portrayed the conversations between Art and his aging father as Art tried to glean his father's account of surviving the Holocaust. The graphic form of the novel demonstrates Spiegelman's awareness of the issues that arise in representation of the Holocaust. The novel confronts issues with memory, which is, necessarily, a selective and mediated process, and hence raises key questions concerning how the Holocaust will be remembered by subsequent generations. D.M. Thomas's 1981 novel *The White Hotel* is another example of a Holocaust novel that broke with historical accuracy in its form. The novel employs the historical figure of Sigmund Freud as a character, honing in on the psychoanalysis of his case study of a woman suffering from hysteria. The novel ventures into dreamscapes that have been described by a number of critics² as reminiscent of the magical realist form. But near the end of the novel, the female protagonist is led to her execution at the Babi Yar massacre. Thomas's novel thus fuses historic moments represented in realist forms—as Thomas writes, “No one could have imagined this scene, because it was happening”—with fantastical representations of unconscious dreams (243). Both Thomas and Spiegelman's works serve as examples for how writers have attempted to convey the Holocaust in unconventional narrative forms.

Like the aforementioned examples, *Everything is Illuminated* is highly experimental in form. In the novel, the fictional Foer, who I will call “Jonathan,” goes on a trip to his ancestors' country of Ukraine. The novel presents us with the fictionalized history of his ancestry that Jonathan supposedly composes while journeying to his ancestor's shtetl of Trachimbrod, which

² Essays by Wendy Faris (“Scheherazade's Children”) and Jenni Adams, cited later in this thesis, both refer to *The White Hotel* as an example of Holocaust literature that invokes magical realist modes.

was completely obliterated at the hands of Nazis. Meanwhile, in a separate narrative strand, another narrator, Alex, who is acting as Jonathan's tour guide and translator throughout Ukraine, writes an account of Jonathan's journey. On one level, *Everything is Illuminated* is rooted in a story of truth. Its author, Jonathan Safran Foer, embarked on what he has called in interviews "an incredibly foolish journey," when he travelled to the Ukraine to a small town that used to be in Poland. He brought with him a photograph of his grandfather with a woman who was said to have rescued his grandfather from the Nazis. Based on this photograph, Foer sought to discover the woman who had saved his grandfather during the Nazi occupation ("Interview"). Likewise, in *Everything is Illuminated*, the Jewish-American character that travels to the Ukraine, henceforth referred to as "Jonathan," bears the same name as the novel's author. Foer's choice to insert himself into the novel as the protagonist is a self-conscious move that conveys the author's own troubling process of understanding the trauma experienced by his family. In this way, the novel is not only about what happened at Trachimbrod, but also about *the author's journey* to figure out what happened at Trachimbrod.

Everything is Illuminated is a highly stylized novel that alternates between three different narrative strands, which offer different perspectives on the novel while at the same time constructing a unified plot. One of the narrative strands is presented by Alex, who writes about Jonathan's journey through the Ukraine with Alex and Alex's grandfather as his tour guides. The narration is replete with Alex's botched translations and cultural misunderstandings, which add a heavy dose of humor to the novel and begin to hint at the limitations of language as a representational form. The fictionalized history of Jonathan's ancestry and Trachimbrod, the shtetl, or village, that they came from, formulates another narrative strand of the novel. The history begins 150 years back and ends with the shtetl's destruction during the Nazi occupation.

This narration is also unconventional in its high degree of literariness. It is clearly fabricated by Jonathan, a grand narrative of his family drawing on symbols of myth and allusion that display a high degree of literariness, thus differing greatly from the sorts of testimonial narratives of the Holocaust like Wiesel's *Night*. Finally, Foer also weaves in letters that are supposedly written between Jonathan and Alex after the journey, providing commentary on the other two narrative strands throughout the novel. These letters blatantly point out that the novel is highly literarily constructed.

Yet despite the novel's highly imaginative nature, marked by its use of subverted chronology, mythical elements, fragmentation, humor, and other devices which are often perceived as incongruous with arriving at a singular coherent truth, Foer appears to be playing with the idea that despite the "unknowability" of the past, it is possible to "illuminate" parts of it in very real ways that can keep the narrative alive. After all, were it not for mediated forms such as Foer's work, we risk the danger of losing the traumatic narratives altogether. But the altering of the Holocaust narrative from what actually happened presents specific moral stakes, as Foer himself has commented:

My mind wanted to wander, to invent, to use what I had seen as a canvas, rather than the paints. But, I wondered, is my family's experience of the Holocaust exactly that which cannot and should not be imagined? What are one's responsibilities to "the truth" of such a traumatic event, and what is "the truth"? Can historical accuracy be replaced with imaginative accuracy? Objectivity with the mind's eye? ("Review")

I suggest that *Everything is Illuminated* begins to answer many of these questions, and arrives at a sort of "truth" from an alternate direction, even while replacing "historical accuracy" with

“imaginative accuracy.” Truth, after all, may not necessarily mean relating an event exactly as it happened—a task that is anyway impossible, as any story that is told will rely on some degree of selectivity in the presentation of fact—but capturing the overall feelings of an event. Being able to capture the emotions associated with an experience is perhaps what Foer means by “imaginative accuracy.” In fact, the poignancy of the emotions evoked by Foer’s novel presents “truth” in a way that can make the awful experience of the Holocaust better known by the present-day reader, who may have no other way of knowing the Holocaust other than through the stories that are told about it. As Alex urges Jonathan in one of his letters, commenting on the novel that Jonathan is writing, “I would never command you to write a story that is as it occurred in the actual, but I would command you to make your story faithful” (*Everything is Illuminated* 240).

This thesis begins to address some of these key questions about how *Everything is Illuminated* conveys the experience of the Holocaust in a manner that may not be factually true to history, but can nevertheless evoke a sense of trauma that makes the experience more real and understood by those who did not experience it firsthand. The novel is important to the debate of what language qualifies for articulating the experience of the Holocaust, because the novel itself pushes many of these boundaries and comments upon the degree of “historical accuracy” that is needed in a narrative about the Holocaust. The first chapter of this thesis explores how memories are passed on to further generations by examining the account of Lista, the sole survivor of Trachimbrod encountered by Jonathan on his journey to Ukraine. Lista is the one living source that Jonathan has for hearing the narrative directly. However, the immediacy of the event to Lista—and the painful emotions that a retelling of that experience invokes—makes it difficult for her to relate her experience to Jonathan. The difficulty of testimonial Holocaust

accounts, as demonstrated by this scene, begins to serve as an explanation for why Jonathan constructs a highly fictionalized account of his family saga.

Therefore, the next chapter of this thesis looks in further detail at the fiction that Jonathan writes. Jonathan utilizes many supernatural or magic realist elements in the composition of his ancestors' story. The overall effect of these elements is to create a narrative that feels larger-than-life, if not downright impossible. Jonathan's story thus explores a number of questions that indicate the inability to express trauma in a straightforward manner. Not only are mediated, unconventional forms more accessible for the reader, but due to the limitations in expression that the Holocaust presents, it is perhaps necessary to seek out new forms for communicating the experience of the Holocaust.

The final chapter concludes by looking at the letters exchanged between Alex and Jonathan in the novel. These letters serve as evidence of the novel's self-conscious nature in pointing out the difficulties of providing a "truthful" account. Nevertheless, *Everything is Illuminated* marks an important landmark in 21st century literary attempts to make sense of the Holocaust and ensure that the enormity of the trauma is not forgotten.

Chapter II: Accessing the Past Sites of Memory

Everything is Illuminated explores the various means through which one may access his familial history. Jonathan's journey to the Ukraine is ostensibly undertaken to reconstruct his family history, but this process is particularly problematic. Jonathan lacks a direct link to the past. To borrow a term from Pierre Nora, the *lieux de mémoire*, or sites of memory, have all been erased when Jonathan travels back to the Ukraine, because the town of Trachimbrod has physically been eradicated. Jonathan must piece together his family history from very limited knowledge, including the photograph he has of a woman—presumably his grandmother, Augustine—and the testimony of the one living survivor of the trauma, Lista. But Lista's testimony is fraught with difficulties, as she struggles to tell Jonathan her story. Lista's struggle mirrors the struggle felt by many survivors of the Holocaust as they try to give testimony of their traumatic experience. In many ways, the traumatic experience of the Holocaust defies expression through language. One reason for this, as Saul Friedlander writes in the introduction to the essay collection *Probing the Limits of Representation*, is that with the Holocaust, "we are dealing with an event which tests our traditional conceptual and representational categories, an 'event at the limits'" (3). The experience of the Holocaust was so extreme, it lacks a parallel, and hence lacks a familiar vocabulary in order to adequately describe the events. But the difficulty of expressing the events of the Holocaust should not provide grounds to remain altogether silenced on the subject. As Peter Haidu writes, "It is a willful silence that may constitute the pre-condition for far worse eventualities and their attendant narratives. It has done so in the past" (298). By remaining silenced about the Holocaust, we risk forgetting the atrocities that human institutions may be capable of. Consequently, this could open up possibilities for a horrific event of the same scale to occur again.

Therefore, it seems imperative to seek out a new vocabulary, or better yet, new mediums, for speaking about the ineffable. Attempts have been made at encapsulating the experience of the Holocaust in various forms. In *Everything is Illuminated*, a multitude of these forms collide, including written history, spoken testimony, and photography. The novel weighs in on the value of these different narrative forms in illuminating an understanding of the Holocaust to current generations. Recorded history, testimony, and photography could all be considered various forms of *lieux de mémoire*. *Lieux de mémoire* provide places “where memory crystallizes and secretes itself,” where memories are deposited and preserved to form a “material stock of what it would be impossible for us to remember, an unlimited repertoire of what might need to be recalled” (Nora 284, 290). *Lieux de mémoire* are thus created as part of a forced, willful, and conscious effort to create “storehouses” of memory (Nora 290). With the Holocaust in particular, it is essential to produce these sorts of *lieux de mémoire* in place of *milieux de mémoire*, real environments of memory, because the real environments have been reduced to nothing. As Nora writes, “The moment of *lieux de mémoire* occurs at the same time that an immense and intimate fund of memory disappears, surviving only as a reconstituted object beneath the gaze of critical history” (288). The Holocaust created a rupture in history that erased an “intimate fund of memory”. And yet, for those who remain, ways needed to be found—and in fact, still need to be found—to continue to remember the past, or else the memory of it could be lost altogether.

On the one hand, it is absolutely imperative to find ways of remembering the past. But this problem is fraught with further difficulties as the historical experience is further distanced temporally. Now memories are not only shared, say, from father to son, but may be passed down through multiple generations. This passing down increases the likelihood that stories will be

altered from the meaning originally intended by the one who lived through the experience. As George Steiner notes, whenever any message is communicated, the meaning is never conveyed precisely as it was originally intended. This problem of translation thus exists not only between languages, but also even within the same language. Time erects a barrier between receiver and communicator that impedes understanding. Whenever a message, such as a recollection of memory, is communicated, there are “characteristic penumbras and margins of failure. Certain elements will elude comprehension or revival” (Steiner 29). Thus even if a survivor of the Holocaust tells her child about the experience, the memory will not be exactly rendered as it exists in the survivor’s mind. Marianne Hirsch refers to the resulting transposed memory as “postmemory.” She writes:

...postmemory is distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection. Postmemory is a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation. This is not to say that memory itself is unmediated, but that it is more directly connected to the past. Postmemory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated (22).

For Jonathan as a grandchild of a survivor, as with for many children of survivors, much of his self-identity is built on the idea of his connection to his family history and the atrocity that occurred to his ancestors. Just as his parents and their parents were shaped by the Holocaust, Jonathan too feels “dominated” by the narrative. For Jonathan, the problem of temporal distance

from the event is particularly acute: what he has of the past is “post-postmemory,” if you will, memory that is passed down through multiple people³. It is therefore likely that for Jonathan, “creation” and “imaginative investment” play a significant role in his memory of the past. The novel composed by Jonathan within *Everything is Illuminated* could thus be looked at as another sort of *lieu de mémoire*, a conscious effort of its author to construct and record a vision of memory. What’s more, the other forms that Jonathan has of accessing the past—through the testimony of Lista and the photograph of Augustine, for example—provide incomplete pictures of the past. Nevertheless, it is crucial, wherever possible, to attempt to preserve what little of the past remains.

Recording history: *The Book of Recurrent Dreams*

Jonathan does not have available to him the same means of accessing the past that were available to his ancestors. In the novel he writes, he imagines the most complete form of memory possible, a book entitled the *Book of Recurrent Dreams*, which details every occurrence in the town for 150 years of history. Thus, in Jonathan’s imagined narrative, when Jonathan’s grandfather Safran grew up in Trachimbrod in the years immediately preceding the Nazi occupation, he was able to read a recorded history of the shtetl. The *Book of Recurrent Dreams* functions as a trope throughout the novel, an emblem of a past that was rich with remembrance. In fact, with the excessive completeness of its record, the book stands in exact opposition to the blankness of Trachimbrod that Jonathan encounters when he goes to the Ukraine. Once Jonathan returns to Trachimbrod, unfortunately, he finds that all of these records and memoirs of the past have been destroyed: literally, nothing remains of the past that preceded Jonathan’s arrival.

³ The phrase “post-postmemory” was used by Christopher Ribbat in his essay “Nomadic with the Truth: Holocaust representations in Michael Chabon, James McBride, and Jonathan Safran Foer.”

Prior to the book's destruction, the *Book of Recurrent Dreams* could be viewed as a sort of *lieu de mémoire* for the shtetl. The "book" is in fact not just one book, but multiple large volumes composed by the shtetl, which began as "a record of major events: battles and treaties, famines, seismic occurrences, the beginnings and ends of political regimes" (*Everything* 196). As it evolved, the book also came to record lesser, more trivial events in great detail, "as citizens contributed family records, portraits, important documents, and personal journals until any schoolboy could easily find out what his grandfather ate for breakfast on a given Thursday fifty years before" (*Everything* 196). Jonathan's narrative proceeds to provide imagined excerpts from the *Book of Recurrent Dreams*, until at one point, the narrative finally breaks down. The narrative comments upon itself by concluding with the words "*We are writing*" repeated over and over again, ending with an ellipsis (*Everything* 212-213). In one sense, this moment suggests that history is constantly being written. On the other hand, this moment alludes to the problem of recording so much history, being so bogged down in memory, that one forgets the present. Indeed, while reading the incessant, overly-detailed writing that the *Book of Antecedents* provides, one begins to wonder, at what point is historical information *too much*? Is it really necessary to remember everything?

Contrary to the imagined problem of having too much information, Jonathan in fact encounters the opposite situation when he arrives at Trachimbrod: scarcity of information. Whereas Jonathan invents much of his family saga, the *Book of Recurrent Dreams* obsessively records every detail, even the most mundane, as a fact worthy of remembrance. The *Book of Recurrent Dreams* seems to be a self-conscious move on the part of Foer, standing in as an examination of the different ways that history might be recorded and preserved. The book delineates some of the shortcomings of recorded history as a *lieu de mémoire*. Within Jonathan's

narrative, the *Book of Recurrent Dreams* is destroyed during the Holocaust. At a basic level, then, the physical copy of recorded history is fragile and perhaps impermanent. In fact, at one moment in the narrative by Jonathan, Foer observes, “The novel is the art form that burns most easily,” a phrase that suggests the fragility of the printed form (*Everything* 201). What’s more, the aforementioned shortcomings of language that arise during translation are also observed when memories are transferred from thought to paper. As a consequence of the process of transference, literary representation is necessarily inexact (Young 4). Finally, the very format of the *Book of Recurrent Dreams*, which eventually attempts to record everything that ever happened, is critical of recorded history as a means of preserving memory. The format demonstrates the impossibility of recording everything; writing necessitates some degree of selectivity. By writing one thing down, therefore, you are choosing to preserve that detail over another. As Foer writes in his nonfiction work *Eating Animals*, “Remembering and forgetting are part of the same mental process. To write down one detail of an event is not to write down another (unless you keep writing forever)” (194). The *Book of Recurrent Dreams* imagines this possibility of “writing forever,” an attempt which ultimately breaks down. Furthermore, the mundane details included in the *Book of Recurrent Dreams* suggest that even if one were to conceivably record everything that ever happened, this record alone would not provide any illumination as to what facts are actually important to remember. Ironically, therefore, even as *Everything is Illuminated* itself exists in a written form, the novel points out its own shortcomings as a means of preserving memory.

Photography

Jonathan’s journey begins with a photograph of Augustine and her family, his only remnant of his family’s past. Photography serves as a *lieu de mémoire*, providing Jonathan with

a means of accessing a family past. In fact, in contrast to recorded history, which must undergo processes of mediation and translation, photographs appear to represent a more direct link between the viewer and the past (assuming, of course, that the photograph has in no way been altered or doctored). Young writes about the photograph as a form of empirical evidence:

..As a seeming trace or fragment of its referent that appeals to the eye for its proof, the photograph is able to invoke the authority of its empirical link to events, which in turn seems to reinforce the sense of its own unmediated factuality. As a metonymical trope of witness, the photograph persuades the viewer of its testimonial and factual authority in ways that are unavailable to narrative. One of the reasons that narrative and photographs are so convincing together is that they seem to represent a combination of pure object and commentary on the object, each seeming to complete the other by reinforcing a sense of contrasting functions. (57-58)

On the one hand, a photograph may seem to represent indisputable evidence of the past: it records what is directly before it. But though the image being captured may not be directly manipulated, photographs are nevertheless subject to manipulation in the form of altering the camera angle, aperture, lens, and so forth. Young writes, “photographs are as constructed and as mediated as any other kind of representation” (57). So can photographs truly be relied upon as a *lieu de mémoire*? Just how direct can the relation of photography to history really be?

Marianne Hirsch has explored the role of photography as a means of preserving family memory. Hirsch writes that photographs provide evidence of the “existence of a family mythology,” a mythology which “survives by means of its narrative and imaginary power, a power that photographs have a particular capacity to tap” (6). Similarly, Jonathan constructs his

own family story; he builds up a mythology via narrative. The photograph of Augustine provides a means by which he is able to access the account of Trachimbrod's sole survivor. But even while the photograph may begin to provide some access for Jonathan to his family's past, photographs, as Hirsch acknowledges, provide only fragmented evidence of the past. In reference to the use of photography in Spiegelman's *Maus*, Hirsch observes, "His inclusion of family photographs demonstrates both their power and their silence: there is nothing in the pictures themselves that reveals the complicated history of loss and destruction to which they testify" (13). Photographs, thus, have the power to "reveal even as they conceal" (2). That is, they tell us something about family history, but at the same time, there is much that they leave out. By looking at a family photograph such as the photo of Augustine and her family, without the background story, one would never know all that is left out of it—that is, the horrible atrocity that was to later devastate their family.

Jonathan uses a family photograph as the impetus for his journey to the Ukraine, and his main guiding source while seeking out his family. When they encounter a woman in the middle of Ukraine, Alex decides to show the woman, named Lista, the photograph of Augustine and her family. Lista, they later find out, was the sole survivor of the massacre at Trachimbrod. Even though she claims not to know anyone in the photo, mysteriously guided by impulse, Alex keeps asking Lista if she knows the woman in the photograph. The resulting scene is one of the most powerful moments in the novel, revealing the power of memory to rupture and disrupt daily life, to confound the present by bringing back memories that Lista had sought to suppress. After Alex has already asked her multiple times whether she has even seen anyone in the photograph, and received no for an answer, the following exchange takes place. Alex asks,

"Have you ever witnessed anyone in the photograph?"

“No,” she said. “No.” I saw a tear descend to her white dress. It too would dry and leave a mark.

“Have you ever witnessed anyone in the photograph?” I inquired, and I felt cruel, I felt like an awful person, but I was certain that I was performing the right thing.

“No,” she said, “I have not. They all look like strangers.”

I periled everything.

“Has anyone in this photograph ever witnessed you?”

Another tear descended.

“I have been waiting for you for so long.”

I pointed to the car. “We are searching for Trachimbrod.”

“Oh,” she said, and she released a river of tears. “You are here. I am it.”

(*Everything* 118).

The initial impulse of Lista to falsely respond that she did not know anyone in the photograph demonstrates a common response of traumatized individuals, described by Van der Kolk and McFarlane: “Once traumatized individuals become haunted by intrusive reexperiences of their trauma, they generally start organizing their lives around avoiding having the emotions that these intrusions evoke” (494). Lista is hesitant to avoid triggering the memory of her traumatic experiences. Alex is forced to turn the question around, to change Lista’s role from “witness” to the one being “witnessed”, in order to elicit a response from her. When she finally claims, “I am it,” that she is Trachimbrod, Lista reveals herself as a *lieu de mémoire*. As the sole survivor of the Nazi occupation of the Trachimbrod, she is all that is left of the shtetl, the final reserve of the shtetl’s history. The statement, “I am it” also seems to allude to the all-consuming nature of traumatic experiences, suggesting that the trauma of the Holocaust now forms an integral part of

Lista's self-identity. As Lista is the only person that Jonathan can reach out to for a firsthand account of the atrocity at Trachimbrod, her role as a *lieu de mémoire* is crucial: she acts as the one living link that Jonathan has to the past. The photograph provides the launching point of Jonathan's journey, but after finding Lista, his new mission becomes extracting Lista's story from her in order to fill in the gaps in his knowledge of his family's history.

Testimony and Lista's Story

Upon meeting Lista, Jonathan first suspects that this woman is Augustine, the woman who rescued Jonathan's grandfather during the Nazi occupation. As it turns out, she is not Augustine, but Augustine's sister. From Lista, Jonathan learns the story of how Trachimbrod was destroyed. If Jonathan's narrative of Trachimbrod is magical realist, one might say that Lista's testimony represents a moment closest to staunch realism in the novel. Lista's account of Trachimbrod's destruction comes to the forefront in a mode that hardly seems constructed or imagined, in fact, in contrast to much of the novel and the Trachimbrod narrative in particular, it is wholly believable as a representation of how an actual survivor of the Holocaust may have responded when prodded to provide testimony.

But even as Lista tries to tell her story, it is evident that this process is forced, difficult, and problematic—not only for her, as the survivor and teller of her own story, but for those who are listening to the story, as well. This scene illustrates many of the problems that are encountered in the telling of Holocaust narratives, particularly within narratives that rely so heavily on fact. When Jonathan finally meets Lista, he is accompanied by Alex, his translator and tour guide, and Alex's grandfather, Alexander, who has been driving the two young men around the Ukraine. Each of these characters relates differently to the event Lista is describing, and yet for all of them, the testimony presents problems.

For Lista, the problem is obvious: as the one who experienced the trauma firsthand, telling her story forces her to recall many of the awful memories of her past experience. At first, Lista is reluctant to tell her story. Alex's account of her retelling of the story invokes many of the same responses described by Lawrence Kirmayer in his interactions with Holocaust survivors. Kirmayer writes:

Survivors of the Holocaust are usually depicted as overwhelmed by memories and unwilling to recount their tale for fear of the pain it will re-evoke. Their problem is not the limits of memory but of language—the inadequacy of ordinary words to express all they have witnessed. The Holocaust presents an incomprehensible catastrophe that undermines the very possibility of a coherent narrative. (175)

It seems as though Lista, too, feels the limitations of language. When asked if she knows of Trachimbrod, Lista's initial response is to recoil. Like the stories of the victims that Kirmayer speaks of, it seems that Lista's story is too terrible for her to repeat. This may be because she lacks the adequate words to describe what happened, or that by telling it, she would be reaccessing the memory of so awful an experience. Lista's statement evokes a sense of the unspeakable that is echoed throughout the novel as a barrier that Jonathan frequently encounters in his attempt to learn his ancestry's history. Lawrence Langer further addresses the difficulty of translating horrific memory through language in his analysis of Holocaust testimonies. Langer distinguishes between two types of memory: common memory and deep memory. Common memory is what we think of as an ordered, chronological narrative. It is fully processed, a sort of window back into the past, as seen by the present self. Deep memory, by contrast, "tries to recall the...self as it was then," to put oneself back in the shoes of his or her past (Langer 6). Or, as Langer summarizes, "these testimonies invite witnesses to re-create '*me*, yes *me*, just as I

know I was' (and 'it', just as they knew 'it' was) in spite of the monitory other self that is skeptical of the whole enterprise" (7-8). That is, even if through common memory, one may seek to distance oneself from the memory by consciously processing it, deep memory will often interfere in the process, "disrupting the smooth flow of their narratives" (Langer 6). Deep memory interferes with common memory in ways that prevent a coherent narrative. But disruptive as it may be, deep memory is often able to achieve the most "historical accuracy," to borrow Young's term, because it is a less filtered form.

Langer also notes the constraints that language can have on expressing these memories, noting the "limited power of words to release the specific kinds of physical distress haunting the caverns of deep memory" (8). It certainly seems as though when Alex and Jonathan first encounter Lista, she struggles to find the right words to describe what happened. The inexpressibility of this event—or lack of desire to return to deep memory by providing testimony of any kind—is demonstrated by Lista's choice to keep the story bound up inside of her. Indeed, when Alex tells her that if she does not wish to, she does not have to "utter" a single word about what happened, she responds, "Then I would never utter another word again" (*Everything is Illuminated* 155).

Langer observes a strange, and seemingly opposite, phenomenon of one victim who gave a testimony about his time in a concentration camp. But rather than hesitate to tell his story, the victim proceeds with "unencumbered flow"; the story comes back in a chaotic rush ("Deep Memory" 18). Langer writes:

At one point his wife, who is with him, says: "I think it's time to stop. He's getting upset. We should stop." But he's been perfectly calm throughout his

testimony and insists on continuing...When he finishes, his wife gets up slowly, says, 'I can't listen to this any more,' and walks off camera (28).

It seems curious that the listener, though she did not experience the trauma directly, was the one who was unable to bear the story. But an almost identical scene appears in *Everything is Illuminated*. Lista is at first hesitant to tell the story of the destruction she witnessed at Trachimbrod, but once she does begin to tell her story, the narrative rushes forward with such force that Alex comments, "I felt that it could not be stopped" (*Everything* 186). Indeed, the sheer power of the narrative is quite evident in Jonathan's reaction to it. Throughout the scene, we witness a marked transformation in Jonathan's attitude: though at first eager to learn about his family's history, he later becomes deflated and closed off. Upon first meeting Lista, Jonathan feels that he is closer to connecting the dots of his family's history and enthusiastically says to Alex, "Ask her to tell us everything" (*Everything* 148). But upon actually beginning to listen to Lista's testimony, Jonathan realizes that it may be too awful to hear. Mid-way through the account, Jonathan states, "I don't want to hear any more" (*Everything* 186). This reaction is not unlike that which Langer observed in the victim's wife. Langer analyzes the unfolding of the victim's testimony, noting that "in his efforts to make *us* witnesses too," rather than giving the listener better understanding of the experience, he "grows *too* graphic, thus alienating various members of his audience and vividly illustrating their difficulty in becoming active collaborators in the ordeal of testimony" (28). Similarly, Lista's testimony alienates Jonathan. Though Jonathan wants to understand what happened to his family at Trachimbrod, Lista's account of the massacre is perhaps *too* direct and factual.

Thus, Lista's testimony presents unique difficulties for each character, who represents a different perspective and relation to the traumatic experience. For Lista, the victim, there is, of

course, the difficulty that by retelling the experience, she is in a sense reliving it, accessing the same emotions and experiences of her deep memory. Alexander, we learn later in the novel, was in fact a witness to this event, and he feels that he is guilty of murder because he identified his best friend as a Jew when the Nazis came. Hearing the narrative brings back such painful memories for Alexander that he seeks to detach or dissociate himself from it by denying its veracity. “This is not true,” he says. Lista responds, “It is true.” These three simple words have a substantial emotional impact. Indeed, Lista’s account seems entirely believable, given the history that we know to be true, but this moment points to another problem in historical narratives: often, two perspectives of the same event may be in conflict with one another.

Young states that because historical accounts may conflict with one another, novels may shift from a reliance on facts to an attempt to instead capture the author’s experience and how the author relates to the event. Jonathan’s narrative is perhaps an attempt to reconcile the difference between pure fact and pure fiction, to add a third perspective: a means of accessing the past that relies more on construction than “historical accuracy”, but nevertheless contains “imaginative accuracy” (“Review”). The imaginative form of *Everything is Illuminated* may be necessary since the raw power of Lista’s testimony appears to be far too powerful to be adequately conveyed to others. Lista’s audience, in fact, may be unable to fully understand the truth in its direct form, and therefore it is necessary to express the truth in alternate modes that are perhaps more understandable to those who did not experience the Holocaust directly.

To point out an additional shortcoming of the testimonial form, it should be noted, that Lista’s memory is mediated in yet another form. Lista tells it to Alex in Ukrainian, and he subsequently translates it for Jonathan. Meanwhile, Alexander asks Lista questions about what happened. The translating of the story through multiple people both distances Jonathan even

further from Lista's account and creates another barrier to his understanding of the history. Earlier in this chapter, I noted that Steiner suggests that any form of communication results in some degree of difference in the message as the communicator understands it and the message as understood by the one receiving the message. Steiner also provides an explanation of the role that translation between different languages has in the transference of a message:

The schematic model of translation is one in which a message from a source-language passes into a receptor-language via a transformational process. The barrier is the obvious fact that one language differs from the other, that an interpretative transfer, sometimes, albeit misleadingly, described as encoding and decoding, must occur so that the message 'gets through.' (29)

But when the message is thus processed by multiple means, its edges are frayed, its meaning twisted, and the message that the receiver hears is never the same as what the communicator intended. An unbridgeable gap will always persist. The use of translation in the novel appears to be a self-conscious move on the author's part to point out the complications of accessing narratives. Not only does a generational gap exist between Jonathan and Lista, but cultural and linguistic ones exist as well. Foer suggests through this narrative that direct access to the past is impossible; our relation to the past will always be mediated in some way or another.

Nevertheless, language provides the dominant means for accessing the past. Steiner continues, "What material reality has history outside language, outside our interpretative belief in essentially linguistic records (silence knows no history)? Where worms, fires of London, or totalitarian régimes obliterate such records, our consciousness of past being comes on a blank space" (30). Without language, history would not survive. Thus, though imperfect, language must be used in order that the Holocaust is not forgotten. But given the imperfections of Lista's

seemingly historically accurate account, might there be other means of accessing the past as well? In large part, the Holocaust is so difficult to describe because the experience itself was so atrocious, it lacks an “analogue in human experience” (Ezrahi 3) To revisit Ezrahi’s quote⁴, no matter how historically accurate an account may be, “even the most vivid presentation of concrete detail and specificity, the most palpable reconstruction of Holocaust reality,” is presented with the challenge of dealing with an event so beyond comparison (Ezrahi 3). Ezrahi continues, “The imagination loses credibility and resources where reality exceeds even the darkest fantasies of the human mind; even realism flounders before such reality” (3). If it is the case that “imagination loses credibility,” how is one to write about the Holocaust at all? *Everything is Illuminated* appears to suggest that in response to the “floundering” of realism, one should instead attempt to find a language that is greater than reality itself. In the novel, Jonathan invents a narrative about his family saga that works directly against the modes of realism: in fact, the narrative is so consciously fabricated and so far beyond belief that it could never truly mirror reality.

⁴ This quote is also included in the Introduction of this thesis.

Chapter 3: Imagining the Family Saga

Jonathan reconstructs his family narrative in numerous ways that deviate from the history as it could have actually happened. It is highly stylized, involving characters that take on mythical proportions, unlikely or impossible occurrences, and a broken chronology that is far from coherent. The narrative style has even been described by some critics⁵ as evocative of the magical realist style, comparable to the literature of Gabriel García Márquez or Jorge Luis Borges. Jenni Adams makes such a case, describing the novel as “a magic realist history of the destroyed shtetl Trachimbrod, complete with mysterious disappearances, prophetic dreams, luminescent copulations, and impossibly comprehensive recordings of shtetl life” (54). One reason, Adams says, that this narrative strand takes a magical realist form is because the past’s unknowability makes it resistant to realist representation. By infusing the story of the Holocaust with fantastical elements, *Everything is Illuminated* engages in a “destabilization of the possibility of transparency and completeness in historical narration” (Adams 60). Fictionalizing a story opens up opportunities to express the inexpressible. The material that Jonathan is attempting to write about in many ways defies expression through ordinary language, and the language of magical realism can provide a new language that opens up the available modes of expression beyond the direct language of testimony or realism.

Magical realism can be difficult to define, in that it is a label that has been used broadly to describe literature over a vast period of the twentieth century continuing into today, and across a wide array of cultures. Although magical realism may vary widely in the forms it may take, Wendy Faris offers a comprehensive definition of magic realism: “Very briefly, magical realism

⁵ In her essay “Dream of the End of the World,” Jenni Adams claims that *Everything is Illuminated* is a magic realist novel. Christoph Ribbat also describes the text as magical realist in his essay “Nomadic with the Truth.”

combines realism and the fantastic in such a way that magical elements grow organically out of the reality portrayed” (“Scheherazade’s Children” 163). In other words, magical realism blends elements of magic and history seamlessly, speaking of the supernatural and the historical in the same “matter-of-fact” tone (Adams 54). For that reason, it often presents a particularly confusing challenge to the reader in distinguishing what is fact from what is fiction—what could have *really* happened versus how the author *describes* the event as happening. In the retelling of his family saga, Jonathan reshapes the events, from the birth of his ancestry to the bombing of Trachimbrod, inflating what could have plausibly happened with what seems too implausible or extraordinary to have actually happened. This chapter examines many of these events in greater detail, but first, it is important for us to ask the question—what might explain Jonathan’s gesturing towards fantastic, magical moments in the novel? He probably could have told the story in a straightforward manner, which would have seemed wholly plausible to the reader and congruous with history, but what explains this curious authorial move, a move that automatically introduces reader skepticism because of the extraordinary description of events? This question has particular urgency with regards to the Holocaust, because it was an experience so terrible it seems to demand a certain kind of attention to the truth, in order that the atrocity not be forgotten or diminished in society’s collective memory. In this chapter, I propose that “truth” may reside just as readily in the imagined as it does in the real.

In fact, by expanding beyond the modes of conventional realism, magical realism may offer an ideal form for developing a more holistic conception of the truth, for portraying human experience in all of the fullness of emotion that realism alone may be unable to encapsulate. The origins of magical realism speak in some degree to the complexities that the genre is capable of conveying. Magical realism originated out of post-colonialism in an attempt for the former

colonies to capture their own voice, to carve out a space apart from the voice of realism that was traditionally identified with European strongholds. Magical realism was at least in part a response to the westernized mode of realism; it had its origins in the histories of the oppressed. Faris writes that magical realist texts “help to deconstruct the univocal authority that characterizes much realistic fiction” (*Ordinary Enchantments* 142). The very form of Foer’s novel—which brings together three narrative voices—seems to reject the notion of a “univocal authority.” What’s more, within the fiction of Trachimbrod written by Jonathan, the competing elements of history and the fantastic seem to work against the notion of a singular narrative authority. Therefore, unlike realism, magical realism “provides a gesturing to alternate possibilities, which is not made possible by the constraints of realism, which often seems to point towards an inevitable end” (*Ordinary Enchantments* 144). In the postmodern sense, then, the narrative form of *Everything is Illuminated* seems to reject the idea of a singular truth. The multiplicity of perspectives offered by the narrative can perhaps illuminate an understanding of the Holocaust from multiple vantage points; realism is not the only way to tell a story.

In fact, many critics of magical realist texts have elaborated that magical realism was adopted as a style in order to *more closely* resemble reality, not to distance the narrative from reality. Realism was found to be lacking in its ability to convey the complex dimensions of reality. In fact, authors faced the same problem alluded to in the previous chapter—the limitations of language to provide an adequate means of representation. Robert Scholes writes, “Reality is too subtle for realism to catch it. It cannot be transcribed directly. But by invention, by fabulation⁶, we may open a way toward reality that will come as close to it as human

⁶ Scholes describes fabulation in the modern context as a tendency “away from direct representation of the surface of reality,” instead returning “toward actual human life by way of

ingenuity may come” (13). The language of realism proves inadequate to capture reality in its fullest. Magical realism invents a language that demonstrates that “what has long been regarded as unreal is more and more turned to or studied as the only ‘true’ or ‘another equally valid’ reality” (Simpkins 153). In a similar vein, Jonathan’s narrative constructs a fiction which may be “equally valid” as a narrative that attempted to directly transcribe what happened to his family. Thus, rather than having an effect of “shielding” the reader from the brutality of the narrative, *Everything is Illuminated* instead offers a more expansive view of human history.

But not only does the magical realist form provide a means of shedding light on the truth of an event, but it represents the author’s conscious recognition of the limitations that any literary form experiences when attempting to transcribe a real experience. As Simpkins writes, “The magic realist’s predilection toward the unreal may also reveal an awareness of the impossibility of successful signification—complete information transference—as magic is used to flaunt these same limitations” (154). Because of the self-conscious nature of *Everything is Illuminated*, Foer certainly does appear to be using elements of magical realism at least in part to point out the limitations of what he knows. As the previous chapter described, Jonathan had very little access to *lieux de mémoire* that could convey the experience of his ancestors. Therefore, he must engage in what Toni Morrison has called “literary archaeology,” a process that she describes as follows:

On the basis of some information and a little bit of guesswork you journey to a site to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world that these remains imply. What makes it fiction is the nature of the imaginative act: my

ethically controlled fantasy” (3). Scholes thus alludes to the ability of fabulated tales to nevertheless convey truths.

reliance on the image—on the remains—in addition to recollection, to yield up a kind of truth (“The Site of Memory” 302).

This process is not entirely unlike the task Jonathan is faced with when writing a narrative of Trachimbrod. Given the sparse “remains” of Trachimbrod, Jonathan must “reconstruct” the world from his own imagination. Foer begins with the foundation of what he knows of Trachimbrod and expands, molds, and builds upon it to create a narrative of Trachimbrod’s history. Yet as Morrison points out, even these imaginative forms can “yield up a kind of truth.” In the construction of his family saga, Jonathan engages in a deliberate process of imagination. This imaginative form may perhaps even be superior to a narrative that attempts to mirror reality without having actually experienced the reality itself, because it makes no false pretenses towards knowing what it cannot possibly know. In other words, the narrative *acknowledges* and *draws attention to* its own shortcomings. For authors such as Jonathan Safran Foer, who are writing at a distance from the Holocaust—operating in post-postmemory—highly imaginative forms may even be more “truthful” than those which try to be realistic. This chapter looks in turn at some of the key elements of the Trachimbrod narrative in order to get a sense of the truth that the narrative seeks to achieve.

Born from a River

The Trachimbrod narrative begins with a description of the mysterious birth of Brod, Jonathan’s great-great-great-great-great grandmother. She was born when a wagon flipped over into the Brod River—hence providing Brod’s namesake—and from the water emerged a “baby girl, still mucus-glazed, still pink as the inside of a plum” (*EIL* 13). The baby possesses supernatural qualities, mysteriously appearing like a beautiful treasure in the midst of the river. She clearly is newly born, but strangely, no evidence of her mother is present. No umbilical cord

is discovered; no body of a mother is found. Are we to believe, perhaps, that the baby girl was literally born of the river? The event draws some parallels to other mythical births, perhaps alluding to Christ's birth from the virgin Mary—an event too, which may seem impossible by everyday standards. Thus, the imagery of Brod's birth immediately introduces a high degree of improbability, or at least, rarity and exceptionality, into the narrative. The imagery of her birth immediately makes the event seem larger-than-life as we know it.

This seemingly extraordinary occurrence comes to form the basis for the shtetl's tradition for decades after. Additionally, this moment marks the beginning of Jonathan's narrative of Trachimbrod, immediately introducing a seemingly impossible occurrence as the premise for a town ritual. The rendering of the event accords closely with one of the characteristics of a magical realist text highlighted by Faris. According to Faris, the magic in magical realism narratives defies regular explanation, that is, the narratives contain an "'irreducible element' of magic" ("Children" 167). To elaborate, Faris writes, "The magic in these texts refuses to be assimilated into their realism. Yet it also exists symbiotically in a foreign textual culture—a disturbing element or grain of sand in the oyster of that realism" ("Children" 168). The fictive elements in the Trachimbrod narrative interact with the realistic portions in a similar manner to what Faris describes. For instance, at the same time that we can believe the ensuing story of the shtetl's traditions when celebrating Trachimday—the festival annually held in the shtetl to mark the day when Brod emerged from the river—we cannot forget the fact that the entire tradition relies on a most unusual basis: for a baby to be born without a mother.

What's more, the narrative itself questions the dubious nature of the accounts of the event of the wagon flipping over the river and Brod emerging. Jonathan writes, ".It's relatively easy to see how a life could be lost in a river, but for one to arise from it?" (*Everything* 16). This sort

of a self-conscious literary move—in which Jonathan casts doubt on the probability of the story—allows the novel to reinvent a family saga. In fact, another characteristic of contemporary magical realist narratives that Faris specifically points to is that “metafictional dimensions are common...these texts provide commentary on themselves” (“Children” 175). The questioning of the Trachimbrod narrative begins as soon as the narrative begins, when Foer writes, “It was March 18, 1791 when Trachim B’s double axle wagon either did or did not pin him against the bottom of the Brod River” (*Everything* 8). The narrative immediately casts doubt on itself; requiring the reader to suspend disbelief from the outset.

The presence of unreliable narrators in the construction of the Trachimbrod narrative places the reliability of the narrative on tenuous ground. The “mad squire Sofiowka N” (*Everything* 9) supposedly witnesses the wagon flipping into the river. But even while claiming to have seen the entire event happening, Sofiowka amends his own eyewitness account of the story:

If that’s not exactly the truth, then the wagon didn’t flip itself, but was flipped by a wind from Kiev or Odessa or wherever, and if that doesn’t quite seem correct, then what happened was—and I would swear on my lily-white name to this—an angel with grave-stone-feathered wings descended from heaven to take Trachim back with him, for Trachim was too good for this world. (Everything 9)

The absurdity—and clearly imaginative nature—of this account need not be pointed out. But not only is the event extraordinary, it too seems evocative of Christian imagery of the ascension, a gesturing that suggests the rather grandiose nature of Jonathan’s narrative. Furthermore, Sofiowka clearly is uncertain about what he actually saw, yet still attempts to describe the scene, ironically, swearing on his “lily-white name” (which, needless to say, is probably not so lily-

white). With the use of many conditionals—if that, then this—the narrative seems to be calling its own bluff. If this is the only firsthand account we have of the event, how is it to be trusted? Once again, the narrative immediately forces the reader to suspend disbelief. The reader approaches the remainder of the narrative with the expectation not of a straightforward account of Jonathan’s narrative, but rather one that is likely quite far-fetched. As Faris writes of magical realist texts, “The reader may hesitate (at one point or another) between two contradictory understandings of events—and hence experiences some unsettling doubts” (“Children,” 171). Indeed, the story of Brod’s birth evokes many doubts, but as these doubts are deliberately cast upon the reader, they come with the terms of reading the novel. The novel invites the reader to take the events in with a grain of salt.

Despite its improbability, the story of Brod’s strange birth forms the foundation of the shtetl Trachimbrod, marking the beginning of a tradition that repeats year after year until the shtetl is destroyed during World War II. At first, an annual contest is held to find the body that had died in the river—presumably, the baby’s mother—but after two years, recognizing that this search is futile, the event evolves into a festival. Therefore, in a parallel to Jonathan’s reconstruction of his family history, the citizens of Trachimbrod are reinventing their own history, weaving new stories and traditions into their existing culture. Brod’s mother’s death becomes integrated into the imagination of the citizens for generations to come, and Brod becomes an object of fascination. The citizens themselves have to suspend disbelief: at the same time they invest in this annual tradition, they recognize that the circumstances it is based on are dubious. After all, it originated from the account of Sofiowka, a man who was thought to be crazy and whose reliability is constantly called into question. About him, Jonathan writes:

He was once found on the Well-Regarded Rabbi's front lawn, bound in white string, and said he tied one around his index finger to remember something terribly important, and fearing he would forget the index finger, he tied a string around his pinky, and then one from waist to neck, and fearing he would forget this one, he tied a string from ear to tooth to scrotum to heel, and used his body to remember his body, but in the end could remember only the string. Is this someone to trust for a story? (*Everything* 15).

This portion of the narrative implies that the answer to the final question is no, that Sofiowka N is not one to be trusted for a story. Nevertheless, the citizens choose to disregard the questionable reliability of the account. Perhaps, more important than how Brod actually came to arise out of a river is what she came to represent: a tradition that was repeated throughout the shtetl's subsequent history, a representation of the shtetl's culture, and a past that is largely inaccessible to Jonathan.

A chance for reinvention

Reinvention is a trope repeated throughout the novel, beginning with Brod's birth. Birth itself is a form of starting anew. Brod's birth might then represent the rebirth of the shtetl Trachimbrod, which would explain Foer's choice to begin the Trachimbrod narrative with Brod's birth. Brod's birth gives the shtetl new chances to create tradition, and gives a new life to Yankel, the man chosen to be the father of the baby. After Brod is found in the river, Yankel is conferred the honor of raising Brod. Yankel has a past that he would prefer to wipe away: his wife left him for another man, leaving only a note, which continues to haunt him. He was previously put on trial for usury, found guilty, and forced to wear a "horrible bead around his neck as a mark of shame" (*Everything* 47). Thereafter, Yankel lost all respect from the others in

the shtetl. Following that incident, he left the shtetl for three years before returning. In short, Yankel finds himself at the lowest of lows before being given the honor of raising Brod. In the Trachimbrod narrative, Jonathan imagines Brod as embodying, for Yankel, a chance at rebirth. Brod's linkage to Yankel's rebirth is evident when Jonathan relates, "When the black-hatted men gave him the baby, he felt that he too was only a baby, with a chance to live without shame, without need of consolation for a life lived wrong, a chance to be again innocent, simply and impossibly happy" (*Everything* 47). While previously, Yankel could not forget the pain of losing his wife, he now seizes the opportunity to reinvent the story of his past. He tells Brod as she grows up that her mother, his wife, had died "*painless, in childbirth*" (*Everything* 48). He regales the young Brod with stories of love between him and his "deceased" wife, even forging exchanges of love letters between the two, "writing with his left hand those from Brod's mother" (*Everything* 48). Hence, Yankel is given a chance at reconstructing his family narrative through the way he chooses to relate it to Brod, while simultaneously, Jonathan is given the power to construct his family history as he writes the Trachimbrod narrative.

As in magical realist texts, the consequence of Yankel's continuous reworking of his history is a conflation of the real and the imaginary. He can no longer tell the difference between what actually happened, and the lies that he made up to appease Brod. Jonathan writes:

It was inevitable: Yankel fell in love with his never-wife. He would wake from sleep to miss the weight that never depressed the bed next to him, remember in earnest the weight of gestures she never made, long for the un-weight of her un-arm slung over his too real chest, making his widower's remembrances that much more convincing and his pain that much more real. He felt that he had lost her. He *had* lost her (*Everything* 49).

Notable in this passage is the binary that is created—and subsequently dissolved—between the real and the un-real. Yankel deflects every part of his imagination with a negative—what is not there. And yet, Yankel repeats this in his imagination so many times that he comes to believe it is true. In fact, Yankel’s process of recreating his family history through his actions is highly emblematic of the process that Jonathan himself engages in as he rewrites his family saga. At once, both Yankel and Jonathan seem to be convincing themselves of the truth of the family sagas that they construct. The only thing saving this fictionalized version from completely supplanting the true history is the highly imaginative elements, which remind us that the narratives and stories are, in fact, inventions.

By rewriting his family history and imbuing it with un-facts, Jonathan comes to create something to replace the void left in his real family history. The saga he invents becomes incorporated into his real family tradition, reconstructed, reordered, rewritten. He chooses to tell different stories. In Foer’s non-fiction work *Eating Animals*, which recalls his decision to raise his son as a vegetarian, Foer describes a similar process: “We could retell our stories and make them better, more representative or aspirational. Or we could choose to tell different stories. The world itself had another chance” (*Eating Animals* 11). Foer implies his belief in a process of reconstruction, that it is possible to rebuild one’s family history by telling stories that don’t necessarily accord with the events as they actually happened. This process of retelling is very much at work in *Everything is Illuminated*, seemingly given Yankel another chance after his shame, giving Brod another chance at life after the wagon flipped over. Throughout the narrative, Jonathan emphasizes the need to understand history in order to reconcile past mistakes—but in moving forward, the process of reinvention, and not getting too caught up in history, may become all-important.

The oppositions of history and imagination throughout Jonathan's narrative together form a collective memory that drives the story of Trachimbrod's tragedy in *Everything is Illuminated*. These oppositions both prove essential to constructing the family history. Without some level of imagination, it seems that the story of Jonathan's family could not have been told at all. But history is essential to provide some grounding in the novel; in Faris's view: "history is the weight that tethers the balloon of magic" ("Children," 170). Narratives cannot get too far off in the world of imagination, or else they lose part of their validity and emotional impact. And in Jonathan's case, a venturing too far into imagination could risk losing his family story altogether, because the way he tells it may be the only way it will be remembered moving forward.

Describing the indescribable

Perhaps the moment that most brings into focus the urgent need for remembrance is the story of the trauma experienced by Jonathan's ancestors during the Holocaust. Yet while this event's place in Holocaust history makes it crucial to remember, it is also the most difficult to describe, and Jonathan's narrative only arrives at a discussion of this trauma after dancing around the subject for quite some time. In the main descriptions that he provides of World War II—and hence, the events leading up to the Nazi invasion—Jonathan focuses most of the narrative on his grandfather, Safran. But curiously, rather than emphasizing the historical turmoil surrounding Safran, with the impending Nazi invasion, most of the narrative at this point focuses on Safran's personal concerns, namely, his impending wedding and his sexual prowess.

The narrative draws conscious parallels between how the trauma of the Holocaust is told and the story of another trauma, the rape of Brod. It certainly seems strange for Jonathan to describe a collective trauma and a very personal trauma in ways that often seem similar. For instance, both traumas unfold by only revealing themselves at discrete moments in the narrative,

rather than all at once. One effect of this layered construction of the narrative is to mimic the nature of traumatic memory, as something that can't entirely be controlled, but may arrive at any moment as an intrusion into the memory of the one who experienced the trauma.

Brod is raped when walking back from the events at the thirteenth Trachimday festival. The event is first introduced in a nonconventional manner. Foer describes how Brod “lifts a powerful telescope to find herself,” a telescope which allows her to see into the future. While glimpsing into the future, she sees part of her family’s history, then sees an excerpt from the *Book of Antecedents* that describes her rape in plain terms:

THE FIRST RAPE OF BROD D

The first rape occurred amid the celebrations following the thirteenth Trachimday festival, March 18, 1804. Brod was walking home from the blue-flowered float—on which she had stood in such austere beauty for so many hours on end, waving her mermaid’s tail only when appropriate, throwing deep into the river of her name those heavy sacks only when the Rabbi gave her the necessary nod—when she was approached by the mad squire Sofiowka N, whose name our shtetl now uses for maps and Mormon...(*Everything* 89)

The jarring manner in which this episode is introduced—and subsequently cut off—introduces some of the problems of describing trauma. It seems as though Jonathan cannot describe the event directly, so he instead relies on an excerpt from an outside account, the *Book of Antecedents*, creating a rupture within the narrative by breaking with its formerly humorous tone. The description of Brod is also quite unusual, seemingly casting her in an exalted light, replete with “austere beauty.” In fact, this moment paints a moment of innocence and perfection, which seems brutally interrupted by the arrival of Sofiowka N. During this point in the narrative,

Brod's rape is not described further. Just at the moment that Brod is able to "lift a powerful telescope to find herself," the image that she receives of her future is incomplete. The moment is cut off, and temporarily left without a conclusion. Perhaps this is in part what Caruth means when describing that with a traumatic experience, "the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it" (2). Indeed, at first glimpse, Brod's view of her trauma is not entirely complete, and therefore cannot be fully "experienced."

The following chapter in *Everything is Illuminated* describes the events of the Trachimday festival the year Brod was raped, but does little to fill in the details of her rape by Sofiowka—the circumstances surrounding it, where it happened, etc.—details of which were also omitted from the earlier description of the event. Instead, it describes her willingly being impregnated by the Kolker, who appears at her window just as she discovers Yankel's dead body. As it turns out, the Kolker is the man who Brod later marries, becoming Jonathan's great-great-great-great-grandfather. At this moment in the text, Foer seems to be substituting a horrific description of the rape that Brod experiences with the opposite of rape: Brod's voluntary choice to have sex. Not only does she come across as compliant in this scene, but as an instigator, turning to face the Kolker and saying, "you must do something for me."

Only much later in the narrative is Brod's rape described in full, when the passage in the *Book of Antecedents* is completed. The description here is bookended by the same language that described the day of the Trachimbrod festival, but here we also learn that Kolker did Brod a favor by killing her rapist: "Sofiowka was found the next morning, swinging by the neck from the wooden bridge. His severed hands were hanging from strings tied to his feet, and across his chest was written, in Brod's red lipstick: ANIMAL" (*Everything* 205). Taking this in with the

other episodes in the text, it is apparent that Brod invites the Kolker to her bed because he has sought revenge on her rapist. The fragmented nature in which the entire story of Brod's rape unfolds points to the difficulty of expression in traumatic narrative. Rather than creating coherence out of experiences that are in many ways incoherent and beyond comprehension—that is, the experiences of trauma—Foer embraces the incoherence of these elements.

The account of Brod's rape ends with imagery of sexual intercourse between Brod and the Kolker. "Her belly lit up like a firefly's bulb" once she was impregnated (*Everything* 98). This odd imagery parallels the imagery of copulation that also appears later in the narrative when the trauma of World War II is described. The start of war activity affecting Trachimbrod is marked by the description, "as the first display of German bombing lit the Trachimbrod skies electric...my grandfather had his first orgasm" (*Everything* 239). As this was also his only orgasm, this too represents a moment of new life. Both events since then associate light imagery with the act of impregnation. Strangely, in both of these moments of trauma, the idea of rebirth also appears at the forefront. Though in one sense the theme of rebirth forms an ironic contrast with the trauma that takes place, Foer may include this link to suggest the capacity of human endurance even in the face of trauma. For the survivors of a traumatic event such as the Holocaust, there is no choice but to keep on with life in its aftermath. Perhaps this notion is best encapsulated in the title of one of the chapters of the Trachimbrod narrative: "The beginning of the world often comes."

The account of March 18, 1942, the day on which the Nazis destroyed Trachimbrod, does not come until the very end of the novel. But unlike the story of Brod's rape, it is not told in fits and starts, but in a rush. Also unlike the jarring manner in which the narrative introduces Brod's rape, the occasion was very much expected by the reader. As the novel builds up, the reader

knows that this moment is the focus of Jonathan's search, and the absence of that event in most of the narrative noticeably defines its presence. Since Trachimbrod no longer exists, the story of its destruction seems like an inevitable end towards which the novel is headed. March 18, 1942 was also the day of the 150th Trachimday Festival. In a highly symbolic authorial move, the day that marked the beginning of a tradition also comes to mark its end. The Trachimbroders, despite knowing that they are in the midst of a war, seem desperate to continue their tradition and feign happiness: "They were trying to believe that life was as usual, healthy, that tradition could plug the leaks, that joy was still possible" (*Everything* 268). In the account, Safran and his "very pregnant wife" are watching the floats go by as part of the parade (*Everything* 267). Here again, with the image of Safran's pregnant wife, even amidst the horror, another life is given possibility. As the floats go by, the ground shakes from the bombs, but Safran seemingly tries to block it out, to experience joy, putting his ear to his wife's belly to hear the baby kick. Jonathan makes it known that he wishes he could interject himself into the narrative at this moment, to even go back in time to completely alter the history that played out. He writes: "(And here it is becoming harder and harder not to yell: *GO AWAY! RUN WHILE YOU CAN, FOOLS! RUN FOR YOUR LIVES!*)" (*Everything* 269). As Jonathan continues to describe this situation, he can see it continuing to spiral into unstoppable tragedy. His commentary, included in parentheses, provides additional insight into the sheer difficulty of describing the event: "(Here it is almost impossible to go on, because we know what happens, and wonder why they don't. Or it's impossible because we fear that they do.)" (*Everything* 270). Jonathan then suspends the narrative, filling almost 2 pages with almost nothing but periods. Thus, a lull is created before what we know is to come, a mere delaying of the inevitable. As before, much of the traumatic experience is again felt more in its absence than in its presence. Yet even while periods replace

words that perhaps cannot be said, when placed in a series, they may also suggest the idea of continuation.

However, the periods do not continue to the end of the novel, but rather, they come to an abrupt stop as the final scene of atrocity is spilled onto the page. Foer writes:

After the bombing was over, the Nazis moved through the shtetl. They lined up everyone who didn't drown in the river. They unrolled a Torah in front of them. "Spit," they said. "Spit, or else." Then they put all of the Jews in the synagogue. (It was the same in every shtetl. It happened hundreds of times. It happened in Kovel only a few hours before, and would happen in Kolki in only a few hours.)
(*Everything* 272).

This moment—arguably the most painful to read in the whole novel—is also the one moment where Jonathan's narrative appears most similar to realism. The accounts given by Alex's grandfather and Lista further confirm the veracity of this moment. What's more, actual historical accounts of the destruction of Trochenbrod⁷, a town in the Ukraine that the novel is alluding to, also confirm a similar scene of horror. Though framed by fiction, this moment seems to be composed primarily of historical fact.

⁷ The historical Trochenbrod existed about 30 km Northeast of Lutsk, a similar location to that described by Foer. According to an account by Eleazar Barco, the Jews in Trochenbrod were led to a nearby village and murdered by the Nazis. 33 escaped, but as for the town itself, "Trochinbord caught fire and was burned down completely, and there is not one Jewish person living there" (Barco.) However, it should be noted that the Foer's historical account has been criticized for misrepresenting the historical account, particularly by Ivan Katchanovski in a 2004 editorial, "Not Everything is Illuminated," who lambasted Foer's novel for its infusion of this historical event with imagined characters and traditions. Katchanovski was particularly upset by Foer's portrayal of Ukrainians, and their role in the Holocaust, in *Everything is Illuminated*. One cannot help but wonder, however, if European audiences such as this critic read this work in translation and hence misunderstood much of the tongue-in-cheek irony of the novel, which points out that it is in fact *not aiming* to present a historically accurate account.

But even that moment is followed with what is clearly a literary construction on Jonathan's part. The description of the atrocity concludes with an excerpt from *The Book of Recurrent Dreams*, in which someone supposedly imagined this future coming to bear. In the dream, entitled "the dream of the end of the world," the citizens of the shtetl all run to the river and jump in it to try to save themselves from the Nazis. In this moment, Safran's wife gives birth to the baby inside of her, and once again, as the story began, a baby emerges from the water. However, the scene comes to a tragic end. Unable to cut the umbilical cord from the baby, Zosha and her baby both drown in the river, becoming a part of the unthinkable masses of people that jumped in the water to escape the bombs. As in the earlier moment detailing Brod's rape, the narrative too is cut off here, ending "this is what we've done we've killed our own babies to save them" (*Everything* 273). The sense of gloom and doom that hangs over this moment in the novel contrasts strongly with the themes of continuation and rebirth, themes also alluded to in the dream with the initial hope at the baby being born from the water. The ambiguity of the moment thus creates further dissonances in the narrative. At the very least, it conveys a sense that no matter how we may try to speak of the Holocaust, there is still a part that remains beyond words.

In fact, when Foer utilizes similar narrative techniques and imagery to describe two separate incidences of trauma—that of rape and that of the shtetl's destruction—he most assuredly is not trying to equate these experiences in any way. But in both, he appears to be suggesting the indescribability of the experiences. With regards to trauma, the gap between the experience and attempts to describe it—which nevertheless fail to truly convey the experience—can never be bridged. While magic realism may provide an expanded vocabulary for describing the experiences of the Holocaust, by enabling an author to write of "amplified realities," it is

nevertheless an imperfect narrative technique for conveying a traumatic experience (Foreman 298). But rather than criticize Foer's novel for falling short of fully conveying the experience of the Holocaust, perhaps we should look at it as a laudable attempt of expressing the inexpressible, in spite of the limitations imposed by language itself.

Chapter IV: Conclusion Nomadic with the Truth

Foer weaves the stories of Jonathan's journey to Ukraine, told from Alex's perspective, together with the fictional history of the shtetl that Jonathan as a character writes, through a narrative strand that consists of letters between the two commenting upon the journey and the novel that Jonathan is writing. These epistolary exchanges provide the basis for much of *Everything is Illuminated's* self-conscious attitude towards the obviously constructed nature of the narrative, and therefore serve a crucial role in tying the novel together. They demonstrate Foer's awareness of the limitations of language to describing the Holocaust, and alert the reader that as an author, Foer is making do with the language available to him, even while providing ironic criticisms of language's limitations. These letters thus help to clarify Foer's purpose of writing *Everything is Illuminated*.

In the letters, Alex responds to Jonathan's comments about the account Alex gives about their Ukrainian journey, while at the same time, Alex comments upon the novel Jonathan is writing about the shtetl's history. These letters serve as an important reflection on the rights of the author to reinvent a story. For instance, Alex notes that Jonathan's narrative contains names that are not "truthful names for Ukraine" (*Everything* 25). Alex continues in the letter, "There were many mishaps like this, I will inform you. Are you being a humorous writer here, or an uninformed one?" (*Everything* 25). Perhaps, the answer is, a bit of both. Alex's observation points to an obvious gap in the narrative—its factual inaccuracies—but in writing his narrative, Jonathan invents what he is perhaps otherwise unable to write. On the one hand, Jonathan may be making up names that are not actually Ukrainian because he simply does not know; because Trachimbrod was destroyed, he lacks historical figures to build his own characters from. On the other hand, Jonathan may be trying, as Alex speculates, to be funny.

Later in the novel, Jonathan tells Alex about his relationship with his grandmother, and how his grandmother once told Jonathan that he was funny. Alex and Jonathan then have the following exchange, with Alex first telling Jonathan he finds him funny:

“You are very funny, Jonathan.” “No. That’s the last thing I want to be.” “Why? To be funny is a great thing.” “No it’s not.” “Why is this?” “I used to think that humor was the only way to appreciate how wonderful and terrible the world is, to celebrate how big life is. You know what I mean?” “Yes, of course.” “But now I think it’s the opposite. Humor is a way of shrinking from that wonderful and terrible world.” (*Everything* 158)

This dialogue is one of the most complicated and seemingly paradoxical moments of the novel. It makes it sound as though humor is the cowardly response to life, a way of masking the truth by “shrinking” from it. But Foer’s novel, in addition to its sad moments, is filled with moments of humor. Why would an author who so clearly employs humor in his work have his fictional doppelganger decry the use of humor? In fact, the humor in *Everything is Illuminated* may be one of the most contradictory elements of the novel. In an April 2002 interview with NPR, Foer stated, “One use of humor is as a sacrificial substitute for things that we won’t talk about otherwise.” Is humor, then, a replacement for things that are otherwise too difficult to speak of? Yes, humor may be resorting to “shrinking from that wonderful and terrible world,” but perhaps Foer is suggesting, that “shrinking” is sometimes the only response that is possible.

The invention of a fiction may be considered another form of shrinking. Jonathan may choose to imagine the shtetl’s history in part because he does not want to speak about the terrible trauma of the Holocaust, but the turn to imagination may also be the result of Jonathan’s lack of access to specific historical knowledge. He imagines a history because there is none. The novel

never fully resolves the reasons that Jonathan invents his family's history, but Alex does begin to examine this question in a letter to Jonathan:

We are both being very nomadic with the truth, yes? The both of us? Do you think that this is acceptable when we are writing about things that occurred? If your answer is no, then why do you write about Trachimbrod and your grandfather in the manner that you do, and why do you command me to be untruthful? If your answer is yes, then this creates another question, which is if we are to be such nomads with the truth, then why do we not make the story more premium than life? (Everything 179)

The broken, yet comical English of Alex becomes immediately noticeable in this excerpt. This flawed language again suggests the limitations of language in attempts to communicate a message. In this passage, Alex also introduces a valuable question: once an author has begun to depart from the truth, why stop? If the author is going to alter some parts of the story, why not alter it all? When Alex asks Jonathan “*why do we not make the story more premium than life?*”, he seems to be asking, in effect, why didn't Jonathan edit out the trauma altogether? But that is not the goal of Foer's writing. Certainly, he is “nomadic with the truth” by presenting a completely alternate Holocaust story to what probably really occurred to the shtetl. But this phrase, “nomadic with the truth,” also draws attention to the *multiplicity* of vantage points from which one may arrive at a form of truth. Perhaps, as nomads can claim a number of homes, the truth can be grounded in many different places at once, or be unrooted altogether. Truth may not be necessarily grounded in fact—a novel may be “imaginatively accurate” without being “historically accurate” (“Review”). Thus, even if Foer's account does not present the shtetl's

history as it actually happened, it may still contain grains of the truth in the emotions that it conjures and the feelings that it captures. As Young writes:

Whatever ‘fictions’ emerge in the survivors’ accounts are not deviations from the ‘truth’ but are part of the truth in any particular version. The fictiveness in testimony does not involve disputes about facts, but the inevitable variance in perceiving and representing these facts, witness by witness, language by language, culture by culture. (32)

Though Young is here referring to testimony in particular, his book suggests that the same could be said of any attempt to represent the Holocaust: there is no singular version of the truth, but rather, multiple versions of it. Foer’s novel presents one such “version” of the truth, which may be true, just as *Night* or *Maus* too expressed “truth” in their respective forms. The real “truth” of *Everything is Illuminated* is that it conveys how Jonathan—and more broadly, Foer himself—comes to understand the Holocaust. The narrative is incoherent because Jonathan’s knowledge of the experience is not coherent. What’s more, it would be hard to argue that anyone’s knowledge of the experience of the Holocaust will ever be coherent, or arrive at a full “truth.” No matter how many attempts have been made to come to an understanding of the Holocaust—and as I write, nearly 70 years of scholarship have tried to come to an understanding of the experience—questions and incomprehensibilities remain prevalent.

Thus, as any one historical event may have multiple conflicting accounts that each represent a form of the “truth”, because they accurately reflect each individual’s relation to the event, perhaps even Jonathan’s self-consciously constructed narrative of the shtetl’s history can be truthful because it represents the shtetl as Jonathan himself has come to know it. The crucial point is that in reshaping the traumatic story, Foer refuses to let it die altogether. When rewriting

the history of Trachimbrod, Jonathan is able to edit it: he can emphasize the moments that would otherwise be forgotten, and perhaps even make the bad parts less terrible; he can make the story more “premium than life”. For example, at the same moment in the narrative that the Nazis descended on Trachimbrod, Safran’s wife gives birth to a baby. The suggestion of a new life being born in the midst of such destruction is reminiscent of what Michael Andre Bernstein has called “sideshadowing,” that is, a “gesturing to the side, to a present dense with multiple, and mutually exclusive possibilities for what is to come” (1). The suggestion of new life in the symbol of a newborn child suggests that Jonathan’s entire account of the event is in some ways a sideshadowed one that demonstrates what *could have* happened instead (the baby being saved), as an alternative to what most likely *did* happen historically (the baby was killed). Bernstein writes, “To concentrate on the sideshadowed ideas and events, on what did not happen, does not cast doubt on the historicity of what occurred but views it as one among a range of possibilities, a number which might, with equal possibility, have taken place instead” (7). Thus, Foer’s narrative does not try to refute the historical truth of the Holocaust, but merely to look at it from a different perspective. His narrative denies the notion of a singular, uni-directional truth.

The fact that *Everything is Illuminated* works against the notion of a singular truth is perhaps best evidenced in the novel’s title. The title phrase alludes to a passage from Czech author Milan Kundera’s 1984 novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*⁸. This novel takes an existentialist perspective, and part of its mission is to explore what happens when there is no “eternal return,” in other words, when history proceeds linearly and does not repeat itself. By this notion, it is difficult to ever condemn any action, because the moment is always temporary. In the novel, Kundera writes:

⁸ Though there has been much speculation that this phrase is borrowed from *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Foer has never publicly confirmed that he intended to borrow it.

For how can we condemn something that is ephemeral, in transit? In the sunset of dissolution, *everything is illuminated* by the aura of nostalgia, even the guillotine. Not long ago, I felt myself experiencing a most incredible sensation. Leafing through a book on Hitler, I was touched by some of his portraits: they reminded me of my childhood. I grew up during the war, several members of my family perished in Hitler's concentration camps, but what were their deaths compared with the memories of a lost period in my life, a period that would never return."

(4) [my emphasis]

In a manner similar to Foer, Kundera thus inserts himself into the narrative, speaking as the "I" in this passage. But it seems utterly problematic for an author whose family members were killed during the Holocaust to look upon the past with any nostalgia. He also refers to that era as a "lost period," suggesting that his memories of the time may be sparse. But what does Kundera really mean by this passage? Or, perhaps, a better question to ask would be, if Foer chooses to borrow the phrase "everything is illuminated" from Kundera, is his novel also attempting to cast everything in the "aura of nostalgia," even the Holocaust? Even further, perhaps Foer is pointing to the inevitability that the Holocaust will be cast in an "aura of nostalgia." As the Holocaust is commonly referred to as the defining event of the 20th Century, perhaps this has already occurred: we may be presently living in the age of nostalgia⁹.

Before proceeding, it would be appropriate to define what is meant by nostalgia. Normally, nostalgia is thought of as a longing for the past, or literally, for the home, a desire to return to what was. This certainly seems to be what Kundera views the term as, for the characters in his novels engage in love affairs that they longingly look back upon once they have

⁹ I am especially indebted to my thesis advisor, Anita Norich, for this observation.

ended, desirous of return to their lovers. In some sense, in Foer's novel, Jonathan too can be thought of as nostalgic. After all, he is so caught up in a photograph that he uses it as a launching point for an entire journey. But Jonathan's nostalgia is not because he wishes he was living in the past—his is not a longing for return, but a longing for a reconnection with a past that has been lost. It goes without saying that the Holocaust is not an event one would ever wish to have replayed in history. Therefore, the type of nostalgia experienced by Jonathan is different than that experienced by the characters in Kundera's novel. The nostalgia in *Everything is Illuminated* may perhaps be an ironic gesture towards the irony of being nostalgic for a past that one has never experienced firsthand, as Jonathan operates in "post-postmemory"¹⁰.

Furthermore, Jonathan's nostalgia seems to have its bounds—it continues up until the point when he realizes his family's true story is so awful, he actually does not want to hear it, and stops Lista from telling the rest of the story. At that point, he retreats into invention, into imagination. This moment, too, is reminiscent of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. The characters in Kundera's novel frequently look to alternative narrative possibilities, of what could have been if countless coincidences and circumstances had not aligned as they did. When speaking of the character Teresa, who is in love with a man named Tomas, the narrator says, "Apart from her consummated love for Tomas, there were, in the realm of possibility, an infinite number of unconsummated loves for other men" (Kundera 37). Later in the novel, the voice of Kundera as author interjects in the novel, a moment which appears to be responding directly to the earlier notion of an "infinite number" of possibilities that Teresa could have chosen. Kundera says that when coincidences that align in, perhaps, characters' chance meetings, or an alignment of seemingly literary symbols, we as readers should "refrain from reading such

¹⁰ Developed in conversation with Anita Norich.

notions as ‘fictive,’ ‘fabricated,’ and ‘untrue to life’ into the word ‘novelistic.’ Because human lives are composed in precisely such a fashion” (54). Perhaps then, there is a suggestion in Foer’s novel that despite its clearly fictive and novelistic constructions, it is still capable of shedding light on certain emotional truths. Looking at the “unrealized possibilities” may thus be an equally valid way of understanding the past as looking at the realized possibilities may be (Kundera 240). These emotions could have been alternately captured through other narrative modes, but *Everything is Illuminated* presents one such possibility for how the Holocaust may be looked back upon.

As Kundera points out, in fact, and as Bernstein has also suggested, a number of narrative possibilities exist at any one time. This multiplicity of narrative possibilities directly alludes to the inability for any singular narrative mode—or even collective narrative mode—to bring everything to light. The title *Everything is Illuminated* can only be thought of as ironic because it is, in fact, impossible to illuminate everything. What the novel really achieves then, is to cast light on a couple of narrative possibilities, but we can imagine thousands of others that might have equally taken place. By suggesting that all has been illuminated, we might think that the narrative comes to a grand conclusion, bathing everything in a nostalgic truth that is reached through understanding. The word illumination suggests clarity, but the title, ironically, implies that complete clarity is in fact impossible to achieve. The novel that claims to “illuminate,” or elucidate everything, in fact does not come to any tidy conclusions. On the contrary, the ending of the novel is most unsatisfactory in terms of tying up loose ends. The novel ends with a letter written from Alex’s grandfather to Jonathan, which is ostensibly a sort of suicide note. The final sentence reads, “*I will walk without noise, and I will open the door in darkness, and I will*” (276). The sentence does not even conclude with a period, it simply cuts itself off. Thus, a novel that

we may expect to “illuminate everything,” in fact leaves the reader with more questions, ending in the unknown. But this sort of ambiguous conclusion stands in stark contrast to the reality of a traumatic experience, which seems to have a clear endpoint (albeit perhaps an inexpressible or suppressed endpoint). Perhaps, the uncertainty left by the novel’s conclusion is preferable to the certainty of the Holocaust experience¹¹.

The novel does not come to a tidy conclusion, because there are no tidy conclusions to be had for an event so horrific as the Holocaust. We might suppose that Jonathan’s attempts to uncover his family’s past played some sort of a role in Alex’s grandfather’s demise, because by bringing him on the journey and reintroducing him to Lista, Jonathan conjured up emotions of guilt and sorrow that Alex’s grandfather had tried to suppress throughout his whole life. At one point, the novel reveals that Alex’s grandfather Alexander had in fact been best friends with Jonathan’s grandfather¹², but stood silent as the Nazis occupied Trachimbrod in order to save his own life. All of his life, by remaining silenced for his whole life about the Holocaust, even denying the veracity of Lista’s account, Alexander clearly had tried to suppress the event in his life, to move beyond it. When the emotions were eventually forced to come out, years later, when he unexpectedly encounters Lista again, Alexander does not know how to handle his guilt and ultimately kills himself because of it. Ultimately, Alexander’s death thus teaches a crucial lesson: the challenge of the Holocaust is not to move *beyond* it (for that is impossible), but to learn to live *alongside* it.

¹¹ I am also greatly indebted to Professor Anita Norich for this observation.

¹² The great amount of coincidence that this “chance meeting” of Jonathan and Alex’s grandfather may too recall Kundera’s novel: “...refrain from reading such notions as ‘fictive,’ ‘fabricated,’ and ‘untrue to life’ into the word ‘novelistic.’ Because human lives are composed in precisely such a fashion” (54).

In the narrative of the shtetl's history, Jonathan writes, "The only thing more painful than being an active forgetter is to be an inert rememberer" (*Everything* 260). This quote suggests two extreme approaches that survivors may take in the Holocaust's aftermath: they may, as Alexander did, be an "active forgetter" and consciously try to suppress any memory of the past horrors they experienced. But more painful, according to the narrative, is to be an "inert rememberer," to remain so nostalgic, perhaps, so stuck in the past, that one becomes unable to move on. Lista appears to represent this opposite extreme in the novel. This suggests that a middle ground must be sought between "active forgetting" and "inert remembering," a middle ground that does not dismiss the significance of the Holocaust to a formation of one's self-identity, but also does not let the Holocaust become an all-consuming self-identity, either. At the essence of this quote, memory is crucial: if one forgoes memory altogether by forgetting memory, they will be forced to live with a gaping hole, but one cannot become so mired in memory so as to forget to continue living.

When Jonathan composes a description of the final destruction of Trachimbrod, he tellingly recounts how despite the bombings that surrounded Trachimbrod for months and the apparently imminent signs of a Nazi invasion, the Trachimbroders did not leave. Foer writes:

They hadn't forgotten, but accommodated. Memory took the place of terror. In their efforts to remember what it was they were trying so hard to remember, they could finally think over the fear of war. The memories of birth, childhood, and adolescence resonated with greater volume than the din of exploding shells.

(*Everything* 262)

This passage is at once horribly tragic and hopelessly beautiful. It is tragic, of course, because the Trachimbroders' obsession with memory left them motionless in the shtetl, when they

otherwise might have escaped. It might thus be said that memory put them in a position of vulnerability, or perhaps they already had come to recognize their powerlessness in the situation. But the role of memory in this passage also serves as a sign of calm endurance; the Trachimbroders let “memory take the place of terror.” Foer imbues memories with a power greater than the force of war.

Despite the untidy conclusion of Foer’s narrative, we might attempt to assemble a final message: memory may at times be a hindrance, but it can also be a propellant. What is needed is not forgetting, not a moving beyond the terror of the Holocaust, but rather, “accommodation.” As time continues to pass in the Holocaust’s aftermath, and postmemory becomes post-postmemory becomes post- post-postmemory, and so forth, it is necessary that the Holocaust be remembered in a form that makes sense to the present generations, by doing justice to the horrific veracity of the experience while at the same time demonstrating how to go on living in its shadow. Though Foer reshapes the traumatic story, he refuses to let it die altogether, and illuminates a new sense for how the Holocaust may be remembered.

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