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A New Way of Speaking: Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated* and Effective Forms
of Holocaust Literature

“It’s not what you say, but how you say it.” This simple aphorism highlights an important truth about language: that the delivery of a message contains just as much meaning as the words themselves. Marshall McLuhan, regarded by many to be the father of communications and media studies, agrees: he coined the phrase “the medium is the message,” meaning that the form of a work is equally important as its content (5). This seems to be the case with *Everything Is Illuminated*, Jonathan Safran Foer’s debut novel, especially given Foer’s comment that “the story itself is not nearly as important as the way the story is told” (“Everything is Illuminated? Jonathan Safran Foer in Interview”). Based on an actual journey Foer took to the Ukraine, the novel strays far from the average, chronological storyline, with three narrative strands that connect in subtle and often confusing ways and lead to several shocking Holocaust survivor testimonies. In addition to the multivocality, the novel also employs broken English, magic realism, and nonlinearity. Foer’s goal with this unconventional medium is to prompt a discussion of traditional, realist, linear narrative form, implying that such realism is inadequate to discuss the underlying trauma at the heart of the novel: the Holocaust. He proposes several alternatives for telling the stories of such events that seem to lie outside the realm of conventional language.

The first strand of the novel follows a young American Jewish man as he ventures to the Ukraine to find the woman who saved his grandfather from Nazis during the Holocaust. This

man, named Jonathan Safran Foer,¹ is aided by his less-than-competent translator, a young Ukrainian man named Alex. Alex narrates this first strand in humorously idiosyncratic English that he learned with the help of a thesaurus, and readers come to understand that these sections are chapters of a book that Alex is writing about the experience. The second strand consists of chapters of a book Jonathan is writing about the journey and is sending to Alex, chapters which can only be described as a magic realist faux history of Jonathan's ancestors. The last strand is a series of letters Alex writes to Jonathan after Jonathan returns to the United States. These letters comment on the other two strands, with Alex giving Jonathan suggestions for his chapters and responding to Jonathan's advice for his own writing. These epistolary sections, as noted by Shannon Seiferth, "blatantly point out that the novel is highly literarily constructed" (8). This high level of construction constantly reminds readers that the book is a discussion of how authors should approach subject matter such as the Holocaust.

Although Jonathan fails to find the woman who saved his grandfather, he and Alex do find the last remaining inhabitant of Trachimbrod, his grandfather's village. This woman, named Lista, relates the graphic story of how she was shot by Nazis but managed to escape. In addition to hearing the horrors she endured, Alex makes a startling discovery about his own grandfather: that during the Holocaust, he turned over his best friend, a man named Herschel, to the Third Reich in order to save his own life. This discovery, or "illumination," serves as the climax of the novel.

It is worth asking why Foer chose such a convoluted medium. He could have easily created a fluent translator instead of a bumbling one, or imagined a realistic faux history for his forebears. He could have even written a nonfiction account of his experience—which was his original plan (Foer, "Week Three: Jonathan Safran Foer on the origins of *Everything Is*

¹ For clarity, I will refer to the author as Foer and the character as Jonathan.

Illuminated”). Instead, he chose to relate his story through both the fuzzy lens of a second language and the mystery of magic realism. The result, notes Robert Kohn, is “an extreme postmodernism that could have been a spoof of the genre, except that it is about the Holocaust” (245).

Many have asked whether writers should attempt Holocaust representation at all. Holocaust survivor Theodor Adorno’s oft-quoted maxim “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” has fostered a decades-long debate with regard to the ethicality of artistic Holocaust literature (qtd. in Manemann 263). Adorno later amended his original statement, saying, “Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream; hence it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems” (qtd. in Manemann 263). Some continue to disagree, however, maintaining that any attempt to create art out of the unimaginable suffering of other human beings—even if its aim is commemoration—is morally wrong.² Berel Lang, Holocaust scholar and visiting professor at Wesleyan University, argues that historical chronicle is preferable as a vehicle for Holocaust writing, given that its “narrow, prosaic, nonironic, nonfigurative foundation” gives it more authenticity (qtd. in Eisenstein 84). Holocaust survivor and Nobel Peace Prize recipient Elie Wiesel ventured even further, saying, “Auschwitz negates all literature . . . Holocaust literature? The very term is a contradiction” (qtd. in Weil 111). This paper presupposes that this claim, though argued by many well-informed and well-intentioned scholars, is false, and that there are certain forms of Holocaust literary representation that are not only ethically acceptable, but also helpful with regards to the healing of survivors—even those of the second and third generations. The aim of this paper, then, is to explore which forms of literary representation most fully and accurately

² See Gary K. Wolfe’s “Introduction” to *The Fantastic in Holocaust Literature and Film* for a good summary of this argument.

depict the Holocaust. This is a hefty task, as highlighted by Mirela Lăpugean, who notes that “[t]rauma eludes representation, referring back to an absence, to an event that has failed to enter the mechanisms of cognition and comprehension of the victim” (91). Foer repeats this idea almost verbatim in the novel, when the narrative observes that “the origin of a story is always an absence” (230). Holocaust scholar Saul Friedländer agrees that trauma—specifically, the Holocaust—“tests our traditional conceptual and representational categories” (qtd. in Adams 57). *Everything Is Illuminated* rises to the challenge of representing such trauma, probing the limits of traditional language and experimenting with a pastiche of styles in an attempt to speak of the unspeakable.

Foer’s decision to communicate the bulk of the novel through humorously broken English introduces readers to the myriad shortcomings of language. Alex’s linguistic blunders are frequent, beginning with the title of the first chapter: “An Overture to the Commencement of a Very Rigid Journey.” The entirety of the chapter reads like the title, with almost-synonyms often taking the place of simple nouns and verbs. The reason Alex’s English sounds so odd is pinpointed by Mark Lawson, who observes that Alex “sees no distinction between common, demotic, and poetic words.” Alex excitedly and confidently blunders on in his unique style of speaking, coining phrases like “flaccid-to-utter” instead of “easy to say” and “miniature brother” instead of “little brother” (*Everything* 1). One of his most frequent solecisms is his use of the word “bitch” to refer to his female dog—while he is technically correct, he is blissfully unaware of the strong connotative meaning of the word. Interestingly, Alex seems to have no problems with verb tenses or person issues, which plague many language learners, making him a highly unrealistic example. Realism, however, does not seem to be Foer’s goal: instead, he seeks to emphasize the difficulty of relaying meaning through words—as Seiferth puts it, he aims to “hint

at the limitations of language as a representational form” (7). Through Alex’s butchered English, readers become accustomed to recognizing language’s deficiencies—a habit which prepares them for the novel’s climax, in which these shortcomings become more obvious than ever before.

Alex inherited his communicative handicap from his author: in a 2004 interview, Foer acknowledged a connection between himself and Alex, saying that “the way Alex speaks, he really is not good at communicating, not as good as he wants to be, but he tries: well, that is really why I write. Most people want to communicate but struggle to find the words” (“Everything is Illuminated? Jonathan Safran Foer in Interview”). Foer’s and Alex’s struggle is echoed in the magic realist thread, in the journal of Jonathan’s great-great-great-great-great grandmother, in which she lists 613 distinct types of sadness, including “the sadness of not knowing enough words to express [what you mean]” (*Everything* 211). Alex’s struggle to communicate in a second language is representative of the human struggle to communicate complex events, especially those involving unspeakable atrocities such as those committed during the Holocaust. Just as Alex struggles to pin down simple concepts in the correct words, so is Foer struggling to cement into words the horrors perpetrated under the Third Reich, along with their lingering effects on second and third generation survivors. Does “Auschwitz lie[] outside speech as it lies outside reason,” as suggested by George Steiner in *Language and Silence* (123)? Foer seems to agree to an extent—the fact that he wrote a book about the Holocaust suggests that while he doesn’t consider Holocaust representation to be entirely out of reach, he views it as an event whose sui generis nature requires a different approach—i.e., nontraditional narrative form.

Despite his obvious struggles with his second language, Alex’s English improves noticeably throughout the novel, mirroring his personal development. His maturation can be seen

primarily through his gradual realization that the purpose of language is not to impress other people, but to communicate and commemorate truths, both beautiful and ugly. The first chapter of the book is rife with Alex's braggadocious claims about going to nightclubs and sleeping with girls, and after Jonathan arrives, Alex grills him about his sex life (*Everything* 71). Near the end of the book, however, Alex writes that he could see a waitress's chest as she leaned over and then adds, "For whom did I write that, Jonathan? I do not want to be disgusting anymore. And I do not want to be funny, either" (*Everything* 219). He confesses to Jonathan in an earlier letter that all his tall tales about his sexual exploits were "*not-truths*,"³ saying he lied "*because it makes [him] feel like a premium person*" (*Everything* 144). He goes on to say that he likes writing because he has the opportunity to fix mistakes and "*be a melancholy person in manners that are interesting, not only melancholy*" (*Everything* 144). He sums up his reasons for loving writing by saying, "*[w]ith writing, we have second chances*" (*Everything* 144). Taken in the context of the book as a whole, this small observation speaks volumes: *Everything Is Illuminated* gives Foer a second chance at healing, at trying to make sense of the tragedy that defines much of his family history, as well as the history of millions of others.

Although Alex's English improves as he matures, even at the end of the book he still makes small errors that keep him from speaking at a native level. This asymptotic idea of approaching but never reaching completion could be seen as reflective of art's inability to fully represent tragedy—while it can get close, there are certain events that remain unspeakable, outside the realm of normal language. This concept is echoed in the fictional Double House in the magic realist thread, the house constantly under construction. The owner, Menachem, dreamed of the house being "a kind of infinity, always a fraction of itself . . . always approaching

³ Alex's letters are typed entirely in italics, which I have maintained when quoting them in this paper.

but never reaching perfection” (*Everything* 162). The description of Menachem’s obsession with the house’s construction is a likely allusion to the construction of *Everything Is Illuminated*:

But Menachem was most proud of the scaffolding: the symbol that things were always changing, always getting a little better. He loved the skeleton of makeshift beams and rafters more and more as construction progressed, loved them more than the house itself, and eventually persuaded the reluctant architect to draw them into the final plans (The blueprints themselves were drawn into the blueprints, and in those blueprints were blueprints with blueprints with blueprints . . .). (*Everything* 162)

Foer chose to leave the “scaffolding” of the book in place as well, resulting in a high degree of textuality that draws attention to the writing process itself, rather than just the finished product. This suggests that although literature may never be able to perfectly communicate truth or represent experiences—although a “finished product” may not actually exist—writers can get close, and should thus still attempt representation, even of elusive traumatic subjects.

Related to Alex’s English faculties are his translations throughout the novel, which are the main reason for his inclusion. Just as his attempt to communicate with readers highlights language’s shortcomings, so do his attempts at translation between characters, such as the scene in which he translates what Lista says for Jonathan:

‘I remember Safran so well. He kissed me behind the synagogue, which was a thing to get us murdered, you know. I can still remember just how I felt. It was a little like flying. Tell it to him.’ ‘She remembers when your grandfather kissed her. She flew a little.’ ‘I also remember Rosh Hashanah, when we would go to the river and throw breadcrumbs in it so our sins would float away from us. Tell him.’ ‘She remembers the river and breadcrumbs and her sins.’ (*Everything* 155)

In addition to demonstrating how much can be lost in a genuinely-attempted translation, Eric Doise also notes that Alex serves to illustrate translation's "ability to conceal or reveal secrets" (103). One humorous example of this ability can be seen shortly after Alex and Grandfather pick up Jonathan from the train station, and Alex "translates" Grandfather's frustrated expletives into light commentary on the passing scenery: "'F***,' Grandfather said. I said, 'He says if you look at the statues, you can see that some no longer endure. Those are where Communist statues used to be.' 'F***ing f***, f***!' Grandfather shouted. 'Oh,' I said, 'he wants you to know that that building, that building, and that building are all important'" (*Everything* 58). Despite the comic relief this scene provides, it highlights a critical issue: should writers, who are translators in a way, attempt to shield their audiences from harsh realities? Foer seems to think they should not, given his inclusion of two graphic survivor testimonies. He seems to point out, however, that readers often want "easy" literature that entertains rather than challenges: in the magic realist thread, Brod desires only a superficial relationship with her husband, wanting only "cuddling and high voices" (*Everything* 125). Her husband, called the Kolker, points out that they had only had six real conversations in three years of marriage, and he begs her to talk with him about things that really matter (*Everything* 124). Likewise, Foer's goal with this novel is to talk about something that really matters.

Though seemingly unrelated to the other two strands, the magic realist thread contains many profound thoughts on language, trauma, and truth that take on a new depth when read in the context of the entire novel. Many have wondered why Foer would choose the fantastic as a means of representing the Holocaust, and Elana Gomel proposes that it is appropriate given the Holocaust's "phantasmagoric genesis" and the fact that Hitler's followers "impose[d] a fantasy of their own making upon the reality of their victims" (385). Caryn James defends creative

interpretations of the Holocaust, saying, “[t]he farther the war recedes into the past, the more imagination is needed to wrench it into the present.” This is exactly what Foer is doing, especially as the novel moves toward its climax: recreating several Holocaust experiences in a creative way that makes them more vivid than many purely historical narratives. Paradoxically, Foer seems to feel more confident about revealing truths in this highly “untruthful” form.

Seiferth notes that magic realism “can provide a new language that opens up the available modes of expression beyond the direct language of testimony or realism,” an opportunity of which Foer takes full advantage (27). Many of the events and characters in this thread can be understood symbolically, as devices that serve to amplify the concepts explored in the other two threads. For example, Jonathan tells of how his great-great-great-great-great-grandmother was born out of the river Brod and was then placed in the town synagogue, where inhabitants of Trachimbrod could sneak glimpses of her through an egg-sized hole in the wall (*Everything* 20). Foer writes that “[t]he hole wasn’t even large enough to show all of the baby at once, and they had to piece together mental collages of her from each of the fragmented views They learned to hate her unknowability, her untouchability, the collage of her” (*Everything* 20). This image is representative of Foer’s job as a writer, as noted by Menachem Feuer, visiting professor of Jewish studies at York University, who observes that “[Foer’s] task as a writer begins after the disaster: his role is to take fragments, in the form of words, representations, and memories of the past, and bring them together into a narrative (albeit a fragmented one)” (38). In Alex’s thread, the assorted boxes of bric-à-brac that fill Lista’s house are yet another reference to the novel itself: a hodgepodge collection of remnants that tell a story. These images are a few examples of many in the novel that artistically explore the concepts examined in the other sections.

Though much of the novel could be construed as dishonest, Foer subtly distinguishes between what is meant to be understood poetically or symbolically, and that which should be taken literally. The book is openly fictive and involves the reader in its own creation—paradoxically, it is very honest about its dishonesty. The book’s excessive textuality and self-referentiality constantly remind readers that it is a book about writing; specifically, a book whose *raison d’être* is to discuss how to write about the Holocaust. Foer includes the more realist angle taken by Alex, who in his letters becomes increasingly upset with both Jonathan’s highly fictionalized account and Jonathan’s suggestions for Alex’s chapters, saying, “*We are 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?*” (*Everything* 179). Alex goes on to point out that if Jonathan wants to do away with the truth entirely, then Alex should make his part of the story happy instead of tragic—he could write that they found the woman who saved Jonathan’s grandfather, for example (*Everything* 179). The fact that in the end Alex decides against such artifice is critical: it implies that while Foer does employ a good amount of poetic license in the novel, there are some truths he is unwilling to sacrifice on the altar of artistic liberty—as Paul Eisenstein puts it, “[t]he beauty of Foer’s formal set up is that even as it gives voice to the writer’s desire and freedom to craft a fetishistic narrative, it shows us Alex choosing not to do so” (90).

While Foer clearly believes he is free to imagine his own family’s history, even including elements of mythic proportions, the magic realist quality of Jonathan’s thread breaks down at its very end, which sees Nazis lining up all the Jewish inhabitants of Trachimbrod who survived the bombing and forcing them to spit on the Torah or be shot (272). This account matches that of Lista, who tells Alex the “real life” story of Trachimbrod’s end (184-189). Anna Hunter

examines the magic realist quality of Jonathan's Trachimbrod narrative and notes that "[e]verything about Trachimbrod is magical except its end" (66). Francisco Collado-Rodriguez agrees, adding that "in the last chapters of the book, the Jewish tragedy is relocated from its mythical premises into the historical line that demands the necessity to not forget what happened to the victims" (60). Christoph Ribbat rightly points out that with Grandfather's confession "the farce ends, the comedy implodes" (16). All of these scholars make the critical observation that despite the creative elements of the novel, Foer in no way abandons the essential truth of what occurred during the Nazi genocide.

In addition to the obvious textuality of the novel, *Everything Is Illuminated* contains a running motif of books that further explores the duties of writers who write about collective trauma. Alan Berger notes that "writing itself is . . . a crucial dimension in each of the three authors' attempt [*sic*] at working through their inheritance of trauma," so it makes sense that the novel includes a meta-narrative about writing (157). Along with the fact that the novel itself highlights the writing process behind it, Foer includes excerpts from several fictional books in the magic realist sections. The most frequently mentioned is *The Book of Antecedents*, which Foer says "began as a record of major events: battles and treaties, famines, seismic occurrences But it wasn't long before lesser events were included and described at great length once updated yearly, [it] was now continually updated, and when there was nothing to report, the full-time committee would report its reporting" (*Everything* 196). This description is followed by a seventeen-page excerpt from the book, which ends with an illustration of this meta-reporting: a page and a half that reads "*we are writing . . .*" over and over (*Everything* 212-213). Other entries in the excerpt also comment on writing, such as the one titled "The Novel, When Everyone Was Convinced He Had One in Him" (201). This section tells of a time in

Trachimbrod when there was a writing frenzy and more than 700 novels were written in a three-year period. The entry also notes that “[t]hose who couldn’t read and write made visual novels: collages, etchings, pencil drawings, watercolors” (*Everything* 201). This constant imagery having to do with writing makes sure that readers always have it in the forefront of their minds, that they always remember that the core message of the whole book is how to write about the Holocaust.

Another fictional book woven into the magic realist sections is *The Book of Recurrent Dreams*, which also contains profound thoughts on trauma and healing. The book is a collective dream journal in which the inhabitants of Trachimbrod record their dreams for posterity. Trachimbroders frequently review the dreams that have already been recorded, with one man noting that “[w]e must go backward in order to go forward”⁴ (*Everything* 37). This comment, if understood in the context of the entire novel, is critical: it implies that we must examine our past, both on a personal and collective level, in order to move forward. Much like *The Book of Antecedents*, excerpts from *The Book of Recurrent Dreams* are included at length in the novel (37-41, 272-273). One significant dream recorded in the book is “The dream that we are our fathers,” recorded by an anonymous Trachimbrod citizen:

I walked to the Brod, without knowing why, and looked into my reflection in the water. I couldn’t look away. What was the image that pulled me in after it? What was it that I loved? And then I recognized it. So simple. In the water I saw my father’s face, and that face saw the face of its father, and so on, and so on, reflecting backward to the beginning of time . . . (41).

Again, this image must be understood in the context of the Holocaust and its generations of survivors. By personally reflecting on his family history and its relation to the tragedy, Foer is able to feel a strong connection between himself and his ancestors. He accepts this trauma as a

⁴ As with Alex’s letters, I have maintained italics where they are used in the book.

part of his personal identity, and through writing, he is able to begin to make peace with it. Though some may have difficulty with understanding how one can suffer from trauma without personally experiencing it—i.e., how it is possible to feel the pain inflicted upon one’s forebears—there is actually a good amount of evidence to support this idea, called postmemory.⁵ Doise adds that “[t]he motivation for Jonathan’s trip reflects the postmemory generation’s need to provide order and details to a narrative devoid of both”—and when he fails to find those details during his trip, he creates them imaginatively through magic realism (95).

Monuments are another significant motif in the novel, especially since they anchor together commemoration and trauma—much like the novel itself. In an interview with Paul Cunliffe, Foer stated that “[t]he visual arts are hugely important” to him, and his passion is reflected in the pages of *Everything Is Illuminated* (“Interviewed: Jonathan Safran Foer, Writer of *Everything Is Illuminated* and *Eating Animals*”). The first example of a monument marking a tragedy is the one set up after Trachim’s wagon sunk in the river in the first magic realist section. The plaque reads:

THIS PLAQUE MARKS THE SPOT
(OR A SPOT CLOSE TO THE SPOT)
WHERE THE WAGON OF ONE
TRACHIM B
(WE THINK)
WENT IN.

Shtetl Proclamation, 1791 (93).

⁵ See *postmemory.net* or *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* by Marianne Hirsch for more on the concept of postmemory.

The uncertainty reflected in this monument stands in stark contrast to the certitude reflected in the plaque Alex and Jonathan find at Trachimbrod:

THIS MONUMENT STANDS IN MEMORY
OF THE 1,204 TRACHIMBRODERS
KILLED AT THE HANDS OF GERMAN FASCISM
ON MARCH 18, 1942.

Dedicated March 18, 1992.

Yitzhak Shamir, Prime Minister of the State of Israel (189).

This second monument, positioned in the realm of reality as opposed to magic realism, does not equivocate: it states plainly that over twelve hundred people were slaughtered. Yet again, Foer proves his commitment to a core of truth as he refuses to entertain the idea that the brutal facts of the Holocaust could be any different.

While Foer experiments with the English language in order to explore its limits when representing the deeply traumatic, others have gone further and imagined what language looks like outside its frontiers. Many have observed language seemingly fail when faced with the task of describing the indescribable, including George Steiner, former professor of comparative literature at Oxford and of poetry at Harvard. In his 1967 book *Language and Silence*, Steiner wrote about the limits of language in the face of the ineffable, which according to him lies “beyond the frontiers of the word” (12). He argues that true understanding lies outside of the “impurities and fragmentation that speech necessarily entails,” a concept explicitly obvious in *Everything Is Illuminated* (12). Alex’s struggle to communicate in his second language is representative of the human struggle to communicate meaning in any circumstance. Alex’s efforts are made even more difficult because what he is trying to understand and communicate—

the events and effects of the Holocaust—is indescribable. This phenomenon, what Steiner called the “failure of the word in the face of the inhuman,” is precisely the barrier against which Alex crashes time and time again (51). The reader sees language fail on one level the first time that Alex and Jonathan meet, when Alex struggles to understand Jonathan’s English, saying, “I do not make to understand. Speak more slower, please” (*Everything* 33). This barrier is echoed in his later failure to understand the truth Grandfather reveals to him—the truth that Grandfather turned over his best friend to the Nazis to be murdered in order to save himself. After hearing Grandfather’s confession, Alex breaks down, saying, “I am not understanding. I am not understanding of any of this” (*Everything* 247). Although Alex quite literally does understand the denotative meaning of the words Grandfather is saying to him, he cannot fully comprehend their implication: Grandfather is a murderer, and has lied to him his entire life. In the same way, though readers can understand reading about the Holocaust on one level, they will never be able to fully wrap their minds around the pure evil that motivated it, or the endless ripple effects it has set in motion.

Steiner suggests three alternative means of communication that may be able to fill in the gaps where language fails: music, light, and silence. All three of these are present in *Everything Is Illuminated*, evidence that Foer is experimenting with possible ways of communicating emotions that words cannot convey. Foer discusses the first of these, music, in a magic realist section containing excerpts from the fictional *Book of Antecedents*. Under a definition of the invented word *ifactifice*, Foer writes:

Music is beautiful. Since the beginning of time, we (the Jews) have been looking for a new way of speaking. We often blame our treatment throughout history on terrible misunderstandings. (Words never mean what we want them to mean.) If we

communicated with something like music, we would never be misunderstood, because there is nothing in music to understand. This was the origin of Torah chanting and, in all likelihood, Yiddish—the most onomatopoeic of all languages. It is also the reason that the elderly among us, particularly those who survived a pogrom, hum so often, indeed seem unable to stop humming, seem dead set on preventing any silence or linguistic meaning in. But until we find this new way of speaking, until we can find a non approximate vocabulary, nonsense words are the best thing we've got. Ifactifice is one such word. (*Everything* 203)

Here Foer uses the shield and distance of magic realism to explore the possibilities of music as an alternative to traditional language, especially with regard to Jewish culture. Would the Torah carry the same meaning if it were read aloud instead of sung? Does the added layer of music affect the meaning of the Hebrew words within? Steiner argues that poetry transforms into music “when it attains the maximal intensity of its being,” which he believes strongly implies that music is “superior to language, that it says more or more immediately” (42-43).

Foer also hints at Steiner's second method of communicating beyond language, silence, when mentioning Holocaust survivors who avoid it by humming—surely the fact that they avoid silence is significant, suggesting that it conveys meaning that they don't want to experience. Steiner suggests that silence can sometimes communicate more effectively than words. He likens it to empty space in modern painting and sculpture, an idea with echoes in the magic realist section recounting the story of the Kolker's accident. After the Kolker (Jonathan's great-great-great-great-great-grandfather) suffers a brain injury and becomes erratic and violent, he is confined to one room in the house, and he and his wife, Brod, communicate through a small hole in the wall. After the Kolker dies, Brod cuts around the hole and puts the wood loop on a

necklace, and Jonathan's narrative observes that "[t]his new bead would remind her . . . of the hole that she was learning is not the exception in life, but the rule. The hole is no void; the void exists around it" (*Everything* 139). Foer uses this vivid picture to explore the idea of negative space and silence as containing meaning in their own right, suggesting that these may be effective alternatives in the struggle to represent the Holocaust. Philippe Codd points out what he calls the best example of "alternative linguistic form" in the entire novel: Foer's decision to represent the bombing of Trachimbrod not with words, but with several pages filled almost entirely with periods (qtd. in Verstryng 63). Instead of choosing to directly represent the bombs falling, the people dying, or the survivors panicking, Foer chooses silence (*Everything* 270-271). Although graphic descriptions, such as Lista's and Grandfather's testimonies, can be very effective, here such detail seems unnecessary: the reader fully understands what is happening, despite the lack of words. In this way, Steiner's theory about silence seems convincing.

Steiner also suggests light as lying outside the reaches of language, and he uses the example of Dante's *Paradiso* to corroborate his claims, saying, "[w]ith each act of ascent, from sphere to radiant sphere, Dante's language is submitted to more intense and exact pressure of vision; divine revelation stretches the human idiom more and more out of the bounds of daily, indiscriminate usage" (40). He argues that the pilgrim at first wrestles with defeat, unable to harness the words necessary to describe what he sees, and that as he draws closer to the divine light, it seems to "burn the word to ash" instead of illuminating it with meaning (40). Ultimately, after being exposed to the purest of all lights, the poet compares his speech to the babbling of an infant, confessing that he now recognizes the absurd shortcomings of language. This crescendo of *Paradiso* is similar to the plot of *Everything Is Illuminated*, whose very title contains a reference to the connection between light and knowledge, as its characters attempt to shed light

on certain dark parts of their past. In the last chapter of the thread told by Alex, titled “Illumination,” Grandfather makes his confession, which is translated and set down by Alex. Alex chooses to depart from the style he used in all the previous chapters and records Grandfather’s confession in a six-page stream of consciousness rush contained entirely in parentheses, in which, as Eisenstein notes, Alex “stretch[es] language to the point of communicating only the terror of Nazi violence and the unspeakable grief of a survivor” (92). Words and sentences bleed together as Grandfather finally reveals what happened the day the Nazis arrived in his village:

. . . I pointed at Herschel and said he is a Jew this man is a Jew please Herschel said to me and he was trying tell them it is not true please Eli please two guards seized him and he did not resist but he did cry more and harder and he shouted tell them that there are no more Jews no more Jews and you only said that I was a Jew so that you would not be killed I am begging you Eli you are my friend do not let me die I am so afraid of dying I am so afraid it will be OK I told him it will be OK do not do this he said do something do something do something . . . (*Everything* 251).

Much like Dante’s poet, Alex’s language devolves into a babble when he tries to write what is utterly incomprehensible to him: the fact that his grandfather is a murderer and has hidden that information from him his whole life. As the blinding light, the titular illumination, is finally unleashed during this moment of anagnorisis, words burn to ash and end the chapter and thread end, gasping for air.

Here the observation made by Jenni Adams, editor of the *Bloomsbury Companion to Holocaust Literature*, is evident: “the ‘opaqueness of language as such’ is arguably made emphatically evident in the disparity between the linguistic signifiers of suffering and the reality

they attempt to denote” (58). Grandfather finds himself trapped in a paradox: while words seem absurdly inadequate to convey the horrible reality he is trying to communicate, they are the best tool he has. Alex—in reality, Foer—chooses to transcribe the confession in such a way that attempts to close the gap between words and the reality they represent. This is a good example of what Doise means when he says that “witnesses can benefit from altering their source material in order to communicate truths that unadulterated facts might be unable to” (93-94). A well-written, neat description of Grandfather’s memory would not carry the same emotional weight as the hysterical flood of words that Foer chose.

It is worth noting that Grandfather’s confessional rush is similar to those of actual Holocaust survivors, such as the testimony of a young woman studied by Holocaust scholar Lawrence Langer. After reading the transcript of her story, in which she describes witnessing her younger brother shot to death by Nazis, Langer notes how “[i]n a surge of sentence fragments the witness recreates the confusion, the violence, and the terror of the moment” (“Memory and Justice After the Holocaust and Apartheid” 95). Langer observes the nonlinear quality of another survivor’s testimony in which she describes feeling dead while still alive after being forced to surrender her infant to the Schutzstaffel. He argues that “[n]ormal chronology records a lifetime from the date of birth to the date of death. But the language of this witness allows us to break and shrink that traditional time mold and invites us to imagine an inverse baptism, a ritual whereby one is dipped into a pool of violent death to emerge not forever cleansed but forever soiled” (“Witnessing Atrocity: The Testimonial Evidence” 101). Grandfather’s betrayal of Herschel has indeed left him forever soiled with a guilt that eventually drives him to suicide. The fact that Grandfather’s testimony is realistic in these ways is significant because it once again confirms that there are some truths Foer is unwilling to sacrifice, even in such a highly creative narrative.

The nonlinear quality of the novel is noteworthy and contributes to its openly constructed form. In addition to the fact that the novel shifts back and forth between an allegedly realist present and a blatantly fictional past, there are multiple instances—in both Alex’s and Jonathan’s chapters—in which references are made to events that have not happened yet. The most striking of these occurs in one of Alex’s chapters, in which he reads a page in Jonathan’s journal. The entry tells of how Alex fights with his abusive father and orders him to leave (*Everything* 160). This entry is repeated word for word in Grandfather’s suicide note at the end of the book, which begs the question: why did Alex decide to include it in an earlier chapter (*Everything* 274)? Menachem Feuer claims that it is a “postmodern literary device: it indicates the presence of the author, as well as the fictionality of this letter” (44). The same could be asked of Jonathan, who creates a dreamlike scene in which Brod lifts a telescope to the sky and sees a young boy reading from *The Book of Antecedents*. She sees he is reading an entry titled “The First Rape of Brod D,” and although the entry cuts off, it is included later in full (89, 203). With both of these instances, Foer may be attempting to address an issue noted by Steiner:

The ineffable lies beyond the frontiers of the word. It is only by breaking through the walls of language that visionary observance can enter the world of total and immediate understanding. Where such understanding is attained, the truth need no longer suffer the impurities and fragmentation that speech necessarily entails. It need not conform to the naïve logic and linear conception of time implicit in syntax. In ultimate truth, past, present, and future are simultaneously comprised. It is the temporal structure of language that keeps them artificially distinct. (12-13)

This bolsters Seifert’s claim that “[t]ime erects a barrier between receiver and communicator that impedes understanding” (13). Foer may be aiming for a more holistic version of truth, one

that sees past the boundaries of time and cannot be contained by grammatical conventions. Both of the aforementioned examples have to do with trauma—rape, abuse, suicide—so perhaps Foer is suggesting that such pain is timeless. Just as millions suffered and were killed during the Nazi genocide, so are millions of their descendants, such as Foer, feeling echoes of that pain and struggling to come to terms with it. Furthermore, Langer points out that “[a] difficult concept for students of the Holocaust to absorb is its violation of temporal reality as a smoothly flowing stream from past to present into the future” (“Representing the Holocaust” 140). Not only did the Holocaust rob millions of a future, it forced those who escaped to live continually in the past. Langer also examines the writings of Holocaust survivor Jorge Semprun, who “recreates consciousness as an intersection of three time zones . . . duplicat[ing] for the reader the fluid, timeless ordeal of the camp inmate who has lost his sense of life as a chronological passage from yesterday through today into tomorrow” (“The Pursuit of Death in Holocaust Narrative” 13). Foer may be trying to replicate this rupture of normal time, this timeless state, with his rapid transitions from past to present to future. Yet again, we see similarities between Foer’s account and the accounts of actual survivors, implying Foer’s dedication to a core of truth underneath the fictional embellishments.

The overall message of *Everything Is Illuminated* is that when faced with events whose cruelty knows no bounds, writers are forced to adapt and seek creative literary forms that attempt to most fully portray the unspeakable. For Foer, this meant utilizing broken English to represent the shortcomings of language, magic realism to explore the familial past he was unable to recover in reality and to amplify the main points introduced in the other threads, and nonlinearity to engage with trauma that seems to lie outside not only language, but also time. Holocaust scholar Thomas Trezise dismisses claims that the Holocaust should not be explored artistically,

saying the issue is “not *whether* but *how* it should be represented” (qtd. in Richardson 6). Foer seems to answer this question using the approach advised by Collado-Rodriguez, who argues that “Holocaust representation seems too large for realist depiction” (16). Writers must feel free to venture outside the realm of pure realism, which can record historical truth but appears to be incapable of encapsulating the emotional truth of unimaginably horrific events like the Holocaust. “For the contemporary Jewish writer,” writes survivor Elie Wiesel, “there can be no theme more human, no project more universal” (qtd. in Gillespie 9). As Foer muses near the end of the novel, “[t]he only thing more painful than being an active forgetter is to be an inert rememberer” (*Everything* 260). *Everything Is Illuminated* is a testament to the power that imaginative forms have to communicate ugly truths, and it ensures that nobody who reads its pages can ever be accused of being an inert rememberer.

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