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"Tattered Photograph": Challenges to Postmemory in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated*

Abstract: Identification with events from an imagined Jewish past, especially in the case of an event like the Holocaust, which acts as a major disruption of such roots, can occur vicariously via material (or immaterial) totems, like photographs, stories, behaviors of survivors, serving as a database of memory famously called "postmemory" by Marianne Hirsch. In the case of Jonathan Safran Foer and his debut novel *Everything Is Illuminated*, a third-generation Jewish-American writing about a highly-fictionalized *shtetl* of his ancestors, the temptation to fill in the blanks in that history gives way to a magical realist understanding of Jewish life in Western Ukraine and of postmemory, but at the same time sheds light on the difficulties of writing personalized historical fiction *vis-a-vis* what is considered authentic. This paper delves into the minutiae of *Everything Is Illuminated*, meaning the novel itself and also the novel-within-the-novel, both of which question the importance of a cohesive intergenerational family narrative in order to achieve a form of closure in the case of a rupture as traumatic as the Holocaust.
Keywords: postmemory, Holocaust, magical realism, authenticity, Jewish identity

In both literature and film, memories of the Holocaust have often been rehashed for aesthetic purposes by contemporary artists claiming a lineage, however indirect, to those experiences. The process of adapting a historical event like the Holocaust implies a second-hand reimagining in most of these cases, a perspective which is crucial in shaping the very structure of the work in question. While the second-hand nature of these memories is not generally acknowledged within the narrative, the appropriation raises questions about the ethics of Holocaust fiction and the distortion of collective memory. A change from this established dynamic would be an added awareness of this transformation within the narrative, taken up by Jonathan Safran Foer

in his debut novel *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002), which sheds light on the notion of what is "authentic" in writing historical fiction from the vantage point of the third-generation Jewish-American diaspora. This paper delves into the late postmodernist representation of lost memories and the limits of remembering in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated*, highlighting the way in which history provides the raw material for fiction to manipulate, but also what issues can arise from depending on memories that are two generations removed. The current scholarship on Safran Foer addresses the issue of his debut novel's "late or post-postmodernism." This is the case of Katrin Amian's *Rethinking Postmodernism(s): Charles S. Peirce and the pragmatist negotiations of Thomas Pynchon, Toni Morrison, and Jonathan Safran Foer* (2008), and Derek Parker Royal's *Unfinalized moments: Essays on the Development of Contemporary Jewish American Narrative* (2009); the latter also discusses the postmodern influences of Jewish authors. More recent books focus on the ethics of telling the truth versus distorting it for literature's sake, and the need to reconstruct Jewish identities, for example in *A Thousand Darknesses: Lies and Truth in Holocaust Fiction* (2011), where Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated* appears in the conclusion titled "The Third Generation", and *The Impossible Jew: Identity and the Reconstruction of Jewish American Literary History* (2015), respectively. In Foer's case, the late post-postmodern elements entail a self-reflexive questioning of his need to fill in the gaps of history, the need to retrace roots in a neat, linear way, while at the same time remaining sincere about his motives. To dissect Foer's reckoning with his grandparents' past and the lost past of the *shtetl*, I use the concept of "postmemory," as defined by Marianne Hirsch, and at the same time contrast Safran Foer's debut novel with its literary precursors: works like Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (another example of self-aware Holocaust fiction), or David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (and its focus on authenticity) to highlight antecedents in terms of similar self-reflexive techniques. I also link

Foer's obsession with lost memories and intergenerational trauma with magical realism, namely Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

The concept of postmemory implies an indirect accumulation of the previous generation's memories, and in the case of the Holocaust can prove problematic when converting it into historical fiction. For postmemory to work, a totemic object linking the past with the present needs to be present in the subject's imagination, linking subsequent generations to the source of the events. Experiencing the Holocaust indirectly through such a vantage point in history is due to the fact that, as Hirsch puts it, "Postmemory describes the relationship that the generation after those who witnessed cultural or collective trauma bears to the experiences of those who came before, experiences that they "remember" only by means of the stories, *images*, and behaviors among which they grew up" (106, italics mine). Hirsch emphasizes how the visual component in particular, especially photography, serves as a powerful summoning mechanism: second-hand experiences are transmitted across generations through such items, becoming fully-fledged memories in the new generation's mind through displaced nostalgia. Using these memories, "children of survivors" of the Holocaust write "novels, plays and memoirs" that aim to "combat revisionist denial" and which should be "understood as formative in their own search for identity" (Sicher 57). On the inside of *Everything Is Illuminated*'s book cover, the publisher describes how the fictional persona of Safran Foer "arrives in the Ukraine, clutching in his hand a tattered photograph. He is searching for the woman who fifty years ago saved his grandfather from the Nazis" (n.pag.). With the photograph of the woman as their link, the two main narrators, the young Ukrainian guide Alexander Perchov, and the fictional Safran Foer, unknowingly share a common thread in the history of a place and "what they are looking for seems elusive—a truth hidden behind veils of time, language and the horrors of war. What they find turns all their worlds upside down"

(n.pag.). In the joint quest to find Trachimbrod, it is also Perchov who uncovers his own family's role in the Holocaust. In *Everything Is Illuminated*, the reconstruction of the past via postmemory gives shape to a re-telling of Trachimbrod's history which is complemented by two different narrative layers within the story: the present-day search for Trachimbrod's physical remains and a monologic epistolary novel, both told from Alexander Perchov's point of view. The latter narrative deals with the aftermath of the present-day search for Trachimbrod, where the characters act out a critique of postmemory itself, drawing attention to "the consequences of hypermediated cultural constructions of the past for identity and historical truth" (Sicher 57). The thematic crux of the novel is therefore , an attempt towards greater authenticity which ends in frustration, especially since Foer's Holocaust fiction is that of the third-generation and therefore more alienated from its original source material.

The artificial revival of Trachimbrod and the improbable events surrounding the *shtetl* is relevant to the connection that critics like John Mullan made with "magical realism." Due to the similarities in tone between Foer's debut novel and Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, magical realism "was a term used by almost all the reviewers of *Everything Is Illuminated* to describe one strand of its narrative" (Mullan para. 1), linking Foer's passages dealing with the reconstruction of Trachimbrod from lost memories and Marquez's doomed town Macondo and its own experiences of collective amnesia and destruction. In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the act of remembering occurs within its very first sentence: "Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendia was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice" (Marquez 1). Flashbacks like these are used often within the book, and "since the past is colored by the memory of those who record it, it can often be laced with fantasy. In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Gabriel García Márquez mixes mundane

descriptions of real world, people and places and events, with fantastical tales of supernatural beings, and places, and actions" (Crash Course). The amalgamation of the probable and the improbable, the historical and the fantastical is present in *Everything Is Illuminated* as well. The fictional Foer's reconstruction of Trachimbrod's past occurs in a manner reminiscent of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*'s family tree, by tracking consecutive generations that make up his Jewish ancestors. The question of memory and its recovery makes an appearance in the third chapter of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, when a plague of insomnia sweeps across the village, affecting its people with a form of collective amnesia. Despite the gradual amnesia, "the inhabitants of Macondo were prepared to fight against loss of memory" through the power of writing, and "thus they went on living in a reality that was slipping away, momentarily captured by words, but which would escape irremediably when they forgot the values of the written letters" (Márquez 48-9). The claim here that words can, quite literally, preserve memories and enable perpetuity, at least until the words themselves lose their meaning, appears in Trachimbrod's world as well: the "encyclopedia of sadness (. . .) found on the body of Brod B," a victim of the shtetl's destruction by the Nazis, features a similar reflection on the written word and its ability to summon the past, in the form of the "sadness of Pinchas T's only notable paper, 'To the Dust: From Man You Came and to Man You Shall Return,' in which he argued it would be possible, in theory, for life and art to be reversed" (Foer 212). Directly following this example on the interchangeability of the written word and existence is the repetition of the phrase "We are writing" throughout the next page and a half. The obsessive desire to hold onto life through language and art, and thus to revive a forgotten past, is a strong undercurrent of the magical realism present in both Marquez's and Foer's novels.

Distortion of memory is a main talking point in dissecting Holocaust fiction written by second-generation Jewish diaspora, and a major anxiety that Safran Foer, a third-generation European Jew, addresses in *Everything Is Illuminated*. Cheapening the trauma could be the unintended result of sublimating it through fiction writing, since "appropriation of the Holocaust for all kinds of agendas means it is now likely the Holocaust will be met as a trivialized trope, as a representation of a memory or as a memory of a memory in a twilight museum culture of simulacra and hypertext" (Sicher 58). A return to the scene of the crime, both literally and as literature, heralds this kind of appropriation, since, as Hirsch and Miller put it,

> the legacies of the past, transmitted powerfully from parent to child within the family, [and which] are always already inflected by broader public and generational stories, images, artifacts, and understandings that together shape identity and identification. While the idea of post-memory can account for the lure of second-generation 'return', it also underscores the radical distance that separates the past from the present and the risks of projection, appropriation, and overidentification occasioned by second and third generation desires and needs. (4-5)

The traces of the past, in the case of Foer's own third-generation "return," yielded this very possibility of "projection [and] appropriation," both within the text and without: the fictional Foer playing with the history of a real place, the novel-within-a-novel in *Everything Is Illuminated*; and the real Foer, essentially dabbling in the same sort of "projection, appropriation, and overidentification," but at the same time subjecting these tendencies to criticism from other characters in the fictional Foer's itinerary. The manipulation of the past occurs in the text itself,

with the coming of Jonathan Safran Foer's grandfather into the generational narrative, which triggers Alexander Perchov to question the veracity of the novel-within-the-novel:

> 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? 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, why do we not make the story more premium than life? It seems to me that we are making the story even inferior.
>
> (Foer 179)

In the conception of the novel-within-the-novel, the two narrators, Safran Foer and Alexander Perchov, hold equal sway over its appropriation of "the truth," and become "such nomads" when dealing with veracity. This gesture therefore points a finger at the very notion of authenticity in the unknowable scheme of intergenerational history for someone of the third-generation, particularly considering the fact that, "While the children of the Holocaust survivors - the second generation - grew up as 'witnesses to an uncompromising trauma that held their parents hostage,' as second-generation writer Thane Rosenbaum suggests, the third generation must navigate with an inexact, approximate map, a broken narrative" (Aarons and Berger 4).In spite of this, the fictional Foer draws attention to the importance of a cohesive lineage within his own novel, in a paragraph titled "The Five Generations Between Brod and Safran," on the nature and importance of remembering: "Yankel begot Trachimkolker. Trachimkolker begot Safranbrod. Safranbrod begot Trachimyankel. Trachimyankel begot Kolkerbrod. Kolkerbrod begot Safran. For so it is written: AND IF WE ARE TO STRIVE FOR A BETTER FUTURE, MUSTN'T WE BE

FAMILIAR AND RECONCILED WITH OUR PAST?" (Foer 210). In retracing family history, forgetting implies erasure, and, within the context of the Holocaust, a second death to a lineage of Jewish tradition, a preoccupation of the third-generation, who, like Foer, "illuminates a cognitive darkness that was not present among survivors and their children" (Berger 151). However, considering Alexander Perchov's remarks about the veracity of the fictional Foer's writings on Trachimbrod, it is unclear if the aforementioned lineage actually took place, or if the rendering of unknowable variables from the past is enough as a symbolic gesture. While filling in the gaps of a collective memory, Safran Foer's input in *Everything Is Illuminated* was never intended to be accurate. In the preface to Avrom Bendavid-Val's *The Heavens Are Empty*, a study of Trochenbrod and the Jewish-Ukrainian communities in the region which served as a basis for Trachimbrod, Jonathan Safran Foer offered a disclaimer to the way his construction of *Everything Is Illuminated* engaged with the real history of the place:

> In 2002, I contributed my novel, *Everything Is Illuminated*, to the small and diverse library
> of books devoted to Trochenbrod. It is a highly fictionalized response to a trip I made, as a
> twenty-year old student, in an effort to find the woman who saved my grandfather, Louis
> Safran, from the Nazis. The book was an experiential, rather than historical, record of
> Trochenbrod. Or perhaps it's more accurate to say it was a deeply personal expression of
> one young man's experience in his destroyed ancestral homeland. (xiii-xiv)

Therefore, the reconstruction of the past serves as a step towards a sense of wholeness and of reconstructing an *ersatz* Eastern European lineage as a building block to one's identity. Therein lies the scope of Foer's plea: "MUSN'T WE BE FAMILIAR AND RECONCILED WITH THE

PAST?" The alternative would be Márquez' plague of insomnia, erasing memory, and thus meaning, from the life of the village.

Despite Safran Foer's apologia for distorting the past, both within and outside the text of *Everything Is Illuminated*, his search for roots belies a sincere preoccupation with wanting to be part of a borderless quest for roots. The dispersed families of Trachimbrod create a sense of community for its future generations, and collectively help to ensure the survival of its memory, especially in the compiling of the book *The Heavens Are Empty*, of which Foer was a part:

> . . . I was surprised by an outpouring from many families who heard about my project and wanted to help preserve and promulgate Trochenbrod's story. They offered me family photographs, some going back to the 1800s. They also offered artifacts for me to photograph, and informal memoirs in which forebears long gone described their lives in Trochenbrod. (. . .) They made it possible for me to walk Trochenbrod's vanished street and see in my mind's eye the hustle and bustle of people buying and selling and arguing and greeting each other, while children run and play, secure as if among family wherever they were in the town. I could hear solemn melodies from the synagogues and rousing songs from Zionist youth meetings, and the clatter of horse wagons and the calls of peddlers from the villages advertising the goods in their wagons that awaited their Trochenbrod customers. What a gift from all the people who wanted to help me bring Trochenbrod back to life, and what a gift across the decades from that lost town in Ukraine that was Trochenbrod. (Bendavid-Val xxviii)

The idea of compiling a memoir of a lost town to "bring [it] back to life" is not unique to Trochenbrod; Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer's *Ghosts of Home: The Afterlife of Czernowitz in Jewish Memory* (2010) does the same with the lost Jewish city of Czernowitz. Bendavid-Val's *The Heavens Are Empty* represents just one attempt to resurrect the memory of a city from bits and pieces of itinerant memorabilia: being transnational and severed from its roots, the dislocated Jewish communities of Europe reinvent and reconstruct their identities from objects like the "tattered photograph" in *Everything Is Illuminated*. Looking at the language of return, James Clifford "added the now familiar homonym *routes* to *roots* so as to emphasize the ways in which every form of rootedness and dwelling already presupposes travel, cultural exchange—routes" (qtd. in Hirsch and Miller 3). In this sense, Foer's journey is towards self-discovery and self-creation, in a search for identity and belonging that aims to add a new dimension to his sense of self. This, again, directly contradicts the real-life result of Foer's trip to the Ukraine to find the woman in the photograph, and the subsequent filling in of the gaps:

> 'Of course I didn't find her!' Foer says (. . .) 'I was so naive - it's like walking into New York City with a photograph and asking people if they recognise the person. It's ridiculous. I was completely ill-prepared for that trip. I did no research at all.' To fill the void left by his journey of non-discovery, Foer imagined what ought to have happened, and the result is his critically applauded first novel, Everything Is Illuminated, which won the Guardian First Book Award last night. (Burkeman para. 2-3)

Despite Foer's fruitless journey, there is a sense that, as Alonda Nelson put it, "root-seekers (. . .) also become root-makers" (qtd. in Hirsch and Miller 3), and that Foer's role as a "root-seeker"

converts his experience into something tangible in the end, the author thus becoming a "root-maker" in the process.

This admixture of sincerity and its simultaneous questioning is a staple of Jonathan Safran Foer's literary genealogy, owing to the influence of David Foster Wallace. It was Wallace's *Infinite Jest* that laid the foundation for a type of fiction that was aiming for sincerity while at the same time being steeped in postmodern self-reflexive techniques, a so-called "metamodern" element that constitutes these switches from levity to seriousness (Eve 12). Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated* was part of a group of "novels that seemed to owe their exuberance – their commitment to "vitality at all costs" to *Infinite Jest*" (Max 265). David Foster Wallace's key literary trait then relates to the tone of the prose within *Everything Is Illuminated*, which tackles a subject like the Holocaust at face value while at the same time dissecting the inner workings of writing Holocaust fiction. *Everything Is Illuminated* also strikes a balance between a somber mood and levity, made possible through Safran Foer's straight-man character and the comic relief from Alexander Perchov. In this literary tightrope act, *Everything Is Illuminated* attempts to communicate the horrors of the Holocaust through the lens of postmemory, while also taking a step back and critiquing such techniques through its characters. The existence of such self-reflexive elements in Foer's work makes *Everything Is Illuminated* a historical "metafiction in which traumatic memory is encased in comedy and tragedy" (Berger 151), relating thus to Wallace's "metamodern" element. Here, the Holocaust exists as the very real lynchpin, while the personal history surrounding it remains open for embellishing and simultaneous questioning of said embellishment.

A precursor to *Everything Is Illuminated* in terms of writing Holocaust fiction while at the same time questioning the ethical nature of writing Holocaust fiction in the text itself is Art Spiegelman's *Maus.* Also a self-aware meditation on the Holocaust, *Maus* functions as

straightforward second-generation Holocaust fiction and also as an interrogation of the role that postmemory plays in the re-telling of a traumatic event, while also managing to oscillate between formal boundaries due to its "problematic status (...) between autobiography and testimony, comic book and memoir" (Sicher 68). Unlike *Everything Is Illuminated* and Safran Foer's being open about the fictitious aspects of his narrative, both inside and outside the text, Spiegelman's story of his parents' survival is markedly rooted in real events, i.e. stories passed down from his father, Vladek Spiegelman. Despite this, the second-hand nature of these memories is still what causes the tension in Spiegelman's *Maus*, as "in a way, he wishes he had been in Auschwitz because his lack of knowledge divides him from his parents and makes him feel guilty he had such an easy life" (Sicher 68) This is addressed by Spiegelman's proxy in the second half of *Maus*, where he questions the root of his fame and his own reservations about writing Holocaust fiction, "most blatantly in the scene of the artist contemplating the dead corpses while a film crew 'shoots' him" (Sicher 80). In the same scene, Spiegelman reveals the details behind the inception of the graphic novel, from the fact that his father/main character "Vladek died of congestive heart failure on August 18, 1982" to the fact that he "started working on this page at the very end of February 1987" (Spiegelman 201). In that scene, Spiegelman dissects the act of writing Holocaust fiction in a manner akin to the epistolary section in *Everything Is Illuminated* about the creation of the book itself. Safran Foer's questioning of his work's veracity is not shared by Spiegelman's *Maus*, since the latter is more concerned with the simple fact of using someone else's traumatic memories to create fiction, and thus the anxiety lies elsewhere: "Throughout *Maus*, Spiegelman emphasizes the artist's concern with the ethics of turning his father into art (...]). Moreover, by reawakening the traumatic past or exposing ghosts in the family cupboard, there is a fear of hurting parents who have tried to put the past behind them and who may fear for control of the memory, who may fear

they are losing 'their' story" (Sicher 80). For *Maus* and other similar works, there is an anxiety of "losing" a story by presenting it to the public, whereas Safran Foer's preoccupation when telling his story while "being nomadic with the truth" is different, and has to do with the authenticity of the events in question.

In conclusion, *Everything Is Illuminated* acts as conduit for postmemory, but also for a self-aware meditation on the limitations of postmemory itself. *Everything Is Illuminated*'s prose style and intergenerational exploration of a lost world is similar to Gabriel García Márquez's work, despite having constant doubt as the subtext of its own magical realism. The inability to accurately recreate Trachimbrod within the novel, and in this way recover the real Trochenbrod, speaks to the impossibility of mending severed Jewish roots, but it is not the final say in terms of root-seeking. The *shtetl* might be lost forever, but the construction of a fictional memory of this space, enhanced by the journey back and Foer's prose, can help the *shtetl* linger in the minds of future generations. The constant shift between sincerity and self-awareness in *Everything Is Illuminated* in the wider context of Holocaust fiction further reflects the influence of David Foster Wallace's writing, where the "exuberance" of the prose would, at the same time, subject to self-reflexive scrutiny the authenticity of the events relating to Foer's ancestral past. This questioning of postmemory is also present in Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, despite the fact that the breaking of the fourth wall there is warranted by a different set of questions, specifically the ethical aspect of writing about the Holocaust as part of a second-generation whose second-hand memories are still fresh. Foer's third-generation quest for roots is equally self-aware, but due to the generational difference between the source of the memories and the author, authenticity and the distortion of memory become the main concerns.

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