

*The Duality of Narrative Voice and the Possibility of Friendship in Jonathan Safran  
Foer's "Everything Is Illuminated"*

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In Jonathan Safran Foer's postmodern novel, *Everything is Illuminated*, we see a semi-autobiographical journey in search for generational memory, family secrets, and the display of self-identification through a combination of Joycian stream-of-consciousness narration, picturesque demonstration of words, and magic-realism (Ward 152). Its 2005 film adaptation has opened a new ground for various interpretations of the relationships among the characters and the influence of trans-generational trauma. A major comparison between the novel and its film version lies, most prominently, in the identity of Alex's grandfather and the indicated friendship between Alex and Jonathan. This paper compares the written text with the filmic version, in the hope of analyzing the relationship between the two protagonists, the display of trans-generational trauma in two different kinds of narrative: one being Alex's letter in the form of a comic-natured "quest Romance" (Feuer 25), the other Jonathan's magic-realistic fable, and how such strategies affect the historical accounts. I argue that by depicting Alex and Jonathan's indicated friendship in a rather oversimplified Hollywood manner, the director attempts to provide a new angle of presentation of a third-generation trauma and wishes to shed light on the possibility of its closure; while the novel points to something more complicated. The possibility of the protagonists friendship and the closure of trauma are entangled more with history than memory itself.

The story plot carries on with two intermingling narrative: Alex's and Jonathan's. Essentially it is a story of a quest in which Alex is in charge of taking down incidents along their journey in search for a seemingly-mythical heritage, a shtetl named Trachimbrod. The plot is divided into several "episodes," followed by Alex's letter to Jonathan inserted at the end of each episodes discussing the authenticity of the account, his opinions about their grandparents, and his relationship with Jonathan. The major addresser in the novel is Alex. Jonathan, on the contrary, is being introduced in the story as "the hero" (*Illuminated* 27)<sup>1</sup> and his every statement is being recorded by Alex. Jonathan, in this manner, is deliberately "made silence" through Alex's narration, there's no direct "voice" from Jonathan except for Alex's description of his witness and his comments on Jonathan's preceding remarks. Jonathan's only narrative, however, lies in his magic-realistic fable—a story of his grandfather, Safran. Francisco Collado-Rodriquez has pointed out that the novel is Foer's "fictional" story based on his incomplete desire to write a non-fictional account of his journey to Ukraine in the hope of finding Augustine—the women who saved his grandfather from the Nazis (56). As he asserts, "it[the novel] is the invented story of the village, reported in mythical and magical-realist terms by Jonathan, and

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<sup>1</sup> *Everything Is Illuminated*, henceforth cited as *Illuminated*.

reviewed by Alex in his letters” (57). The narratives of Alex and Jonathan point to two different perspectives toward the story plot, mainly, toward their impression of Trachimbrod. What Jonathan writes is a fictional story about the history of Trachimbrod, while Alex records their recent search of Augustine and his witness of the present-day Trachimbrod (Verstryng 50). Alex’s narration appears to be a “cover-up of the fact that it is a fictional comedy that tries to avoid being a tragedy” (Feuer 36), whereas Jonathan’s is consistently tragic and independent outside influences (36).

The story unfolds with Alex’s self-introduction in his own version of English, in which Alex uses a series of synonym instead of regular phrases. His own particular lexicon: “dub,” “spleening,” “first-rate,” or “premium” (*Illuminated* 1-3), his love for American culture: “I dig Negroes, particularly Michael Jackson. I dig to disseminate very much currency at famous nightclubs in Odessa” (*Illuminated* 2), and his bragging of women always “want to be carnal with me” (*Illuminated* 2), all point to his simple naivety. The beginning episodes of the novel carry on with Alex’s casual description of getting a phone call from the Heritage Touring Agency requiring a driver, a guide, and a translator for a young Jewish man coming from America looking for a town his grandfather came from. This “overture to the commencement of a very rigid journey” (*Illuminated* 1), enclosing with Grandfather’s stubborn complaint that he “do[does] not want to drive ten hours to an ugly city to attend to a very spoiled Jew” (*Illuminated* 7), is illustrated by Menachem Feuer as a classic opening of the quest Romance; in which the journey would gather people from different social classes or racial identities together (25). And eventually the adversaries within the group would be transformed into friends or allies as the journey progresses (26).

One thing to be noted is that the letters Alex writes to Jonathan is sent *after* their journey in search for Trachimbrod and Augustine and *after* Jonathan has returned to America. Their exchange of manuscripts composes the whole novel. Jonathan’s approach of writing his dreamy, quasi-realistic stories of his grandfather’s life in Trachimbrod comes entirely from his own viewpoint of Jewish history. Alex, on the other hand, plays a lowly role in his letter to Jonathan. He feels he “must eat a slice of humble pie for not finding Augustine” (*Illuminated* 23). In short, Alex’s narrative appears to be a pleading for mercy (Feuer 27), that he is pleading Jonathan to be “truthful” yet “benevolent” (*Illuminated* 26). He is even willing to change his own version of the story: “I apologize for the last line, about how you are a very spoiled Jew. It has been changed” (*Illuminated* 24). In the subsequent chapters we see more

alternation and omission of Alex's narrative. His version of the story is a result of the external forces imposed upon his narrative compelling him to change eventually from a comic tone into a tragic account (Feuer 36).

The novel is adapted into a film by Live Schreiber in 2005. As formerly mentioned, the filmic version of the story plot appears oversimplified with the total exclusion of Jonathan's magic-realistic narrative of his grandfather (Verstryng 67). The filmic Jonathan possesses, as elaborated at the beginning of the film, a habit of collecting things. Jonathan's collectomania, however, has much reference toward his mythical writing in the novel. One of the instances could be seen in the unfolding scene when Jonathan obtains from his grandfather's deathbed an amber necklace pendant. This pendant ushers his collectomania. Schreiber even serves such habit as Jonathan's motive of the Journey to Trachimbrod. Since the only token of memory for his grandfather was the amber pendant, Jonathan sets off for a search for his grandfather's heritages along with a faded picture and a Star-of-David necklace which he has just obtained from his grandmother. Later we can see that the pendant, which is suggested to be Augustine's, resembles Yankel's ring described in the novel: "The prehistoric ant in Yankel's ring, which had lain motionless in the *honey-colored amber* since long before Noah hammered the first plank" (*Illuminated* 13; emphasis added). Another example of Schreiber's undermining Jonathan's mythical narration occurs when Jonathan dreams about the river Brod and imagines plastic bags—the one he uses to collect things—floating down along the river. This scene instantly and vividly makes the viewer recall Jonathan's narration of the bombardment of Trachimbrod, in which people try to survive from the bombarding by staying in the river, ultimately almost everyone drowns and their bodies turn up floating alongside the river: "the bodies began to rise one at a time until I couldn't be seen through all of the bodies" (*Illuminated* 273). As the novel indicates, Safran is buried under a pile of drown bodies and thus could not be found by the German troops: "[I became] invisible under them I was the carcass" (*Illuminated* 273). Same scene occurs in the filmic version when Grandfather goes through a mental flashback. In this scene, we see a younger version of grandfather—wearing the Star of David—miraculously survives Nazi's round-up execution through being buried under a pile of corpses. The overlapping images of both Alex's and Jonathan's grandfather point to the same identity they both possess—a Holocaust victim: One being a confirmed Jew, the other being hidden under the perplexity of the dual narrative voice.

Lewis Ward, in his *Holocaust Memory in Contemporary Narratives*,<sup>2</sup> states that

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<sup>2</sup> Lewis Ward, "Holocaust Memory in Contemporary Narratives: Towards a Theory of

Foer's text shows a strong desire to "move beyond immediate experience and journey to the further side of the past, whether through travel to historical sites, genealogical reconstruction, or (imagined) contact with survivors from that past" (81). The journey in search for Trachimbrod and Augustine has revealed, intentionally and unintentionally, some truth about both Alex's and Jonathan's grandfather, whom directly experienced Holocaust. Although this journey ends up with no concrete evidence of the past ever existed: what used to be Trachimbrod is now an empty field, and the quest for Augustine has been suspended as they encounter Lista, the only survivor of the Jewish community. The journey has forced each character to introspectively re-examine himself. One direct result would be the outpouring of the history from Alex's grandfather and his later breakdown. Alex, who witnesses firsthand the outburst of this raw and cruel memory, is entirely unprepared of such revelation:

"I am not a hero, it is true"

"He is not a hero." [Alex translated]

"But I am not a bad person, either."

"But he is not a bad person."

[. . .]

"And he[Herschel] was my best friend."

"He was his best friend."

"And I murdered him." (*Illuminated* 228)

Note that this chapter ends up with an omission of Alex's translation of Grandfather's last remark, "And I murdered him." Alex's intentional omission, his constant pleading to Jonathan for "mercy," all winds up together in the final chapter of his narration: "Illumination" (*Illuminated* 243), in which his dialogue with Grandfather, his epistolary dialogue with Jonathan, and Grandfather's own nearly-raving confession, all intermingle into a gigantic chain of sentences without punctuation:

(*Do you remember what he did next, Jonathan? . . . Herschel was a good person, and so was I, . . . And then I asked him, What, what happened? . . . I murdered Herschel, he said. Or what I did was as good as murdering him. . . . Were you scared? I was scared. . . . I pointed and for him that Herschel was murdered that I murdered Herschel and this is why he is how he is he is how is he because a father is always responsible for his son and I am I and I am responsible not for Herschel but for my son . . .* (*Illuminated* 247-51; emphasis added)

Collado-Rodriguez explains Foer's employment of such approach: "The use of experimental techniques in trauma fiction frequently suggests or symbolizes the

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Transgenerational Empathy," MA Thesis. (Cornwall:U of Exeter, 2008).

victim's—not the perpetrator's—posttraumatic condition, especially when she or he becomes the narrator” (63). Such remark, along with what trauma theorists deem the typical nature of a traumatic narration—chronological disorder and jumping away from linear narration—point to the fact that Grandfather indeed *is* a victim who possesses a traumatic past.

Although the identity of Grandfather has never been testified, we see hints from both the film and the novel. Clearly, near the end film we see Grandfather's full name engraved on his tombstone which shows he is indeed the one Augustine recognizes on the picture: Alexander *Baruch* Perchov. Furthermore, we see the Star of David above his full name engraved in Hebrew, and the family has chosen to bury Grandfather next to the Trachimbrod memorial stone. All of these indicate that the family has not only discovered the truth about his past, but they accept their Jewish heritage (Verstryng 69). Jonathan also seems to realize the truth about Grandfather's Jewish identity since he symbolically gives him a bag of sand retrieved from the riverbank of the Brod. In this manner, his acknowledgement of Grandfather's identity makes a connection between the two families in the history of Trachimbrod. Similarly, Grandfather's identity in the novel is revealed through his final outpour of confession. From this intermingling monologue/dialogue among Alex, Jonathan, and Alex's grandfather, we encounter a scene where Herschel begs his best friend Eli not to turn him to the German troops. Since Augustine/Lista has mentioned that Eli “had to shoot Herschel, because if he did not, they would shoot him” (*Illuminated* 152); with Grandfather's subsequent refusals of continuing to hear the woman's account, and his soliloquized confession that he kills Herschel, it is safe to say that grandfather *is* Eli—he too, is a Jew.

In this manner, if the filmic version admits a closure of this trans-generational trauma in which Jonathan accepts Grandfather's Jewish identity, in the novel we see no trace of such acknowledgement. Jonathan's omission of Grandfather's Jewish identity marks, as Feuer asserts, a refusal to think of the implications of a Jew selling other Jews out (47). He would rather, under such context, admit Grandfather as an anti-Semitic Ukrainian than a Jew who murders his best friend. Sue-Ann Weissmark replies to Jonathan's lack of response to Alex's final revelation, in which she asserts that many Jews would admit their position as absolute victims by refusing to acknowledge Jewish perpetrators or bystanders. Jonathan's magic-realistic novel points to his desire to create a fictional history where Jew would insist on absolute guilt of the other (Weissmark 47). In addition, Ward also explains, “Jewish tradition and religious practice [have] always emphasized both remembering the experience of

one's ancestors and understand the present as part of a continuum with the past" (22). Following this sense, Jewish descendents may possess what Jean Goodman characterizes a phenomenon which World War II has given birth to: the "Holocaust remembrance" (9). Replying to this collective memory, Jonathan's refusal of accepting Grandfather's identity and Alex's friendship has much more to do with history and memory. Grandfather's betrayal has caused tensions between Alex and Jonathan. They can never be friends unless they find out a new definition for their relationship that can transcend traditional binary category, in this case, the third generation of the perpetrator and the victim.

In sum, the duality of narrative voice in Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated* points to two versions of the fictional history the two protagonists project. The possibility of their indicated friendship, though being rekindled through the interpretation of its filmic version, has been reduced due to the perplexity of the trans-generational grudge and the rejection of the alteration of long-inherited collective memories.

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