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The human hole: Problematic representations of trauma in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything is illuminated* and *Extremely loud and incredibly close.*

Abstract:
Jonathan Safran Foer's novels *Everything is illuminated* and *Extremely loud and incredibly close* are commonly read as trauma fiction—works that incorporate insights from literary trauma theory. This paper argues that these novels give rise to implications that are difficult to reconcile with that theory. Foer's signature motif of 'holes' alludes not only to trauma but also to post-structural theories of language and a postmodern sense of the absence of an all-synthesising paradigm of truth. By conflating these concepts, his novels evoke an original, structural trauma, which problematises the practical imperative of trauma theory to *work through* trauma. In its place, as I illustrate, Foer's novels advance a challenging philosophy of *living with* inexorable trauma: this ethic, which demands authenticity but discounts healing or self-preservation, and even apparently endorses suicide, highlights the dangers of ignoring Dominick LaCapra's warning against confusing absence with loss when talking about trauma.

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Introduction

Jonathan Safran Foer writes about trauma. His celebrated first novel, *Everything is illuminated* (2008), dramatises aspects the literary theories of trauma espoused by scholars such as Cathy Caruth, Anne Whitehead, Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman. The basic tenets of literary trauma theory include the idea that trauma results from an experience so extreme for the victim that it cannot be comprehended or assimilated into memory when it occurs. Trauma persists as a rift or absence in the coherent self, escaping memory, conscious knowledge, and representation in conventional language. Trauma is wounding precisely because it remains unknowable and breaches 'the mind's experience of time, self and world', even as it returns repeatedly to torment the survivor (Caruth 1996: 4). Foer's debut explores the devastation wrought by the Holocaust from the perspective of third-generation survivors, while his follow-up novel, *Extremely loud and incredibly close* (2011), follows a family of traumatised characters in the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks on New York.

This article argues that the concurrence of literary trauma theory, post-structural theories of language and a postmodern sense of the absence of an all-synthesising paradigm of truth in these novels gives rise to problematic implications. Specifically, Foer's signature motif of holes conflates the theories, allowing the ungroundedness of language and its ontological implications to be construed in his work as a kind of original, universal trauma. *Everything is illuminated* and *Extremely loud and incredibly close* both treat trauma as an unavoidable, even defining, aspect of being, which undermines the practical imperative to 'work through' trauma espoused by most trauma theorists. No reconstitution of self-knowledge is possible if all structures of knowledge are deemed essentially fragmented. Instead, Foer's novels advance a challenging philosophy of 'living with' inexorable trauma. This ethic, which demands authenticity but rules out healing or self-preservation, and even apparently endorses suicide, is difficult to reconcile with the trauma theories from which it is born. Foer's work exemplifies the error, warned against by Dominick LaCapra (2001), of confusing trans-historical absence with historical loss when talking about trauma so as to perpetuate a culture of fatalism and undifferentiated, irrevocable victimhood.

Trauma as discontinuity, disruption and absence

Alan Gibbs associates Foer's novels with the genre of 'trauma fiction' described by Whitehead (2004). Diverging from Whitehead, however, Gibbs suggests that such fiction does not simply illuminate but, rather, replicates knowingly the dominant themes of trauma theory using a set of disruptive postmodern literary techniques, specifically 'fragmented, non-linear chronologies, repetition [and] shifts in narrating voice' (2014: 27). Motifs of discontinuity, repetition and absence have dominated literary representations of Holocaust memory since Felman and Laub's seminal work, *Testimony* (1992); they now also pervade interpretations and representations of all kinds of traumatic experience, as modelled by Caruth (1996), and have come to define 'the aesthetic of the trauma genre' (Gibbs 2014: 25), despite growing evidence from experimental psychology that this is not a faithful description of how survivors experience or remember traumatic events (see McNally 2003, Pederson 2014). Foer's work is characterised by a recurrent motif of 'holes', including peepholes, beads and keyholes, as well as narrative strategies of omission, elision and excision. Such 'holes' evoke the discontinuities of experience and absences of knowledge integral to standard literary theories of trauma. The visual, structural and even literal lacunae in

the texts of his first two novels signify the ubiquity of trauma in his characters' lives: holes attest to things unassimilated and unavailable to direct knowledge that create rifts within one's sense of time, self and reality.

At the same time, Foer's holes conjure an impression of the deficiencies of language and the absence of a foundational truth drawn from post-structuralist and postmodern theories. This hole has always-already taken place. It does not arise from a singular disruption of being or knowing but represents the original disruption, the discontinuity and ungroundedness of all being and all knowing, which Foer depicts as traumatic in itself. His novels narrate the challenge of living with this hole.

Everything is illuminated

The most blatant embodiment of the inescapability of trauma in Foer's novels is the character Brod from *Everything is illuminated*, who, by the age of eighteen, is an orphan twice over, a victim of rape, a survivor of domestic violence, and a widow. As the first forebear in the novel's fantasy genealogy of a fictionalised Jonathan Safran Foer (henceforth Jonathan), she establishes her descendants' propensity for loss and suffering, which reaches its climax generations later when the Nazis destroy her Ukrainian shtetl, Trachimbrod. Her perspective that self and reality are defined by the 'hole' of trauma typifies the portrayal of trauma in Foer's novels as something universal and essential to the human condition.

Brod features in one of the novel's three narrative strands: Jonathan's fantastic reimagining of his forebears' lives in Trachimbrod. This narrative, as Mary K. Holland observes, 'privileges absence, depicting it as ubiquitous, formative, and insurmountable' (2013: 186). Jonathan's story begins with an inexplicable event: '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' (Foer 2008: 8). Amidst the flotsam that floats to the surface of the river in the aftermath of this accident is the infant girl Brod. The specific date linked to the event implies historicity, but its mythic resonances—with, for example, the birth of Venus and the discovery of baby Moses—point to the mythic quality of any origin. Something original is, from a Derridean perspective, 'neither properly inside nor outside the historical process' (Taylor 1984: 155): as a 'first thing', it initiates a chain of causes yet lacks a prior cause of its own. Because origins irrupt into history from outside and so cannot be fully assimilated into history, they resemble the kind of unassimilable events that beget trauma. This is precisely the case for Brod's appearance, which has all the hallmarks of a traumatic event as described by trauma theory. It is not comprehended in its first instance, insofar as the villagers cannot explain what caused the accident and do not respond to the disturbing possibility that the wagon's unknown passengers are drowning near where they stand bickering. Once recognised as something not fully grasped as it happened, this scene becomes impossible to confront: everyone present, even the dead horse and a petrified insect, averts their eyes. The event is then repeatedly revisited, as traumas tend to be: for years afterwards, the shtetl-folk celebrate a 'Trachimday' festival that re-enacts the accident and their recovery efforts.

Jonathan's grandfather, Safran, echoes Derridean post-structuralism when he recognises, several generations after Brod, that 'the origin of a story is always an absence' (Foer 2008: 230). In *Of grammatology* (1976), Derrida proposes that the necessarily absent first cause typifies the ungroundedness of all systems of

knowledge, including language. This constitutes the point of continuity between Derridean post-structuralism and the Lyotardian postmodernism also evident in Foer's novel: the origin without origin reveals the absence of any overarching or fundamental truth. In *Everything is illuminated*, this amounts to a crisis because it apparently delegitimises all sources of meaning while universalising the traumatic discontinuity associated with the unknowable origin event. The traumatic event that begins Jonathan's story begets a family legacy of trauma that, like the flotsam in the water, resists reassembly into a coherent whole.

Brod embodies the unknowable origin and absence of any ultimate truth. Her leitmotif is a hole, the first instance of which is an 'egg-sized hole ... cut out of the synagogue's back wall' (Foer 2008: 20) through which the women of the shtetl view the newly rescued baby:

> From such a distance—palms pressed against the partition, an eye in an absent egg— they couldn't satisfy any of their mothering instincts. The hole wasn't even large enough to show all of the baby at once, they had to piece together mental collages of her from each of the fragmented views. (Foer 2008: 20)

This hole, figured as 'an absent egg', evokes both an origin and an absence. Brod's fragmentation in the women's eyes recalls the baffling 'life-debris' (Foer 2008: 8) that emerged with her from the river, emblematic of the fragments to which knowledge is apparently reduced when a metaphysical foundation is lacking. Brod thus represents that which cannot be fully grasped or 'assimilated into full cognition' (Felman & Laub 1992: 5): in this case, the original absence and the broader epistemological crisis it represents.

Accordingly, Brod's life is a testimony to a crisis of truth. The hole of her origin asserts itself as a silence surrounding her origins, a double negation: she 'remember[s] nothing and was told nothing' about her apparent coming from nothing (Foer 2008: 48). The legacy of this unknowable origin manifests itself in her sadness and detachment from the world to which she apparently has no causal connection. Brod's intuition of the absence of an ultimate ground of meaning leaves her feeling that '[t]here was no convincing reason to live' (Foer 2008: 81). This intuition is likened to a hole in 'the dike that held back what she knew to be true' (Foer 2008: 81), a hole needing plugging lest it unleash the terrible nothingness at the heart of who she is and the world she inhabits. Faced with the real things of the world, she is only able to perceive their emptiness, the absence of any solid 'reality' in which one might ground knowledge or love. Thus, Brod lives 'a once-removed life' (Foer 2008: 80). Unable to truly love anything, '[l]ove itself bec[omes] the object of her love' (Foer 2008: 80).

Brod's living at a once-remove from her world analogises a post-structuralist understanding of language as operating at a once-remove from things themselves; her 'loving love' (Foer 2008: 80) reflects the way language points only to language, creating meaning through difference and deferral rather than through an essential correlation to what is signified. This absence of a ground of meaning resembles an essential wound in the comprehensibility and cohesiveness of life. It dictates that knowledge exists only as fragments, and that no meaning or relationship is ever entirely secure. This traumatic hole is the opposite of any positive 'whole', and yet the whole is defined by the hole. When she makes love with her violent, brain-damaged husband 'the Kolker' through a hole in a wall, their palms and thighs 'pressed ... against the wall' just as the women's 'palms pressed against the partition' so many years before, this second peephole comes to symbolise for her 'the hole that ... is not

the exception in life, but the rule' (Foer 2008: 135, 20, 139). The hole represents not only the site of trauma—the persistence of all that cannot be made whole and integrated into a cohesive understanding—it is also the very site of human 'being'. Life itself is described as 'a small negative space cut out of the eternal solidity' (Foer 2008: 135): life is characterised by absence.

This experience of the hole does not belong solely to Jewish experience in Foer's novels but to the human condition in general. Tellingly, an entry in the Trachimbroders' *Book of Antecedents* entitled 'The Human Whole' describes a terrible pogrom in which the shtetl-folk were raped and murdered. In the aftermath, the town's two estranged Jewish congregations moved their portable synagogue from the Jewish Quarter to what was designated the 'Human Three-Quarters' of the shtetl, 'making it, for only one hour, the Human Whole' (Foer 2008: 207). The assonance of 'hole' and 'whole' is significant: the hole of trauma, it seems, is wholly human and, insofar as it encompasses what it is to be human, our whole human being.

The essentiality of the hole to human being is further implied in Brod's perception that her vagina, source of life and a most intimate part of herself, is 'also a hole, also a negative space' (Foer 2008: 135). Women are targets for sickening violence in *Everything is illuminated*: Brod is raped—ostensibly more than once in her lifetime—while, in another of the novel's narrative strands, Holocaust-survivor Lista recalls having a Nazi fire a gun into her vagina, killing her unborn baby. These are traumatic experiences: sudden, distressing events that evidently fracture characters' sense of history, self and reality. However, in the context of personal traumas like these, the acts of mass killing that feature in Foer's works are not simply traumatic discontinuities within the otherwise comprehensible fabric of 'normal' life. Rather, they attest to the traumatic discontinuity and incomprehensibility inherent to human experience. Furthermore, the rape of women in this novel operates as an analogy for the experience of trauma in general; specifically, the way traumatic events do not create the wound in one's being but, rather, brutally confront one with a hole that already exists. This can be demonstrated through close reading of Brod's rape.

The rape of Brod fits with the understanding of trauma propounded by standard literary trauma theory in that it eludes comprehension in its first instance. The crime initially appears in the narrative euphemistically and in passing, as someone having 'made a woman of' Brod after the Trachimday parade (Foer 2008: 96). The suppressed trauma re-asserts itself belatedly when a full account of the rape—by Trachimbrod's local pervert, Sofiowka, at knifepoint—appears over 100 pages later. The non-linearity of the narrative dramatises the way traumatic events evade consignment to history and irrupt into consciousness after the fact. Yet this event also demonstrates an unusual quality of trauma in Foer's novels: it is not simply sudden, elusive and discontinuous with reality but inevitable. Brod's rape is foretold when she sees her rape written in the history books of the future in a vision that takes place before the rape occurs. She recalls this premonition that someone will rape her at the Trachimday festival even as she insists on attending. This peculiarity may represent the apparent timelessness of trauma as described by Laub, which sees the survivor relive repeatedly and uncomprehendingly the event that their self-history cannot neatly contain:

> While the trauma uncannily returns in actual life, its reality continues to elude the subject who lives in its rip and unwittingly undergoes its ceaseless repetitions and reenactments. The traumatic event, although real, took place [for the victim] outside the parameters of 'normal' reality, such as causality, sequence, place and time. The trauma

is thus an event that has no beginning, no ending, no before, no during and no after. (Laub in Felman and Laub 1992: 68–69)

However, Sofiowka's rape of Brod is not just something that continues in her present and future but that *had already happened*, before its historical occurrence. It is not an event without end but rather an event without origin, an event that precedes itself and so can be interpreted as manifesting an original trauma or, rather, the structural trauma of the missing origin and foundation of truth. Brod's knowing attendance at the festival suggests that, traumatised even before her 'first rape' (Foer 2008: 89), she is already caught in the cycle of 'acting out' her trauma through the repeated re-exposure that is later evident in her marrying her would-be rapist the Kolker and then subjecting herself to his violence again and again. This pre-existent trauma is evident prior to the rape, in her detachment from the world and her inability to love anything, and can be traced right back to her inexplicable origin. Moreover, Foer's calling this specifically 'the first rape of Brod D' (2008: 89) perhaps suggests that subsequent traumas—insofar as trauma, in this novel, is that which penetrates the deeply-felt hole that is the absence of a fundamental truth—are also, figuratively, 'rapes'. Because it brutally confronts the already-orphaned Brod with her lack of parents, her implied second 'rape', occurring immediately after her first, is perhaps her adoptive father Yankel's death.

Although never explicit, the use of rape as a metaphor for a universal experience is implicit in this novel's equation of structural absence with a hole (which Brod *specifically* compares to a vagina) and its insistence on the traumatic quality of encounters with that hole. There are a number of issues here. The portrayal of female genitalia as a 'negative space' is problematic (Foer 2008: 135), perpetuating, as it does, the framing of women as lacking and 'Other', and therefore inferior, according to a binary in which maleness and the penis are normative. The association of fundamental absence with the vagina makes women the source of original trauma by reducing them to the 'nothing' from which we all emerge. Furthermore, the figuring of rape in this novel accentuates the problems that arise when the universal absences identified by postmodernism and post-structuralism are confused with trauma. Rape is *not* an inescapable, universal experience; rather, it is a culpable act that does exceptional harm to victims and that should not be dismissed as unexceptional. Feminist arguments against the use of rape as a metaphor point out that such language implicitly genders victimhood (insofar as the metaphor presumes the maleness of the perpetrator and 'feminises' the victim) and perpetuates rape culture, whereby the abuse of women is normalised and even subtly excused. 'When the word rape is used metaphorically', explains Tzeporah Berman, "[it] drain[s] the term and the act of its violent and abusive connotations for women. Women become the absent referent' (2001: 266). The implication that we are all somehow rape victims because of our shared experience of the hole and the inevitability of our being painfully confronted with it is evidently objectionable, but so, too, is Foer's conflating absence with loss to imply that everyone is a victim of a structural trauma, because this, too, trivialises and erases real victimhood, the specificity of real traumas, and human culpability for real crimes.

Extremely loud and incredibly close

The physical holes that drive the narrative of *Extremely loud and incredibly close* are keyholes, pictures of which appear throughout the novel. As these images remind us,

nine-year-old protagonist Oskar's quest to find the lock that fits a mysterious key is, specifically, an attempt to fill a hole. Oskar believes the key belonged to his father Thomas, so the keyhole symbolises the absence left by his father's death in the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York, and Oskar's quest symbolises his desire to 'unlock' his traumatic loss.

Oskar exhibits symptoms associated with post-traumatic stress disorder: for example, he often feels depressed and panicked and has difficulty sleeping (American Psychiatric Association 2013). His trauma results from his incomplete witnessing of his father's death. In an analepsis, we learn that, on the day of the terrorist attacks, Oskar arrived home from school to find five messages from his father, who was trapped in one of the World Trade Center buildings, recorded on the family answering machine. When the phone rang for the last time, Oskar felt unable to pick it up, so he missed his final opportunity to speak to his father before he died. Oskar subsequently describes this experience as 'a hole in the middle of me that every happy thing fell into' (Foer 2011: 71).

Oskar's late arrival and paralysis at the moment of his loss constitutes an inability to be present as it was taking place. The phone call came, he says, 'before I had time to figure out what to do, or even what to think or feel' (Foer 2011: 15). In accordance with Caruth's theory, Oskar's trauma is

> experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor. ... [T]rauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on. (1996: 4)

Although not strictly unavailable to consciousness, Oskar's memory is suppressed, as evidenced by his keeping the answering machine containing the recorded messages hidden 'in the closet under lots of junk' (Foer 2011: 69). Additionally, he practises forms of self-harm that attest to his compulsive revisiting of the pain of losing his father, such as bruising himself in response to strong emotions and seeking out images that make him uncomfortable for his scrapbook entitled '*Stuff That Happened to Me*' (Foer 2011: 42). As Caruth suggests, '[w]hat returns to haunt the victim is not only the reality of the violent event but also … the way that its violence has not yet been fully known' (1996: 6). Oskar replays the recorded messages repeatedly without ever recovering the missing experience (as, in the final recording, his father only repeats the words 'Are you there?' (Foer 2011: 301), evidently waiting for Oskar to answer the phone). Oskar cannot know what his father wanted to say to him or how, exactly, he died and this not-knowing torments him.

Like Brod's rape in *Everything is illuminated*, the content of the recorded messages is foreshadowed, deferred and evaded throughout the narrative of *Extremely loud and incredibly close* through conceits reminiscent of trauma's haunting absence. The idea that trauma troubles the continuity of history is also evident in other gaps, elusions and repetitions in the narrative that mirror the symptomology of trauma described by trauma theory. Images punctuate the narrative, including a repeated image of a man falling from one of the World Trade Center buildings that Oskar believes might be his father. These images enact the intrusive nature of visual memories for the traumatised person and the disruptive nature of traumatised non-knowledge that resists neat

assimilation into narrative (Uytterschout 2008). The answering machine messages themselves are full of pauses and gaps.

The hole motif continues in the narratives of Oskar's equally traumatised grandparents, both of whom lost loved ones in the World War II firebombing of Dresden. Oskar's grandfather, Thomas, lost his lover, Anna, and experiences her absence as a hole in his being. He foreshadows as much when he describes parting from her after their first meeting: 'she went home with her father, the centre of me followed her, but I was left with the shell of me' (Foer 2011: 113). His surname, 'Schell', attests to his emptiness following her death. Loss manifests itself in Thomas' speech, which is riven with gaps after Anna's death as he gradually develops aphasia and eventually becomes totally mute. Yet, despite his silence, he is burdened by an excess of language that signifies his inability to apprehend the enormity of what has happened to him. His attempt to write his traumatic experience of the bombing deteriorates into unreadable planes of overlapping type: a virtual black hole in the narrative in which the sheer density of knowledge and expression eliminates the possibility of either.

Thomas embodies the trauma theory orthodoxy that trauma remains, for the victim, unspeakable, resistant to being integrated into narrative because the overwhelming nature of the traumatic experience overextends any form of expression. Laub explains:

> There is, in each survivor, an imperative to tell and thus to come to know one's story ... Yet no amount of telling seems ever to do justice to this inner compulsion. There are never enough words or the right words … to articulate the story that cannot be fully captured in thought, memory and speech. (Felman and Laub 1992: 78)

Thomas, however, is driven not so much by a desire to know his own experience as to divest himself of it, as well as all words, memory, identity and relationships with others. He finishes his narrative, 'I'll rip these pages from this book, ... address the envelope to "My Unborn Child," and I'll never write another word again, I am gone, I am no longer here' (Foer 2011: 135). As Sien Uyttershout and Kristiaan Versluys explain, Thomas' simultaneous avoidance of and immersion in his traumatic past reveals both his 'inability to bear witness to what has happened' (2008: 222) and his 'inability to forget' (2008: 223).

Oskar's grandmother, Anna's sister, also admits to having 'a hole in the middle of [her]' (Foer 2011: 83). The sole surviving member of her family, she manifests trauma in her writing, which is punctuated by wide spaces between sentences. Grandma's first attempt at writing her life story produces only blank pages, which are recreated in the novel, white space creating a tangible lacuna in the book. Her husband assumes that her blank manuscript is accidental, but we later learn that Grandma has done this on purpose, writing her autobiography using only the space bar on her typewriter because she feels that her 'life story [is] spaces' (Foer 2011: 176)—in other words, without substance and defined by the things she has lost (her family) and never really had (her husband's love). Her life, it seems, cannot contain but, rather, is consumed by these holes.

The prevalence of traumatised characters from multiple countries and generations in *Extremely loud and incredibly close* 'universalizes grief' (Versluys 2009: 82) by evoking, as Matthew Mullins writes, a 'global community' with a 'common experience of trauma' (2009: 321). 'In the end', Oskar reflects, 'everyone loses everyone' (Foer 2011: 74). The effect is a shared, undifferentiated 'wound culture' of

the kind warned against by LaCapra, which implies 'that everyone is a victim, that all history is trauma, or that we all share a pathological public sphere' (2001: 64). Trauma seems to precede itself in these characters' lives, too. Oskar's father is a product of trauma. His parents' marriage comes about only because of their mutual pining for Anna, and his birth stems directly from his mother's loss: she explains, 'One morning I awoke and understood the hole in the middle of me. ... I needed a child' (Foer 2011: 177). His birth precipitates the departure of his father, which foreshadows the subsequent fatherlessness of his own son. This family legacy of trauma is again tied to an absence at the origin: in this case, in the form of absences in and of parents.

Living with trauma

In the Freudian terms adopted by the founding literary trauma theorists, those possessed by trauma are caught up in 'acting out': reliving the repressed traumatic past endlessly in the present. Many literary trauma theorists, led by LaCapra (1994; 2001), tend to emphasise the process of 'working through', whereby narrating the seemingly unspeakable trauma reinstates a sense of chronology and relegates it to the past, enabling one to reclaim one's experience and formulate a coherent self-history. A state of closure is not possible for Foer's characters, however, given that their trauma results from the very structures of language and knowledge themselves. Instead, they strike a balance by 'liv[ing] with the hole' (Foer 2008: 135). Unlike someone who acts out their trauma, the characters 'living with' trauma are not caught unknowingly in their past but rather know the inescapability of trauma, expect to re/encounter it, and attempt to respond appropriately to this rupture in human existence.

'Living with' trauma takes two forms. One is typified by Brod and the Kolker, who uphold for each other

> the great and saving lie—that our love for things is greater than our love for our love of things—[and] wilfully [play] the parts they wrote for themselves, wilfully creat[e] and believ[e] fictions necessary for life. (Foer 2008: 83)

In this sense, living with trauma means perpetuating the self-deceptions that prevent confrontation with the hole at the heart of being. The greatest saving fiction is a kind of deliberate naïve positivism: an insistence on the real, on a meaningful and coherent world that is not a mere construct, to counter trauma when, in fact, reality is empty of meaning and the hole reduces all that 'exists around it' to a 'void', too (Foer 2008: 139).

The character Alex in *Everything is illuminated* insists upon a second mode of 'living with' trauma. As the novel's second narrator, Alex tells the story of Jonathan's failed attempts to locate Trachimbrod two generations after the Holocaust and, with it, the woman who saved his grandfather Safran from the Nazis. He also records, in letters to Jonathan, his grappling with the writing and ethics of their respective tales. Like Brod and the Kolker, the Gentile Ukrainian characters of Alex's world bear what is painful to confront by inventing an alternative reality. For example, Alex frequently embellishes his narrative to conceal his own inadequacies. When Alex and Jonathan try to locate Trachimbrod, the locals they encounter insist that they have never heard of it, demonstrating a determination to forget the atrocities perpetrated against the Jews in which some Ukrainians were complicit. Alex's grandfather exemplifies the

same denial, having spent his entire life suppressing his betrayal (albeit at gunpoint) of his Jewish best friend to the Nazis. Alex, however, gradually comes to feel that such saving fictions are unacceptable.

Alex understands that, because 'Brod is not truthful with anything,' she is unable to feel real love (Foer 2008: 103). Living at a once-remove from the world shields her from 'the immovability of truth' (Foer 2008: 103), which, in Alex's eyes, is cowardly. The first time Brod feels anything akin to love is when the Kolker tells her that Yankel was not her father. It seems that she is able to say '*I love you*' in response to this revelation not because his honesty fills the hole inside her—after all, the Kolker does not tell her who her real father was, and so provides her with no truth to replace the fiction he denies her (Foer 2008: 139). Rather, it is precisely because this revelation *confronts* her with the hole that is both the mystery of her origin and the rule of life that it *connects* her to life, empty as it is of any foundation of meaning, in a genuine way for the first time.

Ultimately, Alex rejects Jonathan's Trachimbrod story because it is not 'faithful' (Foer 2008: 240). Alex accuses Jonathan, like Brod, of 'liv[ing] in a world that is "once removed"' (Foer 2008: 240) and of shying from the truth, albeit in a different way: by resigning himself and his characters to futility. Alex abandons his own avoidance strategies and insists on a paradoxical response to the traumatic hole of existence, which entails acting with genuine commitment to a reality that reveals no underlying truth. He says, '[w]e all choose things, and we also all choose against things. I want to be the kind of person who chooses <u>for</u> more than chooses <u>against</u>' (Foer 2008: 241). Faithfulness means responding to, rather than avoiding, the hole. Adhering to this ethic, he ejects his abusive father from the family home, fracturing his family to protect it. Alex endorses a response to the traumatic aspects of life that is authentic and courageous, no matter how self-defeating.

Alex's grandfather exemplifies this mode of 'living with' trauma when, having lost his wife and confronted his guilt about failing his friend, he suicides. In his suicide note, Grandfather insists that he ends his own life 'not out of weakness [and] not because I cannot endure' (Foer 2008: 276). Rather, as Alex would say, it is 'the only ... truthful thing to perform' (Foer 2008: 240). Grandfather insists that he wants a life without violence for his grandsons, but takes his own life violently to end the abusive legacy of his betrayal and to give them a fresh start. This paradoxical action is an act of love and faithfulness in Alex's sense. Notably, the final words of his note are 'I will' (Foer 2008: 276), recalling Alex's own desire to 'choose ... that I will' instead of 'I will not' (Foer 2008: 241); this attests to Grandfather's resolve to confront and respond to the pain of being rather than deny it.

Oskar's grandmother in *Extremely loud and incredibly close* is another character who lives around trauma. In the final pages of her narrative, she makes a commitment to remain with her husband, whom she '[doesn't] know if [she] ever loved' (Foer 2011: 309), as he waits in indefinite, self-imposed limbo at the airport after attempting to leave her for a second time. After initially allowing him to disguise his departure as an errand, as he did the first time, she decides to confront, rather than deny, her imminent loss, choosing 'I will' by giving up everything to pursue him. In choosing her husband, she abandons her beloved grandson. Such is the paradoxical nature of love in the context of inevitable trauma: 'choosing to' or 'choosing for' cannot prevent loss; it only offers an honest alternative to denial, plunging one into the hole of being with a noble deliberateness.

'The most difficult aspect of traumatic situations for victims, no matter what the context', Laurie Vickroy explains, 'is feeling that one is powerless to affect his or her situation' (2002: 25). Thus, the self-destructive behaviours associated with acting out are often preferred, because they offer trauma survivors 'a provisional if ineffective sense of control' (Vickroy 2002: 25). The response to trauma propounded by some of Foer's characters seems to offer an equally provisional and ineffective sense of agency: the ability to select, but not avoid, one's losses.

Conclusion: Foer's problematic representations of trauma

Foer's characters acknowledge that there is no easy solution to trauma: loss is, ultimately, inevitable, and some holes are unfillable because some losses cannot be undone. At the same time, the implication that loss is always-already 'done' produces problems. 'Living with' trauma allows for action, choice, life, but never denial of the fact that these things are constructs of will, beneath which persists the inescapable absence of fundamental truth. Foer's application of post-structuralist and postmodern ideas is needlessly pessimistic. Rather than providing grounds for nihilism, the realisation that meaning is constructed and that there is nothing outside the structure of 'writing' can be liberating. It renders language non-totalising, making it powerless to enforce any absolute worldview. Additionally, this insistence on absence is particularly problematic in the context of trauma, because adequate witnessing of others' trauma and the possibility of working through trauma may be dependent on the acceptance of the real occurrence of events in a narratable history. While acknowledging that 'the inaccessibility of trauma evokes "the always absent signified" of deconstruction and post-structuralist discourse', Marita Nadal and Mônica Calvo identify a crucial difference between the two: 'in contrast to the relativism of the latter, trauma emphasizes its links with history' (2014: 5).

LaCapra articulates the dangers of conflating trans-historical, structural absences, 'including the absence of ultimate metaphysical foundations', with the kinds of historical losses that beget trauma (2001: 46). Treating historical losses as incidences of a universal condition of absence fails to do justice to the singularity and impact of actual instances of loss and precludes the possibility of working through them. Similarly, treating inevitable absence as a traumatic loss results in 'the impasse of endless melancholy, impossible mourning, and interminable aporia' (LaCapra 2001: 46). Foer's novels do perpetuate the impression that 'everyone (including perpetrators or collaborators) is a victim, that all history is trauma, [and] that we all share a pathological "wound culture"' (LaCapra 2001: 64). Of course, Foer's links between postmodernism and trauma are not unique or original. As Wulf Kansteiner (2004) elucidates, the Holocaust was important to early conceptualisations of the postmodern, operating as an emblem for the failure of grand synthesising narratives. This association of the Holocaust with the fragmentation of paradigms of ultimate meaning underlies Caruth's influential figuration of trauma as a source of discontinuity within the self. Importantly, however, Foer's novels demonstrate the practical and moral problems that result from overextending the idea of trauma to the point of fatalism—a tendency that is, in fact, apparent within the seminal works of popular literary trauma theory themselves (Kansteiner 2004; LaCapra 2001). Insofar as it potentially promotes disempowerment and self-destruction among trauma survivors and homogenises all instances of absence and loss, such generalisation of

trauma may prevent the kind of adequate acknowledgement of and moral response to real traumas, through narrative, that this same trauma theory celebrates.

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