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### **Constructive distance: Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything is illuminated* as a model for third-generation Holocaust fiction**

#### Abstract:

Debate surrounding representations of the Holocaust inevitably revolves around a single key question: whose past is it to tell? If second-generation authors lack the authority to represent a trauma that they experienced only vicariously, as some critics claim, it follows that the fiction of the third-generation is doubly suspect for being twice removed from the Holocaust. As an author whose Jewish grandfather survived the Holocaust, I would suggest that the ethics of representing the atrocity poses particular challenges and opportunities for the third-generation writer. Does a familial link to the Holocaust lend our work an ethical validity missing from other contemporary Holocaust fiction? Or is our connection to the trauma so remote that it no longer impacts the reading or the writing of our work? In this case, perhaps, is familial connection no longer a prerequisite for writing 'worthy' or 'authoritative' Holocaust fiction?

In this paper, I adapt Marianne Hirsch's notion of second-generation postmemory to consider a particular third-generation text, Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is illuminated*. I suggest that Foer's metafiction is ethically valid not despite but because of its author's generational distance from the Holocaust. Foer uses distancing techniques in the language of the text to highlight his twice-mediated knowledge of the atrocity. By drawing attention to his remoteness from the Holocaust, Foer enables readers to compare their own dormant knowledge of the atrocity against the version being presented in the text. In this way, he leads readers away from a passive or complacent reading of history towards a more active one. Foer's model suggests that an author's very distance from the Holocaust, whether they are personally connected to the event or not, is in fact a necessary and productive ingredient of contemporary Holocaust fiction.

#### Biographical Note:

Antonia Strakosch is completing an MPhil in Creative Writing at the University of Queensland, where she is writing a magic-realist novel about the Holocaust with the assistance of an Australian Postgraduate Award. She has published short stories, poetry, and food criticism, and was the recipient of a Varuna Fellowship for Writing Retreat in 2011.

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In the introduction to *Teaching the representation of the Holocaust*, second-generation Holocaust scholar Irene Kacandes describes, with poignant irony, her experience of being inspected by other scholars in the field at Holocaust conferences—having them scrutinise her name tag, her jewellery, and even her face—in order to determine whether or not she is Jewish (2004: 11). When Kacandes subsequently reveals that she is not Jewish (her father was deported to a Nazi camp because he was circumcised and mistaken for a Jew), she does so almost in passing. Her point, rather, is to ask whether an author's 'pedigree' should determine acceptance into the closed ranks of survivors and their descendants, a question which affects not only how one's scholarship and fiction are received, but whether or not one is granted license to write about the sacred subject of the Holocaust.

Kacandes's anecdote exemplifies contemporary debates over the ethics of representing the Holocaust. As the generation of survivors passes, accessing the event demands new levels of mediation and imagination, and so fiction, in particular, has come to be considered a 'serious vehicle for thinking about the Holocaust' (Hungerford 2004: 181). But far from the liberties that govern usual creative practice, authors of Holocaust fiction are held to, and limited by, a particular set of ethical standards. Berel Lang (2003) offers a convincing argument for why this might be the case. Lang contends that the Nazi genocide was more morally complex than other large-scale horrific events of history, and so Holocaust fiction demands to be judged on its ethical rigour as well as on the traditional literary markers of form and style (2003: 161). In this fraught realm, the question of who owns the Holocaust and can legitimately speak about it must be considered along with the ways in which they speak.

These questions of legitimacy and authenticity become more pronounced as generational distance from the Holocaust increases. As an author whose Jewish grandfather survived the Holocaust, I would suggest that the ethics of representing the atrocity poses particular challenges and opportunities for the third-generation writer. In this paper, I adapt Marianne Hirsch's notion of second-generation postmemory or inherited trauma to consider a particular third-generation text, Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything is illuminated* (2003). If second-generation authors lack the authority to represent a trauma that they experienced only vicariously, as critics such as Alain Finkielkraut claim (1998), it follows that third-generation fiction is doubly suspect for being twice removed from the Holocaust. I will suggest, rather, that the use of two distancing techniques in Foer's metafictional *Everything is illuminated* renders the work ethically valid not despite but because of its author's generational distance.

Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi argues that according to conservative Holocaust critics, 'degrees of access' govern an author's 'relative claims to authenticity and artistic license' (2004: 53). This view posits that imaginative responses become less valid as an author's distance from the Holocaust increases. In my own writing, it is precisely this tension—a powerful desire to explore my connection to my grandfather's past, combined with feelings of fear and guilt at doing so—that I am interested to examine. My questions are: Does a familial link to the Holocaust lend my work an ethical validity missing from other contemporary Holocaust fiction? If so, why do so few third-generation authors declare this familial relationship? Is our connection to the

trauma so remote that it no longer impacts the reading or the writing of our fictions? Is it this tenuous relationship to the subject that I find so troubling in my own writing? In this case, perhaps, is familial connection no longer a prerequisite for writing ‘worthy’ or ‘authoritative’ Holocaust fiction?

Marianne Hirsch has contributed significantly to the field of Holocaust memory studies, with her research on how inherited traumatic memory (what she terms ‘postmemory’) of the Holocaust manifests in the aesthetics of the second generation. According to Hirsch, postmemory is ‘distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection’, and is a powerful tool in shaping second-generation identity (1992: 8-9). Hirsch’s concept of postmemory as inherited trauma is supported by psychoanalytic research, which reveals that the children of survivors inherit genuine physical and emotional traumatic symptoms from their parents; Karin Goertz notes that ‘as far as pathogenic effects are concerned, a definite continuum exists between real and imagined trauma’ (1998: 34). In relation to Hirsch’s notion of postmemory, the ‘continuum... between real and imagined trauma’ is significant as it articulates the relationship between inherited traumatic memories and the imagination. Hirsch argues that while a common or non-traumatic memory may lose its potency as it is passed down, postmemory is powerful not despite but *because of* its distance from events, as it is mediated through the imagination.

Obviously, in third-generation fiction, the author’s distance from events of the Holocaust must pass through a further generational remove. Many second-generation authors describe a sense of absence or void—a lack of knowledge about the past that seeks some resolution or understanding in the present—as a key reason why they are compelled to explore the Holocaust (Hirsch 1996; Raczymow 1994). Third-generation authors arguably suffer this absence even more. In an interview for *The Times* in 2002, Foer articulated the extent of the absence he experienced when he travelled to the Ukraine to research his family history for *Everything is illuminated*:

There wasn’t a grandfather, there wasn’t a dog, there wasn’t a woman I found who resembled the woman in the book—but I did go, and I just found—nothing. It’s not like anything else I’ve ever experienced in my life. In a certain sense the book wasn’t an act of creation so much as it was an act of replacement. I encountered a hole—and it was like the hole that I found was in myself, and one that I wanted to try to fill up. (Wagner 2002)

My grandfather died when I was ten—years before I understood the term ‘Holocaust’ or the magnitude of all he had suffered. Everything I know of his life I learned from a single cassette-tape interview conducted by my uncle in 1980, or from the stories he told my ten year-old father one evening after dad had broken his arm and could not sleep (dad subsequently told these stories to me). In my experience, then, and similar to the ‘hole’ Foer (2003) encountered when he travelled to the Ukraine, third-generation (post) postmemory is filled with a twice-mediated distance from the Holocaust so significant that critics may argue our connection to the atrocity does not exist at all. However, a small yet important group of third-generation authors,

including Jonathan Safran Foer and Nicole Krauss, is exploring their simultaneous distance from and connection to the Holocaust in their fiction.

Jonathan Safran Foer was born in Washington D.C. in 1977, the son of successful Jewish parents. During his undergraduate degree in philosophy at Princeton University, he took an introductory subject in creative writing with Joyce Carol Oates. The course was a turning point in Foer's life; after studying briefly for a degree in graduate medicine, Foer dropped out to pursue a career as a writer. His first novel, *Everything is illuminated*, inspired to a degree by his maternal grandfather's experiences of the Holocaust, was published by Houghton Mifflin in 2002. Unusually for second- or third-generation Holocaust fiction, the novel met with rave reviews, earning Foer a National Jewish Book Award and a Guardian First Book Award. Given the novel's imaginative treatment of the Holocaust—a subject where 'etiquette' favours historical realism over the subversive potential of imaginative fiction—the lack of controversy surrounding its publication was especially noteworthy (Flanzbaum cited in Kern-Stähler and Stähler 2009: 164).

Foer's use of distancing devices in the text to highlight his twice-mediated access to the Holocaust underlie a complex metafictional narrative structure. Told from the dual perspectives of the serious Jewish-American student Jonathan Safran Foer (the narrator uses the author's own name) and his comical translator Alexander Perchov, the novel explores Jonathan's journey to the Ukraine to find Augustine—the woman who saved his grandfather from the Nazis. The narratives converge when it is revealed that Alex's grandfather (who served as Alex and Jonathan's driver in the Ukraine) was both a victim and a perpetrator of the Nazi massacre in the town of Kolki. As the novel progresses, Alex begins to question the morality of 'improving' the facts of the Holocaust to better fit Jonathan's story:

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 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? ( Foer 2003: 179)

In this way, *Everything is illuminated* attempts to deal with the ethics of its own production. Alex's question encompasses not only the ethics of writing imaginative Holocaust fiction, but, specifically, Foer's ability to access the subject from the historical distance of the third-generation. In this paper, I will explore the use of two distancing techniques in *Everything is illuminated*: first, the role of the translator as a mediating device in an already hyper-mediated metafiction, and second, Alex's comical and inept use of the English language, which serves to distance the reader from the 'facts' of the story.

The role of the translator in literature has been investigated with growing interest in recent years (Kern-Stähler and Stähler 2009: 160). In the field of Holocaust testimony, however, direct access to the survivor and their memories (in so far as is possible) is considered important. Including a translator in the act of testimony, then, adds a level of mediation that could be seen to detract from the directness of the survivor's testimony. In the context of mental health, Hanneke Bot describes this complex interaction between witness, translator and listener as the development of a

‘three-person psychology’ (cited in Kern-Stähler and Stähler 2009: 161). Positioned between witness and listener, the translator both affects and is affected by the moment of testimony.

In *Everything is illuminated* (2003), the role of the translator symbolises both the difficulties of transmitting the unimaginable trauma of the Holocaust, and the impossibility of receiving that trauma as reader or listener. By including a translator as one of his two central narrators, ‘Foer emphasises the narrative and mediated character of Holocaust testimony’ (Kern-Stähler and Stähler 2009: 173). However, as a member of the third-generation, Foer (2003) is already twice-distanced from the events he seeks to represent. The character of the translator Alex thus adds a third level of mediation to the text. As he travels through the Ukraine in search of Augustine, Jonathan must rely on Alex to ‘illuminate’ information about the present and the past. When Alex tells Jonathan in a letter, ‘You were perhaps accounting upon a translator with more faculties, but I am certain that I did a mediocre job’, moreover, he raises doubts about whether or not his translations were reliable (Foer 2003: 23). The question, then, is why Foer would seek to draw attention to his distance from the Holocaust by choosing an *unreliable* translator—a figure already responsible for providing a further layer of mediation in the text. Alex later admits to his unreliable translations in his narrative prose:

‘Fuck,’ 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.’ ‘Fucking fuck, fuck!’ Grandfather shouted. ‘Oh,’ I said, ‘he wants you to know that that building, that building, and that building are all important.’ ‘Why?’ the hero inquired. ‘Fuck!’ Grandfather said. ‘He cannot remember,’ I said. (Foer 2003: 58)

Here, Alex chooses to spare Jonathan from the emotion his grandfather is suffering as a result of returning to his traumatic past. Curse words become commentary on the landscape and its significance, allowing humour to bubble up in the spaces between the grandfather’s expletives and what Alex chooses to convey. This discrepancy between what is uttered and what is conveyed is an effective distancing device, as it creates distance between the witness’s testimony and its translation. In this way, Foer (2003) encourages the reader to question the textual reality, even as he attempts to explore the subject of the Holocaust with some authenticity or truth. Foer uses this technique, I would suggest, to draw attention to his generational distance from the Holocaust. This distance serves to remind readers of the mediated and subjective nature of third-generation fiction. By asking readers to remain vigilant about questioning the version of events being presented in the text, Foer prompts them ‘to take another look—a deeper look, a more thoughtful look—at the event’ (Flanzbaum 2009: 165). The device of the translator, then, serves as an example of how an author can utilise generational distance in an ethical and instructive way.

On a linguistic level, Alex’s role as translator serves to highlight both the unreliability and capacity of language ‘to convey the horror of traumatic experience and the ethical conundrums inherent in confronting it’ (Kern-Stähler and Stähler 2009: 165). Indeed, Alex’s inept and comical use of the English language functions as the second key

distancing device in the text. The following is an excerpt from the start of the novel, ‘AN OVERTURE TO THE COMMENCEMENT OF A VERY RIGID JOURNEY’:

My legal name is Alexander Perchov. But all of my many friends dub me Alex, because that is a more flaccid-to-utter version of my legal name. Mother dubs me Alexi-stop-spleening-me!, because I am always spleening her. If you want to know why I am always spleening her, it is because I am always elsewhere with friends, and disseminating so much currency, and performing so many things that can spleen a mother. (Foer 2003: 1)

Alex misuses adjectives and verbs to comic affect, when, for example, he substitutes ‘rigid’ for ‘hard’ and ‘dub’ for ‘call’, but far from a simple strategy for laughs, Alex’s misuse of language distances the reader from the text, so that while they still become swept up in the story, they maintain a critical distance. In this space between creative and critical engagement, the reader is led to question not only the narrator’s use of language, but also, and more importantly, to compare their own dormant knowledge of the Holocaust against the version being presented in the text. Because if the reader cannot trust Alex to accurately convey current events in the world of the story, it follows that they cannot trust him to convey accurately the distant events of the Holocaust. The narrator’s (mis)use of language thus allows Foer to explore wider themes of truth and perception. Jonathan pursues the truth of what happened to his grandfather in the Holocaust, only to discover that from his position of generational distance there is no objective truth, that his knowledge of the Holocaust is subjective because it is mediated by (post) postmemory. By choosing a narrator who struggles with the English language, Foer leads readers away from a passive or complacent reading of history towards a more active one, where they can vigorously engage in the act of remembering the Holocaust.

Novelist Yann Martel (cited in Robinson, 6 April, 2007), whose controversial Holocaust novel *Beatrice and Virgil* was published in 2010, has spoken out in favour of inventive Holocaust narratives for the very reason that they encourage readers to engage more actively in the text. According to Martel, society still has trouble accepting metaphorical or imaginative representations of the Holocaust, which can lead to stories about it becoming sacrosanct. Martel contends that the tendency to re-enact narratives of ‘barking Germans [and] cowering Jews’ limits the Holocaust’s capacity to teach. While these faded and familiar images still elicit an emotional response, their reduction to ‘ancient history’ means they cannot persuade readers to re-evaluate critically their significance for contemporary society. Martel argues that creative Holocaust narratives—including, I would suggest, those that interrogate notions of generational distance—help society re-encounter an otherwise distant historical event, allowing readers to engage with the horrors in a more active and meaningful way.

Foer’s (2003) use of distancing techniques in *Everything is illuminated* not only draws attention to his generational remoteness from the Holocaust, but also encourages readers to confront the atrocity so that its lessons for humanity remain relevant today. Viewed in this light, the text can be considered ethically valid not despite but because of its author’s generational distance from the Holocaust. Foer’s

model suggests that an author's very distance from the Holocaust is in fact a necessary and productive ingredient of contemporary Holocaust fiction. *Everything is illuminated* has broader implications for how contemporary society accesses past atrocities, suggesting that the mediated spaces of (post) postmemory and imagination are fertile and legitimate sources for engaging with acts of atrocity.

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