Representing Trauma in Post-9/11 Fiction: Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Everything is Illuminated* and *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*
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Chapter 1: Introduction

On September 12, people who don’t speak to their parents forgot why.
Today is not a dress rehearsal.
On September 12, fewer men spent the night on the couch.
Today is not a dress rehearsal.
On September 12, families returned to the dining room table.
Today is not a dress rehearsal.¹

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 caused such shock and devastation that they have already been called the defining tragedy of our time.² Despite the great number of lives lost, the most horrifying aspect of the attacks was that they had taken place on American soil. In the heart of Manhattan, in the center of the financial world, the Twin Towers had represented the dominance of capitalism, and the strength of the technological, urban and globalized world. This was the place where the future was invented, and the place where the future was already lived. As Zizek notes in his 2002 essay Welcome to the Desert of the Real, the terrorist attacks were immediately seen as dispelling the illusory haze of security in which many Americans had been living. Sturken argues that the U.S. lost its innocence at the moment of the collapse. Moreover, Kaplan points out that the term “Ground Zero,” which originally referred to complete nuclear destruction, suggests a new starting point, a “tabula rasa.” These observations add to the notion that the world was radically altered by the events of September 11: as if the fall of the Twin Towers caused the U.S. to abruptly plummet into the “real.”³

It is interesting to note that, shortly after the attacks, designer Kenneth Cole launched a series of advertisements with the slogan “Today is not a dress rehearsal.” According to the New York Times, the images of the series express an idea of “domestic contentment.”⁴ People return from the superficial and illusionary comfort of consumerism to the things that bring

real comfort in life: home, love, and family. The idea that a post-September 11 world can no
longer be called a rehearsal, and that we can no longer hide behind costumes, clothes, and
make-up, resonates with the dominant feeling of the days and weeks following the attacks:
that everything had changed, that the world had indeed become more “real.”

Nevertheless, while it is most certainly true that the U.S. suddenly had to face the facts
on their actual state of national security, it is both remarkable and paradoxical that a name-
brand designer filled in the gap—in most literal terms, the gap that the Twin Towers left—by
promoting “reality” clothes and accessories. Are “real” clothes any different from normal
clothes? In the words of Baudrillard, the U.S. can never get back to the real, if such a thing
still exists, for “reality is a principle, and it is this principle that is lost.” In fact, the notions of
reality and truth have decades ago been uprooted and deconstructed by postmodernism and
commodified by mass-consumerism. In the contemporary U.S., commodification takes place
at rapid pace: “objects become fetishes, events myths, persons celebrities: and all three,
products.”

A similar observation can be made regarding the speed and size of the attempt to fill
in the void, to turn the “nothing” the collapse of the Twin Towers had left into a “something.”
Stamelman notices how quickly the gap and the landscape surrounding it was transformed
into a site of memory. Unlike Nora’s argument that it usually requires the passage of decades,
generations or sometimes even centuries for a “milieu de mémoire” to be changed into a “lieu
de mémoire,” an apparent desire to immediately fill the void with images, photographs,
words, testimonies, and mementos seemed to prevail. Yet, for the many who were personally
affected, as well as for many others, the almost compulsive repetition of images and
information by the media made no sense. As Dori Laub recalls, “I felt impelled to [...] be
released from the hypnotic fashion of the endlessly repeated television images, and the
continuous repetition of already well-known bits of information, fragments that did not
cohere.”

In this respect, it is useful to keep in mind Derrida’s statements on the constructedness
of the “feeling” the event created among its direct and indirect witnesses. In an interview
shortly after September 11, Derrida asserts that “this ‘feeling’ is actually less spontaneous
than it appears: it is to a large extent conditioned, constituted, if not actually constructed,

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7 Ibid., 14-15.
Greenberg (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), 210.
circulated at any rate through the media by means of a prodigious techno-socio-political machine."9 Through the media, the event became the attack and the dead became the heroes. Soon after, the same discourse would be used by American politicians to justify the invasion of Afghanistan. Consequently, this nearly immediate political follow-up was often considered as a betrayal, a hijacking of the event for political purposes.10

While the spontaneity of the urge to fill in the gap can be questioned, the fact remains that up to this day more than 1,500 book-length items have been written about September 11. Nonetheless, as author Star Black puts it, “those who talked could not say much.”11 The Twin Towers did not only represent the dominance of capitalist culture, they were also part of many people’s lives as spatial structures. In this sense, they were a part of many New Yorkers themselves. Either way, the collapse of the towers was an event so traumatic that it “defies […] any form of interpretation.”12 It is argued that it can neither be understood, nor represented. The events seem “beyond words,” beyond the limits of linguistic representation. Versluys describes the events of September 11 as “so traumatic that [they] shatter the symbolic resources of the individual and escape the normal processes of meaning-making and cognition.” He furthermore points out that there is a consensus to describe September 11 as a limit event, “which sharply demarcates a before and an after and which eludes both representation and interpretation.”13

This characterization of September 11 as a limit event brings to mind the atrocities of the Holocaust and the notion that it can never be historicized. The scale and intensity of the trauma determined its status “outside of history” as well as beyond the realm of words and language. Of course, the Holocaust and September 11 cannot be equated nor compared. It has to be realized though, that the inability to represent the horrors of the Holocaust contributed a great deal to postmodern ideas on the problematic nature of language, and its impossibility to represent reality, ideas that are now well ingrained in Western societies’ consciousness. For Laub, the apparent ease and speed with which the gap of the Twin Towers was filled does not mean that things have changed: “There is this similarity: the absence of narrative. No one can really tell the story of the Twin Towers disaster, and no one is really ready to hear it.”14

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12 Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism*, 13
13 Versluys, “Art Spiegelman’s *In the Shadow,*” 980, 986.
Nonetheless, an important consequence of September 11 was the re-opening of old wounds. The events awakened personal loss and, in particular, previous suffering. Scurfield points out that number four in the list of “expectable reactions” to September 11 is the “resurgence of memories,” as new pain triggers the pain from past trauma. Because of this, September 11 had a significant and painful extra dimension for a specific group in New York and the U.S. as a whole: the Jewish-Americans. September 11 reminded many Holocaust survivors of their traumatic past. In fact, many of the survivors living in New York City began to re-experience their terrors and nightmares, and many had to be hospitalized. Furthermore, for second and even third generation Holocaust survivors and the Jewish-American community in general, September 11 brought to the forefront the gaps and holes in family histories, and the fate that so many fellow Jews had suffered. In short, the events of September 11 influenced many lives on a personal level. Despite its public character, and the “political hijacking,” the trauma of September 11 was to a large extent a personal trauma that affected New Yorkers, (post-) generation Holocaust survivors, and Jewish-Americans in general in a particular and difficult way. For them, the events of September 11 unequivocally started a new period of time.

Thus, the post-September 11 world feels different, more “real.” At the same time, the contemporary “postmodern condition” of society has resolutely destabilized notions of reality and truth. It is particularly Derridean poststructuralism that has pointed out the consequences of the system of language for previously stable notions that claimed their validity on a reality outside the linguistic system. This, plus the many troubles surrounding the representation of the Holocaust, has resulted in a general awareness on the inadequacy of language to represent reality. These considerations, in addition to the more natural feeling that words cannot describe such a traumatic event, caused significant confusion across the literary field on issues of trauma, representation, witnessing, and integrity. The latter notion particularly relates to the contemporary culture of commodification, of which Kenneth Cole’s advertisement series is only a fragment, and statements derived from or similar to Adorno’s criticism on the representation of the Holocaust. Ever since he argued that “writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” and that “commodification equals forgetting,” fiction writers, particularly those concerned with trauma, have had to confront multiple pitfalls on the road to literary success. Moreover, the “constructedness” of the general as well as individual responses to September

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11, as pointed out by Derrida, problematize the notion of an authentic reaction to trauma, and consequently its representation through literature.

It is in this complex post-September 11 world that a young Jewish-American New Yorker, and third-generation Holocaust survivor, made his literary debut. Jonathan Safran Foer published *Everything is Illuminated* at the age of twenty-five in 2002. Funny, inventive, and insightful, the story of Jonathan’s attempt to recover his family’s past in the Ukraine ranked high on annual bestseller lists. Foer’s second novel, *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (2005), would consolidate his new status as a hip and unconventional young writer. More importantly, however, is that the novel was one of the first to deal directly with the trauma of September 11, and would become the most popular and widely read on this subject.

In this dissertation I will analyze Foer’s novels in relation to trauma and its representation. In doing so, I will provide insight into the position and function of trauma literature, and in particular its value as a positive and redemptive force for traumatic healing, as seen by one of the main representatives of a new generation of writers. It is thus by means of an analysis of trauma and its representation that this dissertation attempts to contribute to the evaluation of the contemporary, post-September 11 timeframe. Even though such an analysis is limited in scope, the particular focus on trauma and representation can significantly enhance our understanding of the post-September 11 period since it is concerned with a number of issues that contribute considerably to a broader cultural analysis. It is of great importance, for example, whether trauma is considered to be “beyond words” and thereby “unrepresentable,” or part of the symbolic. This has serious implications for the function and value of language, and thus literature, and illustrates how U.S. culture responds to trauma. In this respect, it is important to keep in mind the debate on the current “period” or “status” of the contemporary world. On the one hand, September 11 can be considered the “apotheosis of the postmodern era—the era of images and perception.” Yet, since the 1990s many voices have been heard that proclaimed the end of postmodernism, and the beginning of a period of post-postmodernism, or “New Sincerity.” This would indicate that the “abyssal crisis of meaning” is not as abysmal as previously thought. In this respect, the meaning of September 11 is yet to be discovered, and the timeframe—a post-September 11 world—all the more interesting since its characteristics are yet to be grasped.

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19 I refer to the young literary movement of “New Sincerity,” coined by Dave Eggers and others associated with McSweeney’s magazine and publishing house, that criticizes postmodern irony, cynicism, and detachment, and advocates community and engagement. See [www.mcsweeneys.net](http://www.mcsweeneys.net).
Throughout the dissertation, I will argue that the novels demonstrate a need to reconstruct trauma in the symbolic sphere, while at the same time showing themselves aware of the problems surrounding this reconstruction—problems bound up with the nature of trauma and language. Nonetheless, there is a large emphasis on the process of writing and reading and its practice is most certainly valued in relation to trauma. As a result, the novels challenge the notion of trauma as represented by former students of Yale deconstructionist De Man, and instead offer a combination of poststructural awareness regarding the limitations of language and representation with a Freudian psychoanalytic belief in the method of the “talking cure.” To offer insight into the theoretical framework, the second chapter will present an overview of the most relevant fields of study, namely psychoanalysis and contemporary trauma theory.\(^{20}\) The consecutive chapters present an analysis of each of the novels. However, it needs to be mentioned that there is a slight difference in focus. The analysis of *Everything is Illuminated* is predominantly concerned with the specific interpretation of trauma that is articulated through the novel, and, in doing this, attempts to illustrate the validity and effectiveness of Freudian vocabulary in response to trauma. The chapter on *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, subsequently, is less cautious in its use of psychoanalytical terms such as mourning, working through, and healing, in relation to trauma. In fact, it endeavors to establish how Foer handles the representation of such a close (in time and space), and loud (in scope, impact, and consequences) trauma. In both chapters, however, the form and structure of the novel is examined as thoroughly as its content, in a formalist belief that a novel’s complete “content” is equally determined by its form. After the novels’ analyses, the main results are put into a broader perspective, particularly in relation to the position and value of trauma literature, in an attempt to contribute, albeit partially, to the characterization of the post-September 11 world.

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\(^{20}\) I use the term “contemporary trauma theory” to designate the field of trauma theory that emerged in the 1980s and was largely represented by former students of Paul de Man at Yale University. A significant influence for their theories was the Holocaust, and its problematic representation. See Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimonies: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992) & Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996)
Chapter 2: Theorizing Trauma and Representation

This chapter will provide the theoretical foundation upon which the analyses of Foer’s novels will be based. Starting with the field of psychoanalysis, Freud’s initial characterization of trauma and its main symptoms will be discussed, followed by a brief, yet indispensable inquiry into the complex work of Lacan. Whereas Freud already explored the “translation” of trauma into the Symbolic—that is, the realm in which meaning is made by systems of signification, i.e. language—by means of his famous talking cure, it was Lacan who put the issue of language center stage. Lacan’s emphasis on language in relation to trauma is invaluable for this dissertation’s analysis as it demonstrates that representation is never merely mimesis, the passive duplication of the Real, but always a contribution to it. In fact, representation constructs reality. Furthermore, Lacan points out that the “loss” of the Real should not be lamented, because it is only in the Symbolic that a sense of the Real is constructed. When the representation of trauma (usually considered to be proper to the Real) is conceived of in this light, it is possible to move beyond its utter inaccessibility and meaninglessness without dismissing the essential incomprehensibility. Such an interpretation would counteract the stance of many trauma scholars within the humanities who, influenced by the many problems surrounding the representation of the Holocaust, have emphasized the ultimate inaccessibility of the traumatic Real.

In a concluding statement on Freudian psychoanalysis, I will highlight that the talking cure effectively treats trauma the way it should be: as a condition proper to the Symbolic. Contrary to contemporary trauma theory, which, in postmodern fashion, has rendered all attempts at “truthful” representation of trauma ultimately futile, Freudian psychoanalysis disregards the need to reach the Real of trauma, and thereby reclaim the redemptive function of symbolic representation. Subsequently interpreting the talking cure in the broadest terms, it embraces symbolic expression in all possible forms, and thus includes the practice of writing and reading, and all forms of art, among which literature.

Trauma and Psychoanalysis: Freud and Lacan

Freud’s interest in psychological trauma, initially called “hysteria,” was linked to the rise of modernity in Europe. Rapid industrialization led to new kind of accidents caused by dangerous machines and a newly formed railroad system. In addition, the strict patriarchal morals within the growing bourgeois families led to the “female hysteria” that Freud initially researched. Freud’s interest in trauma increased during the years of the First World War when
he saw soldiers so traumatized by their experiences that they showed signs of paralysis and other malfunctions of the nervous system. While most psychiatrists continued to use the “quick fix” of electric or shock therapy to get these soldiers who were “neglecting military duty” back to the frontline, Freud stuck to the method he applied to the young traumatized women: the talking cure. This methodology is probably the most significant aspect of psychoanalysis, and has been emphasized to such an extent that psychoanalysis is now generally considered as a method of treatment whereby the patient verbalizes thoughts, fantasies and dreams, often through free association, whereupon the therapist draws a conclusion about unconscious conflicts that cause the problems. In this respect, psychoanalysis is the talking cure.¹

Freud was quick to determine what is now commonly known as the main characteristic of a traumatic experience. This is also what causes the main problems for the representation of trauma in the symbolic sphere. When Freud describes the impact of a train accident on a young man, he points out that the man appeared to walk away unharmed, not bodily or mentally injured, yet started to develop severe psychological and physical problems about a week after. This belated experience and the belated occurrence of symptoms is what Freud called the “Nachträglichkeit” of trauma, and it is closely related to the way trauma is cognitively registered, or in fact, not registered.² Because the impact of a traumatic experience is so unforeseen, threatening and harmful, it is temporarily ignored by a person’s consciousness. In this sense, trauma is an experience that is not experienced and therefore lost. Trauma is effectively the loss of a loss, or the absence of loss. The traumatic event itself thus cannot be known and only reveals itself in a (compulsive) repetition of the event in dreams and thought, and the reoccurrence of fragments of the event (screen memories). Generally, the trauma is said to be “haunting” the victim’s consciousness. Indeed, during one of his first years of practice, Freud already observed that “hysterics suffer mainly from reminiscences.”³

Later on, Lacan would elaborate on the concept of trauma and essentially describe it as a “missed encounter.” To explain this, he refers to Aristotle’s concepts of the “tuché” and the “automaton.” The “automaton” herein denotes the realm of the Symbolic: “language and the

² Ibid., 207.
imaginary or the iconic, that within the ‘network of signifiers’.”4 “Tuché,” on the other hand, describes the realm of the Real: that which can never be completely grasped or encountered. Yet encounters with this always elusive Real inescapably happen throughout one’s life. This is what Lacan calls the missed encounter:

   The function of the tuché, of the real as encounter—the encounter insofar as it may be missed, insofar as it is essentially the missed encounter—first presented itself in the history of psychoanalysis in a form that was in itself already enough to arouse our attention, that of trauma.5

Thus, for Lacan, trauma’s main characteristic is the impossible encounter with the Real in which it is constituted. The introduction by Lacan of the concepts of the Real, Symbolic and Imaginary is related to the three stages of development (mirror stage, fort-da game, Oedipus complex) that a child goes through before entering the Symbolic. What is most important herein is a process called “castration” that takes place in the stage of the fort-da game. Initially, before the mirror stage, one is in the realm of the Real, in which everything is whole—it is impossible to tell where the body ends and the outside world begins. After a sense of self is gained by looking in the mirror, a split between being and meaning occurs in the fort-da game as the child is introduced into language. While in the Real one simply is, in the Symbolic the whole of oneself is split in object and subject: I (object) can now think or talk about myself (subject). This process is called “castration”: the inevitable loss of being that is required to enter meaning.6 The human condition is therefore one of “lack,” because the entry into the Symbolic is inescapable. Humans try to overcome this condition by substitution and replacement strategies. Lacan calls this “lack” “l’objet petit a,” and the desire and unfeasibility to reach this “l’objet petit a” resembles the “missed encounter” of trauma. Thus, in addition to Freud, who pointed out that trauma fails to be cognitively registered because of its unexpected and harmful nature, Lacan situates it in the realm of the Real, so that trauma can be defined as a negative inscription (present absence) in a realm which lies beyond reach.

Nevertheless, even though Lacan acknowledges the existence of a Real, as an ontological state of being “outside,” or prior to the system of signification, he does not consider trauma to be “beyond words.” In a statement on human nature, Lacan points out:

5 Lacan quoted in Olivier, “Trauma and Literature,” 36.
“nature as Nature is always an articulation of culture: the Real exists, but always as a reality constituted, (that is, brought into being) by culture—the Symbolic.”\(^7\) Drawing an analogy between (human) nature and trauma, two notions that are considered to belong to the Real, it can be concluded that trauma exists in the Real, but only because, and after, this has been established in the Symbolic. In other words, “the world of words [...] creates the world of things.”\(^8\) This statement explains Lacan’s interest in the functioning of language and symbolic representation. In this respect, it is important to highlight that, as with Freud, one needs to remain aware of the fact that Lacan’s work is dense and complex, and most importantly still open to interpretation even after decades of scholarly debate and the emergence of a vast field of Lacanian studies. Furthermore, the majority of Lacan’s work does not directly relate to trauma. Yet the importance of it all lies in the fact that through Lacan’s interest in language in relation to trauma and psychoanalysis he “introduced us to the less than obvious fact that psychoanalysis is a theory of language.”\(^9\) It is this essential link between trauma and language that provides the ground upon which this dissertation’s literary analysis is based.

**Contemporary Trauma Theory: The Limits of Representation**

During the late 1960s and early 70s, the most significant group of American scholars that affiliated with Derridean poststructuralist ideas, the Yale deconstructionists, to a large degree emphasized the vocabulary of “joy,” “freedom,” and “free-play” that had accompanied Derrida’s 1966 groundbreaking lecture “Structure, Sign and Play”\(^10\) Their emphasis on the “implosion of meaning” initiated an approach to literature that resembled the existentialist outlook characteristic of the postmodern condition. This subsequently influenced the theories of an emerging group of scholars in the humanities that focused on trauma. In most general terms, the increased interest in trauma arose from a broader cultural contact with trauma and its victims. The most significant development was that, from the 1980s onward, after decades of silence, more and more Holocaust testimonies could be heard and read. Moreover, the Vietnam War brought back to the U.S. many veterans that suffered from severe trauma. This triggered the interest of psychologists, and resulted in an overall renewed interest in trauma.

\(^7\) Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*, 79.


The symptoms of Vietnam veterans, and other traumatized individuals, soon belonged to a new psychological condition called Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.  

The development of a vast field of “trauma studies” is additionally linked to an increased interest in the role of memory in the historical and cultural debate. As Huyssen points out, “memory has become a cultural obsession of monumental proportions across the globe.” This is undoubtedly related to the main characteristics of contemporary society: its ever increasing flow of information and extremely high “turnover” of present into past, which has resulted in a changed perception of time. The flipside of the popularization of memory is a concern about mass amnesia, caused by the commodification of memory. For what is true, authentic memory in a world of constructed sites of remembrance? In the academic world, the rise of memory is linked to the “revolutions” in critical theory that caused the fall of the (historical) metanarrative. Like White, who pointed out the “fictions of factual representation” for historical discourse, Derrida and Lacan were among the theorists to cause similar turmoil in respectively the fields of semiology and psychoanalysis. Memory became the antidote to the hegemonic practices of traditional History, and is often associated with terms such as “personal,” “fragment,” “identity,” “witnessing,” and “testimony.” Not surprisingly, the link with identity politics and the “return of the repressed” is swiftly made, and these are the connotations that link memory to the contemporary fascination with trauma. For, as LaCapra argues, memory sites are “generally sites of trauma.” In short, memory’s concern with the “other,” those groups and individuals once oppressed and excluded, elevates trauma to the site of analysis.

The developing field of trauma studies within the humanities predominantly focused on the trauma of the Holocaust as scholars such as Laub, Felman and Caruth laid the groundwork for a new theory of trauma. Since a significant number of these trauma scholars were former students of Yale deconstructionist De Man, their poststructural belief in the autonomous and referential structure of language, and the relativity of once fundamental truths caused them to focus on the “unrepresentability” of trauma. Since the traumatic event cannot be registered, its main characteristic is dissociation, and because of the limits of language, because of its inadequacy to represent reality, trauma is said to be “beyond words.”

11 Kaplan, Trauma Culture, 32.
15 LaCapra quoted in Klein, “On the Emergence of Memory,” 140.
As Kaplan argues, for these scholars trauma has “affect only, not meaning.”\(^{16}\) Instead of being a part of a solution—as with Freud’s talking cure—language is now merely considered part of the problem.

The engagement with trauma led to a series of insightful publications on its effects, and often included theories on its relation to language. To this date, Caruth’s definition of trauma as “the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur” is still considered valid.\(^{17}\) This underlines the current hegemonic status of these scholars’ theory of trauma. A consensus also exists on trauma’s main characteristics: the inability to cognitively register the traumatic event, the belated (haunting) experience, and its overall incomprehensibility. Nonetheless, the narrow focus on dissociation and the extreme involvement with the “discourse of the unrepresentable,” have resulted in an idealization and near sanctification of trauma.\(^{18}\) Klein distinguishes two types of engagement with trauma, the “avant-garde” and the “therapeutic.” In response to contemporary trauma theory, the “avant-garde” interpretation, Klein argues that it “represents itself as an engagement with postmodernism and appeals to the ineffable—the excess, the unsayable, the blank darkness, the sublime, or some other Absolute whose mysteries can be grasped only by those initiatives armed with the secret code.”\(^{19}\) It is this concern with the “excesses of the Real” and the “Real of trauma” that characterize this approach to trauma and its representation that should be underlined, for it forms, in many ways, an antithesis to Freudian psychoanalytic approaches to trauma.

**Reclaiming Freud: Psychoanalysis and the Truth of Trauma**

Klein’s “therapeutic” approach to trauma describes the use of psychoanalytic analyses and terminology (“mourning,” “working through,” “melancholia,” “redemption”) in contemporary trauma discourse. In fact, Klein is extremely skeptical about this, since he characterizes these modes as “weak appropriations of Freudian language to valorize sentimental autobiography.”\(^{20}\) It is, however, questionable whether Freudian psychoanalytic approaches to trauma prompt exclusively sentimental writing and overvaluation of the processes of working through and redemption. And, if it is the case, why that should be considered problematic.

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\(^{16}\) Kaplan, *Trauma Culture*, 34.


\(^{18}\) Berger quoted in Klein, “On the Emergence of Memory,” 137.

\(^{19}\) Klein, “On the Emergence of Memory,” 137.

\(^{20}\) Ibid., 136.
If Freud’s understanding of trauma and in particular his method, the talking cure, is interpreted correctly, it becomes clear that Freudian psychoanalysis does not consider trauma as belonging to the “excesses of the Real.” In an interesting reflection upon psychoanalysis and trauma theory, Belau demonstrates that trauma does not lie beyond the limits of representation. As she puts it, contemporary trauma theory misinterprets the psychoanalytic notion that trauma posits a loss, a missing piece. This loss is interpreted not as a hole or void, but as a prohibited content. This relates to the Derrida’s main point of criticism on classical semiology: the idea that there is a metaphysical presence outside language. By stating that there is nothing outside the text, “Il n’y a pas de hors-texte,” Derrida does not imply that instead of a “something,” (reality, the Real, truth) there is a “nothing” outside the text. In fact, Derrida rejects all notions of an ontological presence, or (in relation to trauma’s negative inscription) absence, outside language. The “idealism” of contemporary trauma theory lies in the conception of trauma as something beyond the system of signification, beyond words, while Belau highlights that it is “only through language that there can be an unspeakable.”

In other words, there is no other, inaccessible place where the trauma is constituted. It is only in its repetition and representation within the symbolic sphere that trauma exists. Obviously, it is difficult to deny that trauma is an exceptional experience. One only has to be reminded of the debate surrounding the “historicizing” of the Holocaust. Nevertheless, it is also dangerous to raise traumatic experience to the level of an ideal. This ascribes a certain “knowledge” to victims and survivors of trauma that is unavailable to the rest.

According to Belau, psychoanalysis does not attempt to lay bare the truth of trauma in its “real” form since it “brings the truth of trauma to the scene of analysis the only way it is able: *it repeats it as an experience in the present.*” It does this by means of its principal method of treatment: the talking cure. In essence, nothing is actually lost in trauma because the lost origin never existed. Consequently, it can be said that trauma functions solely in the Symbolic. Belau points out that “while trauma itself may be proper to the real, the failure of its inscription is registered in the symbolic. Because of this, the real of trauma can be said to be inherently symbolic.” As such, psychoanalysis and (Derridean) poststructuralism are related in their notion of trauma for both subvert the need to reach it in its “real” form. Reminiscent of Lacan’s “petit objet a,” the cause of human desire for a pre-linguistic state of being, Derrida points out that the semiotic desire for a pre-linguistic center will also

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23 Ibid., 14 (emphasis in original).
24 Ibid., 22.
prove to be an illusion. What is most important, however, is that this approach to trauma does not undermine the complexity and severity of trauma, yet resists the notion that trauma is “unrepresentable” and thereby provides a base upon which a working through of trauma can take place, and a platform for (public) sharing, empathy, and debate.

The direct aftermath of September 11, 2001 saw a “crisis for fiction and writing,” since the traumatic nature of the events, and their scale and proximity, disillusioned every author attempting to describe what happened.\(^{25}\) In fact, a broader concern about the role of literature in society, and in particular its ability to represent trauma, surfaced in today’s post-September 11 world. A certain need to renegotiate notions of trauma and representation becomes apparent, and it is by means of an analysis of Foer’s novels that this dissertation attempts to contribute to the debate on the role of literature in relation to trauma (and healing), and more generally, on its place and function in society. In theoretical terms, it will become clear that Foer’s novels demonstrate a need to articulate trauma, despite the many problems surrounding its representation, and thereby embrace a psychoanalytic notion of trauma, that values the effectiveness of language (and literature) for traumatic recovery. The postmodern (contemporary trauma theory) notion that the “Real of trauma” is inaccessible, and language and literature consequently fruitless on the road to recovery, is thereby rejected, or at least considered irrelevant.

Chapter 3: *Everything is Illuminated*

Jonathan Safran Foer’s first novel, *Everything is Illuminated* (2002), is based on a journey undertaken by the young author when he was still an undergraduate at Princeton. In 1999, Foer travelled to the Ukraine to trace his ancestry and research his grandfather’s life. Although Foer initially did not plan to write about his search, the novel that is the end result of this journey tells the story of a young Jewish-American student and collector named Jonathan Safran Foer who tries to find Augustine, the woman who saved his grandfather from the Nazis in Second World War Ukraine. In Odessa, author-as-narrator Jonathan meets his local translator Alex, and their driver, Alex’s grandfather Alex, who work for the family-run “Jewish Heritage Tours.” Together with Grandfather’s “seeing eye-bitch” Sammy Davis Jr. Jr. and only one old photograph of Augustine, this dynamic group of individuals sets out to find the old Jewish shtetl of Trachimbrod, the place where Foer’s grandfather lived before he fled to the U.S.

Obviously, the main trauma represented in *Everything is Illuminated* is the Holocaust. The novel can therefore be placed in the extensive and diverse field of post-Holocaust literature. Jonathan is a third-generation Holocaust survivor trying to fill in the gaps of his family’s past. His quest is essential in constructing a conscious identity for himself. Unlike the direct witnesses of the Holocaust, second and third-generation survivors cannot base their memory of the Holocaust on recollection. Instead, their “postmemory” is to a large extent an imaginative effort.¹ In *Everything is Illuminated* this is noted by Alex: “I saw that he [Jonathan] kept filling his diary, the less we saw the more he wrote.”² Jonathan’s journey to the Ukraine is furthermore typical of the post-Holocaust generation. The function of such a “pilgrimage to the site of destruction” is twofold: it can facilitate the necessary mourning or working through, and overcome the prevalent silence.³ For Jonathan, the latter is of more importance, and clearly relates to his search for identity. It is as if, as Sicher notes, “identity needs to be anchored in a time and place.”⁴

In an analysis of this novel in terms of trauma and its representation two aspects need to be emphasized, namely the novel’s postmodern characteristics and the faith it demonstrates in the power of language and literature as a redemptive force. First, however, it needs to be

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⁴ Ibid., 70.
made explicit that, the novel’s main concern is the (symbolic) representation of a traumatic past. As Feuer points out, “like many post-Holocaust novels it is concerned with the relationship of writing to memory.”\textsuperscript{5} Foer uses two narrative strands to give voice to contradictory interpretations of reality and representation. As a result of this juxtaposition of narrative it becomes clear that there exists no such thing as a “correct” or truthful representation of reality. This is a consequence of the structure of language, as the novel demonstrates. Moreover, the relativity of concepts such as “reality,” or “truth,” is emphasized by the articulation of two different representations and interpretations of it. Another result of the contradiction in narrative voice relates to the notion of authority. It is particularly Jonathan’s Trachimbrod story, but also the way in which it relates to Alex’s account, that questions the credibility of the narrative voice. Thus, in many ways, the novel accords with poststructuralist notions of language and representation, and in a broader perspective, postmodern interpretations of reality, truth, meaning, and authority. Also, the novel provides a postmodern perspective on the relationship to the (traumatic) past by means of its plot structure. Already in the opening chapter it becomes clear that Jonathan will be unsuccessful in his search. By doing this, Foer quickly underlines the postmodern awareness that the past is ultimately inaccessible.

Nevertheless, despite the novel’s numerous postmodern characteristics that emphasize the relativity of all attempts to render truthful representations of “reality” and undermine the possibility of engagement with an unrevealed past, \textit{Everything is Illuminated} values the importance of symbolic representation, or, in other words, the importance of literature, in relation to trauma, and in particular the trauma of the Holocaust. As Collado-Rodriguez argues, “Foer clearly sides with those who maintain that the Holocaust is not utterly unrepresentable and that keeping silent about it is not the most ethical response to the Jews’ annihilation.”\textsuperscript{6} Foer does not consider language as an obstacle, like many contemporary trauma theorists have done, in their concern with the “unrepresentability” of trauma, but instead demonstrates a faith in the (redemptive) power of language and literature, despite its many “shortcomings.” The young author thereby combines poststructuralism’s main ideas with the notion that symbolic representation is important, if not indispensable, for traumatic healing. The latter is articulated through an emphasis on, and constant evaluation of, the process of writing and its effects, which is similar to Freudian psychoanalysis and its method


of the talking cure. Thus, Foer, writing in a post-September 11, post-traumatic world, in which a number of voices have already claimed the end of postmodernism, seeks to establish an alternative to contemporary trauma theory that has been so closely linked to the postmodern condition and the “unrepresentability” of the Holocaust.

_Everything is Illuminated_ as a Postmodern Novel

First of all, it needs to be acknowledged that the term “postmodern,” or “postmodernism” has been troublesome from the start. Moreover, it has come to define so many aspects of (popular) culture, that it can no longer be called subversive. Instead, it has become a dogma in itself. In fact, already in 1988, Hebdige argued that “postmodern” had become a “buzzword.”7 Because of the term’s complex connotations, I want to highlight that in the novel’s analysis, “postmodernism” is exclusively dealt with in its destabilizing function vis-à-vis notions of truth, reality (and realistic representation), and authority. The postmodern notion that the past is ultimately inaccessible is also underlined in _Everything is Illuminated_ by Jonathan’s unsuccessful search, which results in the illumination of things unsought for, such as Grandfather’s personal Holocaust trauma and Alex’s traumatic relationship with his father.

The notion that language is ultimately inadequate to represent reality, or in this case, the traumatic “excesses of the real,” can most clearly be distinguished in those parts of the novel that describe actual trauma, such as the destruction of Trachimbrod, the burning of the synagogue, and the Nazi invasion of the village where Grandfather lived. In an attempt to address Grandfather’s betrayal of his Jewish friend, Alex writes: “Is it forgivable what he [Grandfather] did canheeverbeforgiven for his finger for whathisfingerdid for whathepointedto and didnotpointto for whathetouchedinhislife and whathedidnottouch he is stillguilty I am I am IamI?”8 Clearly, punctuation and spacing are influenced by the emotion and intensity that involves the retelling of such an event. The bombing of Trachimbrod is unfilled space in the novel: two pages consisting only of dotted lines indicate that words cannot describe the event.

Nonetheless, there are other characteristics of the novel that point to a postmodern interpretation of reality and representation. As mentioned before, the juxtaposition of two completely different narrative strands problematizes issues of truth, reality, authority and “correct” representation. Alex’s account of the search for Augustine is the novel’s prime

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8 Foer, _Everything is Illuminated_, 252.
narrative strand, which is complemented by Jonathan’s imaginative story of Trachimbrod. Yet, this story-within-a-story is of extreme significance for the novel as a whole. Jonathan starts writing the history of the shtetl when he is back in the U.S., after his journey to the Ukraine and Trachimbrod. Because of the lack of real evidence—there is only a memorial stone where Trachimbrod once lay—Jonathan invents his own heritage: from the mythical birth of Brod, Jonathan’s great-great-great-great-grandmother in 1791, till the bombing of the shtetl in the Second World War. It is worth mentioning that the “reinvention of the shtetl” is another typical aspect of the post-Holocaust generation’s attempt to recover the lost spaces of the Holocaust, and has led to an obsession with such places. The story of Trachimbrod, however, and in particular its form— which has been described as “postmodern, experimental [...] allegorical, ironic, and value-free comedy”—10—can be interpreted as a plea to put this obsessive reinstatement of shtetl life into perspective. Those who seek salvation by clinging to a (romanticized) notion of pre-Second World War shtetl life are thus criticized.

In fact, the most important aspect of the story of Trachimbrod is its literary style. As Collado-Rodriguez points out, Foer presents the shtetl’s story in quasi-mythical terms, including fantastic events, magical elements and superhuman beings.11 His depiction of Trachimbrod is furthermore reminiscent of Márquez’s village of Macondo in One Hundred Years of Solitude (1967), and can thereby be situated in the literary tradition of magic-realism. The story of the creation of Trachimbrod starts with a revealing statement: “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.”12 This indicates that the exact origin of Trachimbrod is not known. Emphasizing the allegorical nature of Jonathan’s story, Feuer argues that this “allegory of origin” can be read as a reflection upon the processes of meaning making. The disappearance of Trachim B into the Brod River, and the surfacing of numerous objects, including a baby, is conceived to represent “a beginning born of trauma, wherein the subject of the trauma is floating in fragments.”13 It is through the gathering of these fragments that meaning is made, and Feuer points out that this is where the task of a writer starts (it is not coincidental that Jonathan begins his story with this event). Thus, already from the beginning Jonathan’s story reflects the notion that reality is only known in fragments and that the writer’s influence on

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12 Foer, Everything is Illuminated, 8 (emphasis added).
the process of collecting and subsequently narrativizing these fragments is significant. In fact, Feuer points out that the Trachimbrod story “has no qualms about being openly fictional and deceptive.”14 This contrasts with Alex’s account, which “does all it can to cover up the fact that it is a fiction.”15 Many aspects of his story contradict Jonathan’s version of events, and thereby further emphasize the fictionality of the story of Trachimbrod. However, Alex’s “realist” representation is undermined by his lack of control of the English language, and his status as a self-confessed liar. Collado-Rodriguez points out that, as a result, “[t]he presentation of historical “truth” in the chapters Alex narrates become as unreliable as Jonathan’s staging of fantastic events and characters [...].”16

In addition to the different forms of representation (mythic versus realist), the two narrative strands offer alternative interpretations of time that lead to distinct viewpoints on history, particularly on the Holocaust. In Trachimbrod perspective, time has a circular movement. This is illustrated by the chapter title “The Beginning of the World often Comes,” which is used twice, to demarcate both the beginning and end of the shtetl of Trachimbrod. This notion of time is accompanied by a belief in the irreversibility of events, including traumatic ones, since these are part of a cycle of rise and fall. This is contrasted by the linear development of time portrayed in Alex’s account. Whereas the Trachimbrod story is insensitive to human intervention, and thereby value-free, Alex’s notion of time stresses the influence of human action, and consequently the notion that there is a specific human agency, that can, for instance, be blamed for the Holocaust. In this respect, fate is positioned opposite free will, and it is because both these notions are equally represented, that the novel introduces ambiguity on this issue. In similar fashion, the contrasting of mythical and realist renderings, creates “a postmodern perspective that openly sustains that the world of reported “facts” also belongs on the same epistemological level as fiction.”17

Thus, the novel addresses issues related to language and “truthful” representation, and undermines the notion that a fictional account is less “valuable” than an ostensible realistic rendering of events. In fact, in postmodern fashion, the very existence of an absolute reality, and thereby the possibility of realistic representation, is challenged. In this respect, it is worth mentioning a seemingly insignificant aspect from the novel. At some point during their search, Alex is allowed to read a small section from Jonathan’s notebook. In it, Jonathan has described a (fictional) confrontation between Alex and his abusive father. The exact words of

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15 Ibid., 36.
17 Ibid., 60.
this imagined scene are repeated in Alex’s translation of Grandfather’s last letter at the end of the novel: “He told his father that he [Alex] could take care for Mother and Little Igor. It took his saying to make it true.”18 By the time Alex translated Grandfather’s letter, he had indeed confronted his father. The repetition of that particular sentence indicates two things, namely that Alex has altered the content of Grandfather’s letter (for Grandfather could not have read Jonathan’s notebook), and that Alex was inspired and incited to action by the fictional event. The former realization points out the presence and influence of the author (and mediator), whereas the latter indicates how fiction can influence reality. This can be related to Lacan’s notion that representation constructs reality (see chapter two). In fact, the phrase “It took his saying to make it true” means just that.

**Trauma and the Importance of Literature**

That a fictional entry in a notebook can help Alex confront his actual trauma also implies that fiction can have a healing effect. In fact, this notion permeates the entire novel. However, it can most clearly be distinguished in four specific aspects. Firstly, the “invention” of the story of Trachimbrod functions as a cure for Jonathan to overcome the journey’s disappointing outcome. In addition, the quasi-mythic and ironic description of shtetl life demonstrates its status as a “non-example” in relation to the treatment of the past, and points out the paralyzing effect of a fixation with the past. Thirdly, the correspondence between Jonathan and Alex functions as a tool of reflection and (self-) understanding for both characters, yet most particularly for Alex, for whom the letter writing, and reading, provides an insight into his situation. Eventually, he is able to act upon this insight and start anew. Finally, the symptoms of repression that Grandfather displays, and Augustine’s preoccupation with the past demonstrate the necessity to articulate trauma.

Despite Sicher’s claim that there exists an obsession with and romanticizing of pre-Second World War shtetl life, the (re)invention of the shtetl is acknowledged to function as a cure for the post-Holocaust generation.19 In fact, this process is considered to be of extreme importance. For Jonathan, it functions as a “writing cure” for the disappointing outcome of his journey to the Ukraine. This journey has not “illuminated” anything for him. His past remains inaccessible, and in the ultimate realization that this will forever stay the same, he invents his own heritage in order to assuage his feeling of loss. The writing process additionally provides him with an opportunity to articulate his thoughts and meditations upon issues such as

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18 Foer, *Everything is Illuminated*, 274.
memory, the fear of forgetting, and the function of language. Other concerns that Jonathan
directly or indirectly deals with are the nature of love and empathy, the importance of dreams
and myths, and the implications of being Jewish.

Yet, as a whole, the story of Trachimbrod functions as a “non-example.” It is as if
Jonathan needs to prove to himself the most incorrect way of dealing with the past in order to
adopt the most effective way and move on. In accordance with the shtetl’s mythical
representation that features the fantastic and supernatural, the shtetl’s preoccupation with its
past, and its desperate attempts to keep alive its traditions and memories, are “normal”
cultural memory practices taken to an extreme. It is consequently only in its hyperbolic nature
that Trachimbrod starts to function as a “non-example.” This status seems contradictory,
considering the aforementioned equal status of the narrative strands, and the value-free
representation of Trachimbrod. However, whereas there is no criticism in the story, its
extremity will affect the readers and influence their judgement of the content. Thus, the
equation of mythic and realist representations, fate and free will, cyclical and linear
developments of time, that is the result of the juxtaposition of the narrative strands, are
structural consequences, whereas this status as a “non-example” stems from the story’s
content.

An illustration of Trachimbrod’s inflated cultural memory practices can be given by
analyzing its “Book of Antecedents.” This cultural document starts out as an annual report
that describes “major events” such as “battles and treaties, famines, seismic occurrences, the
beginning and ends of political regimes.”20 Yet, the purpose soon changes: due to an
overappreciation of the need to remember, literally everything is described at great length.
This leads to a situation in which “any schoolboy could easily find out what his grandfather
ate for breakfast on a given Thursday fifty years before.”21 The book is soon to be continually
updated, and “its full-time committee would report its reporting, just to keep the book
moving, expanding, becoming more like life: We are writing...We are writing...We are
writing...”22 Shtetl inhabitants read the “Book of Antecedents” meticulously, since it serves as
a guide to them—keeping them well informed, and more importantly, well aware of their
heritage and culture. The book is supposed to ensure the preservation of traditions, and the
continuity of the community’s cultural memory, or, in other words, the continuity of the
community itself.

20 Foer, Everything is Illuminated, 196.
21 Ibid., 196.
22 Ibid., 196 (italics in original).
Nonetheless, the community’s continuity, or rather its progress, has come to a halt. Writing the “Book of Antecedents” takes so much time that it replaces all other activities. It literally replaces life. As a result of this, the people of Trachimbrod forget to live in the present. Interestingly, the emphasis on memory is linked to Judaism. The full-time committee responsible for the “Book of Antecedents” is installed by the synagogues. The main purpose of the congregations’ meetings is to discuss the need to remember: “*The what [...] is not so important, but that we should remember. It is the act of remembering, the process of remembrance, the recognition of our past.*”\(^{23}\) In the “Book of Antecedents,” there are many statements on the Jewish identity. For instance, under the heading “Jews have six senses” it is explained why they place so much emphasis on memory:

> While Gentiles experience and process the world through the traditional senses, and use memory only as a second-order means of interpreting events, for Jews memory is no less primary than the prick of a pin, [...] the Jew is pricked by a pin and remembers other pins.\(^{24}\)

Thus, Jews can only know why something hurts by tracing the pain to other, similar, experiences. Their primary question when experiencing pain, consequently, is: “What does it remember like?”\(^{25}\) Obviously, these statements repeat Nietzsche’s claim that memory is linked to pain, and that only that which will always hurt will stay in a person’s memory. In fact, Foer often refers to Nietzsche in interviews, mentioning that “everything we have words for is dead in our hearts.”\(^{26}\) Similarly, Foer discusses the implications of forgetting, which Nietzsche considered an active force of repression that is nevertheless indispensable for “joy” in the present. In Trachimbrod, the fear of forgetting becomes so great that the character of Sofiowka ties strings around his body parts in order to remember them. However, using his body to remember his body, results in him only being able to remember the string. This incident indicates once more the danger of an extreme fear of forgetting.

> Overall, Jonathan is right to mention that “the only thing more painful than being an active forgetter is to be an inert rememberer.”\(^{27}\) This sums up the “lesson” that can be learned from Trachimbrod. In this respect, it is interesting to note Jonathan’s statement on this: “They [the Trachimborders] waited to die, and we cannot blame them, because we would do the

\(^{23}\) Foer, *Everything is Illuminated*, 36 (italics in original).

\(^{24}\) Ibid., 198.

\(^{25}\) Ibid., 198, 199.


\(^{27}\) Foer, *Everything is Illuminated*, 260.
same, and we do the same [...] and we must forgive them.” For a story that generally avoids judging human action, this claim is interesting. The people of Trachimbrod should be forgiven for their inaction, because we do the same. This “we” could include everyone that lives in the contemporary U.S., the Western world, or the entire world. On the other hand, since Jonathan is a post-Holocaust generation writer, it could also only refer to second and third generation Holocaust survivors—for had not Jonathan’s ambivalent position within this group already been confirmed due to his indirect criticism on this generation’s obsession with shtetl life? Nevertheless, it remains hard to determine to what extent the specific portrayal of the Trachimbrod shtetl should be regarded as socio-cultural criticism, and for the purpose of this dissertation it is more relevant to examine the story’s function in relation to (traumatic) memory and the relationship with the past.

The second, and probably most important, aspect of the novel that asserts the redemptive function of writing and literature, and the necessity to “move on,” is the written correspondence between Alex and Jonathan. First of all, it is telling that both characters feel the need to write once the journey has ended. It is important to note that there is only a sequence of letters from Alex to Jonathan. It becomes clear that the chapters on Trachimbrod are part of the correspondence from Jonathan to Alex, yet there are no personal letters. At first it seems as if the main purpose of the correspondence is simply to correct language mistakes and other errors. It is mainly Jonathan who corrects Alex’s flaws in English, and tells him how a sad story can best be told (humorously). Alex, who calls Jonathan “the hero,” subsequently wonders why Jonathan is “being so nomadic with the truth.” Nevertheless, reading Jonathan’s story helps Alex to confront his personal trauma. As Collado-Rodriguez argues, “Literature, as Jonathan’s mythopoieses exemplifies it, directly helps Alex resolve his own family problems and cope with a truth about Ukrainian complicity in genocide [...] In other words, for Alex, literature also illuminates.” Thus, the fact that Alex is not simply reading letters, but a fictional story, causes Collado-Rodriguez to conclude that any (traumatized) individual can be helped by reading literature. In addition, but no less important, reading Jonathan’s story also helps Alex to understand the trauma of his American contemporary.

Besides reading Jonathan’s story, the process of writing his own is important for Alex. He needs to recapture what happened and was revealed during their search in order to

28 Foer, Everything is Illuminated, 262.
29 Ibid., 179.
understand and reconcile himself with it. Writing is a struggle for Alex, as can be illustrated by his remarks and additions to the story. For instance, when trying to discuss Grandfather’s confessions, Jonathan inserts:

(Here it is almost too forbidding to continue. I have written to this point many times, and corrected the parts you would have me correct, and made more funnies, and more inventions, and written as if I were you writing this, but every time I try to persevere, my hand shakes so that I can no longer hold my pen. Do it for me. Please. It is now yours.)  

Clearly, Alex is hesitant and turns to Jonathan for help. Regardless of whether Jonathan accepts the request, Alex eventually manages to write the complete story. He complements certain (difficult) passages by parenthesized personal statements, interpretations, and explanations. Often, these additions are directed to Jonathan. Nevertheless, it is Alex who is most helped by writing them, and it indicates that he is reading both Jonathan’s story as well as his own in a self-reflexive manner. He is aware of the redemptive function their writing and correspondence can have: “We are talking now, Jonathan, together, and not apart. [...] Do you not comprehend that we can bring each other safety and peace?”

As mentioned, Alex eventually benefits from the writing process as he frees his little brother and himself from the hands of their abusive father, and successfully continues with his life.

In a final note on the function of the protagonists’ correspondence, I want to point out that the novel ends with a letter written by neither Jonathan nor Alex. It is the “suicide note” written by Grandfather (and translated by Alex). It is interesting that Grandfather uses both the name Alex and Sasha in his note: “If you are reading this, it is because Alex found it and translated it for you. It means that I am dead, and that Sasha is alive.” Throughout the novel, the character known as Alex attempts to be strong, successful, and funny. However, through the confrontation with his past Sasha, the traumatized individual underneath the surface, is gradually exposed. The phrase “Sasha is alive” suggests that Alex has managed to successfully confront his trauma and thereby lost the shield that was initially necessary to protect him from it. Another phrase from the note that stands out describes the need to move on for Alex and his little brother: “They must begin again. They must cut all strings, yes? With you (Sasha told me you will not write each other any more), with their father (who is now gone forever), with everything they have known. Sasha has started it, and now I must

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31 Foer, *Everything is Illuminated*, 226.
32 Ibid., 214.
33 Ibid., 274.
finish it.”

It is revealed that Alex and Jonathan have already given up their correspondence. This, and Grandfather’s remark, indicates that, after the past has been confronted, its needs to be put aside. This does not mean that it needs to be forgotten, but to cling to it is counterproductive, as illustrated by the Trachimbrod story. Moreover, this does not suggest that the novel offers full closure. Instead, it demonstrates a revelation of and confrontation with a traumatic past, which is (emotionally) evaluated and illuminated through the process of writing and reading. In this sense, the correspondence, which forms the novel as a whole, functions as a slightly altered form of Freud’s talking cure, which also provides a confrontation with the unconscious and unrevealed traumas of one’s past and present. Thus, for Foer, language, and thereby literature, is not necessary for traumatic healing as a last resort, the best attempt to reach the “excess of the Real,” but because it is an effective and redemptive force, regardless of its inadequacy to represent “reality.” In effect, there is no “reality” (or “Real of trauma”) that needs to be reached, for this is a concept created by the Symbolic (as the conflicting narrative strands accentuate).

In a concluding statement on *Everything is Illuminated*, I want to point out that the novel makes a distinction between the direct witnesses of the destruction of Trachimbrod, and the third-generation survivors. While the trauma of their past has left Grandfather and Augustine—who literally “lives in the past”—forever damaged and unable to lead normal lives, third-generation Alex and Jonathan manage to, to a great extent, work through their personal and family traumas. Obviously, there are issues that can never be resolved, but these individuals manage to articulate, confront and consequently “accept” their traumas, whereupon they can “move on.” The concept that is applicable to the situation of the direct witnesses in this novel is Caruth’s “crisis of life.” As she argues, trauma is always the mediation between the crisis of death and the crisis of life, “between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival.”

The reader can take note of the consequences of repression, by evaluating Grandfather’s and “Augustine’s” fate, and preferably approach trauma in a different manner, as illustrated by Foer through the stories, and story-writing, of Alex and Jonathan.

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34 Foer, *Everything is Illuminated*, 275.

Chapter 4: Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close

While *Everything is Illuminated* was widely praised for its inventiveness, irony, tenderness, and its passionate depiction of Jewish shtetl life, Jonathan Safran Foer’s second novel *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (2005) did not enjoy the same positive reception. Even though the first novel’s resourcefulness had led critics to anticipate further formal and typographical experiment, *Extremely Loud*’s reviews were mixed. Responding to the “avant-garde toolkit” that includes multiple pictures, blank and illegible pages, in-text corrections in red, name and index cards, full-color pages from an art supply store, and an ending that functions as a flipbook—depicting a man falling “upward,” back into one of the Twin Towers—many critics have denounced the novel’s excessive use of “special effects.”¹ John Updike observes that “a little more silence, a few fewer messages, [and] less graphic apparatuses might [have] let Foer’s excellent empathy, imagination, and good will resonate all the louder.”² Additional criticism is directed at the novel’s protagonist Oskar, who has been called an annoying and overwise nine-year-old. Moreover, in line with Sontag’s characterization of contemporary U.S. “therapy culture,” the novel has been slated for its sentimentality, for “there is hardly a line in this book that has not been written for the purpose of eliciting a particular emotion from the reader.”³ In this respect, it is important to keep in mind Kaplan’s arguments on the “culture of sentimentality” in the U.S., and the tendency to classify “all discussion of emotion [as] part of the same negative sentimentality.”⁴ Kaplan points out that there is a thin line between sensationalism and sentimentalism, and that it is problematic to disregard all sentimental approaches to trauma, since these constitute an integral part of the responses it initiates.

Yet, despite the criticism, the *Extremely Loud*’s immediate success and high ranking on bestseller lists demonstrate its appeal to audiences in what has been called the “post-traumatic phase in the American public unconscious.”⁵ With the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 as its main subject, and the bombing of Dresden and Hiroshima as important subtexts, the novel has been complimented on its ability to expose the complexity of trauma, and the intensity and proximity of a traumatic event for its direct witnesses. In this respect,

Codde points out that “the formal experiments that so many critics have objected to are perhaps as close as the author can come to rendering the condition of the traumatized mind.”\textsuperscript{6} In fact, it is the novel’s form that contributes to its strength as a trauma narrative, as will be demonstrated in this chapter.

\textit{Extremely Loud} is set in New York City in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11 and tells the story of Oskar, a young boy traumatized by the death of his father in the collapse of the Twin Towers. When hiding in his father’s closet, Oskar finds a vase with an envelope in it. In the envelope is a key. The one word written on the envelope, “black,” leads Oskar to suspect that someone named Black has information concerning the key and its unknown lock, and Oskar sets out on a quest through New York City to find the right Mr. or Ms. Black. Gradually Oskar’s story merges with that of his grandparents. Both “Grandma” and Thomas Sr. are survivors of the allied bombing of Dresden in February 1945 and suffer severely as a consequence. Grandma and Thomas Sr. had known each other in Dresden, through Anna, Grandma’s sister and Thomas Sr.’s first love, who was pregnant when she lost her life in the bombing. Years later Grandma and Thomas Sr. meet again in a Broadway bakery and decide to marry as “an acceptable compromise.”\textsuperscript{7} They set up certain rules, create “Something” and “Nothing” places in their apartment and never talk about the past. Yet, when Grandma breaks the first rule of their marriage by becoming pregnant with Oskar’s dad, Thomas Sr. abandons Grandma and leaves for Dresden. There he writes daily letters to his son in which he completely lays bare his personal life and history. These letters function as separate chapters in the novel, all named “Why I’m Not Where You Are” followed by the date they are written. All letters remain unsent, except for the one that describes the bombing of Dresden. Thomas Sr. returns to New York after the death of his son, and leaves a note at Grandma’s apartment on the same day as Thomas’s funeral. Grandma then allows Thomas Sr. to live in the guest room, and explains to Oskar that she has a renter. At a certain moment, Thomas Sr. leaves for the airport, and afraid to lose him once again, Grandma follows him. Here she writes a number of letters to Oskar, which appear as independent chapters in the novel, all bearing the heading “My Feelings.” The novel thus consists of three narrative strands, each with a specific form and style of writing. Moreover, the incorporation of images and other unconventional literary techniques functions differently in each of the characters’ chapters.


\footnote{Jonathan S. Foer, \textit{Extremely Loud \& Incredibly Close} (London \& New York: Penguin, 2005), 84.}
In order to establish the functioning of the novel in terms of traumatic recovery via textual representation, it is important to distinguish between the novel’s content, mainly character development and the portrayal of symptoms of either melancholia or working through, and the novel’s experimental form. Obviously, a division between form and content is only possible in theory. In practice, these concepts are inseparable. Moreover, because they have been used, evaluated and re-evaluated in a long line of literary theory and criticism, it is impossible to apply these terms in an analysis without pointing out their complexity and (multiple) connotations. For these reasons, it has to be admitted that the concepts of “form” and “content” are not perfect. Nonetheless, such a distinction is useful for an analysis of *Extremely Loud* as a trauma narrative, since its form offers a particular dimension to the functioning of the novel, which cannot be distinguished in an analysis of the novel’s story and characters. Thus, for a complete understanding of the novel as a trauma narrative, it is effective to separate form and content.

The distinction between the Freudian concepts of melancholia (or acting out) and working through (or mourning), reintroduced into the field of trauma studies in the early 1990s by LaCapra, serves well to interpret the response of the novel’s characters to trauma. Initially, the novel seems to be symptomatic of a melancholic response to trauma. Indeed, as Huehls points out, “almost unanimously, book reviewers have pronounced Foer’s inventiveness as pathological and compulsive as Oskar’s.” Yet, rather than providing the audience with an analogy of traumatic recovery, the novel as a whole effectively attempts to expose the complexity of trauma, and to engage the reader in this process of understanding. The correlation between form and content is the most interesting aspect of the novel: this interplay demands active participation from the reader in “connecting the dots” of this “avant-garde toolkit,” and places emphasis on the complexity and incomparability of traumatic experiences. In addition, it underlines the difficulties in constructing trauma narrative, while at the same time making the characters’ traumas particularly textual. In doing this, the novel neither offers a notion of closure nor resolves the traumas. Nonetheless, as one of the few novels written in the direct aftermath of September 11 that deals so explicitly with the notion of trauma (and in particular the trauma of September 11), its attempt to “wrench trauma out of the realm of the inarticulate and nudge it towards expression is a first step in the healing

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process.”¹⁰ It is in this manner that the novel can facilitate an attempt, by the reader, to witness, share, and work through traumatic experiences, in the problematic but inevitable realm of the Symbolic. Moreover, the incorporation of many aspects characteristic of contemporary U.S. society and its immediate response to the events of September 11, such as the notion of (TV) images overload, aid in this process of witnessing.

**Extremely Loud’s Content: A Melancholic Response to Trauma**

Of the novel’s three main characters, Thomas Sr. seems to be the least capable of coping with trauma. After losing the ability to speak shortly after the Dresden bombings, he starts carrying around notebooks to write down the bare essentials for everyday communication. Pages from these notebooks are found in *Extremely Loud* when a “conversation” between him and another person is narrated or when he recounts flipping through the book before going to sleep. Certain seemingly idle phrases—“Excuse me, do you know what time it is?”—can be found throughout Thomas Sr.’s chapters, and indicate his inclination to repetitive behavior and inability to give direct and meaningful answers. At other times, his short sentences seem desperate cries for help and forgiveness: “Help”; “I’m sorry, I don’t speak”; “I’m sorry”; “I’m still sorry.”

Thomas Sr. thus appears to suffer from a state of inarticulate sorrow. Yet, this problem vanishes completely when he starts writing. The absence of oral communication seems to be compensated for by Thomas Sr.’s extensive letter production. In fact, he writes so fanatically that, at a certain point, the pages become illegible due to a lack of paper. In his letters, Thomas Sr. seems to be highly aware of his obsession with his (pre-) traumatic past, and his own shortcomings in dealing with it. This moral awareness and self-reflection is interesting since it runs counter to his behavior in everyday life. In the letter that describes the bombing of Dresden, Thomas Sr. demonstrates that he understands the positive link between communicating trauma and the process of working through when he writes: “Sometimes I think if I could tell you what happened to me that night, I could leave that night behind me, maybe I could come home to you, but that night has no beginning or end, it started before I was born and is still happening.”¹¹ Despite all this, Thomas Sr. portrays all the symptoms of a melancholic for he “finds himself trapped in an endless reliving of his traumatic past while

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acting that past out in a post-traumatic present.” Again, he is conscious of this fixation with the past: “The center of me followed her [Anna], but I was left with the shell of me,” and in fact, Thomas Sr.’s last name, Schell, suggests that his survival was a mere bodily survival, for in his mind he is constantly reliving the night of the bombing. At other points, Thomas Sr. is aware of the ways in which he acts out the traumatic past, as he realizes that his marriage with Grandma, Anna’s sister, was an attempt to reconstruct his lost love (most explicitly by him trying to sculpt Anna when Grandma is posing). Yet, for all the knowledge and self-awareness he demonstrates in his letters, Thomas Sr. never stops acting out the trauma, and thus remains captive to it.

Thomas Sr.’s contradictory behavior indicates a bodily manifestation of trauma and traumatic symptoms, a notion that is further reinforced by his tattooed hands, and his behavior towards Grandma. For instance, whereas he writes in one of his letters that “when your mother found me in the bakery on Broadway, I wanted to tell her everything [...] Maybe that could have made the impossible possible,” he is the one to set up the rule that prohibits talking about the past. Moreover, Thomas Sr. suggests that Grandma should write her life story, yet at the same time sets her up in a “Nothing” room—a room in which one can temporarily cease to exist so that what happens is neither considered to have happened nor have meaning—with a typewriter from which he long ago removed the ribbon. The result is thousands of blank pages, some of which appear in the novel. He encourages her to write, arguing that it is better to “express herself rather than suffer herself” and that “everything is full of meaning.” Thus, towards Grandma, Thomas Sr. expresses a belief in the therapeutic function of writing while the results of his efforts prove the opposite. In fact, when describing how Grandma handed him the stack of blank pages, he points out; “I know that I haven’t explained a thing, she and I are no different, I’ve been writing nothing, too.”

Upon returning to the U.S. after the events of September 11, Thomas Sr. explains to the immigration officer that his purpose of visit is “to mourn.” He then quickly erases this so that it says “to try to live.” Obviously, for Thomas Sr. mourning is not the same as trying to live, because his mourning—what Freud would have called acting out, for he described mourning as a process of working through—has prevented him from living. The suitcases filled with unsent letters symbolize the past, and in particular its great weight and

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13 Foer, Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close, 113.
14 Ibid., 132.
15 Ibid., 119.
16 Ibid., 132.
17 Ibid., 268.
size, that Thomas Sr. carries with him, whereas the final act of digging up and filling his son’s coffin with these letters can be interpreted as a form of closure for Thomas Sr. since it forms a confrontation with the gap created by the loss of his son, and allows for a replacement of the (absence of) the human body by a textual one. Nevertheless, it is important not to attach too much meaning to this notion of closure, since it remains completely unclear whether Thomas Sr. manages to “live” afterwards. Indeed, the fact that he buries the key to the apartment together with the letters, and leaves for the airport shortly after, does not offer much hope. The focus should instead be on the fact that the absent human body is replaced by a textual one, and the more general emphasis on the practice of writing in relation to trauma, which demonstrates that the novel, like Everything is Illuminated, is predominantly concerned with trauma and narrative, or (symbolic) representation.

Contrary to Thomas Sr., who returns to Dresden because he feels unable to live, Grandma is desperately trying to live, and to perform her responsibilities as a mother and grandmother, while she is just as much plagued by her trauma (of losing her family in the Dresden bombings) and survivor’s guilt. Whereas Thomas Sr. feels guilty because he lived while Anna died, Grandma wonders whether the many letters that she kept would have fuelled the fire that destroyed her family’s house. Both also suffer from what Caruth calls the “crisis of life” which leads to feelings of unworthiness. 18 Grandma writes how she “wanted to lie down in [her] own waste, which was what [she] deserved.”19 Oskar notes that his Grandma suffers from nightmares, and that “a couple of days after the worst day, I [Oskar] saw Grandma carrying a huge rock across Broadway.”20 Knowing that Grandma planned to commit suicide by jumping into the Hudson river shortly after her arrival in the U.S., this observation may indicate that she is (again) suicidal.

Nonetheless, Grandma is much more committed to “move on” than Thomas Sr. She is determined to become fluent in English, and builds herself a future by becoming pregnant with Oskar’s dad. Yet, Grandma’s efforts prove problematic, and she continues to display symptoms of trauma. In addition to her feelings of guilt, nightmares, and a possible suicide attempt, Grandma has difficulty to actually express her feelings and communicate her life story. This can be observed in her writing style, which is characterized by short sentences and more than usual spacing, indicating hesitancy and a troublesome search for the right words.

19 Foer, Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close, 231.
20 Ibid., 104.
Moreover, she reveals that she never wrote her life story on that ribbonless typewriter: she only pressed the space bar.

To a large extent, Grandma’s description of the September 11 collapse of the Twin Towers resembles the general response, fuelled by the media’s repetition of the images, of the American people. Throughout the letter, specific phrases, evoking the images and atmosphere of that day, are repeated: “Planes going into buildings”; “Bodies falling”; “Buildings falling.” Such a reaction suggests that the actual impact of the event has not yet been realized. In general, this characterizes Grandma’s psychological condition, for she appears to be only remotely touched by trauma. This emotional detachment, of which she is fully aware since she “spent her life learning to feel less,” nonetheless masks a far worse state of trauma that is, not unlike Thomas Sr.’s, manifested in a physical form. In fact, only when Grandma sees that she is bleeding through her shirt, does she realize that her son has died: “That was when I knew that I knew.”

The traumas of both Thomas Sr. and Grandma thus unconsciously and unwillingly surface through physical symptoms. Attempts to force the trauma into the Symbolic through linguistic means prove futile. Consequently, Thomas Sr. and Grandma live in a vacuum of mis- and non-communication. Nevertheless, they are aware of their incapability to communicate trauma, and sometimes actively undermine potential recovery by means of duplicitous behavior. In fact, their marriage frees both of them from the need to expose, explain or share their personal trauma and thus prevents recovery. The balance between textual and bodily trauma is essential for an understanding of this novel as a trauma narrative, as will become clear in the analysis of its form.

Prior to the formal aspects, however, the novel’s main character requires analysis in order to determine his status as a victim of trauma. Obviously, Oskar is traumatized by the death of his father. More specifically, the cause of the trauma is the unexpected nature of his father’s death, which results in an overall incomprehensibility and speculation about the exact cause of death. Oskar desperately wants to know how his father died, and the incorporation of images of a man jumping or falling from the one of the Twin Towers, as well as images of birds, suggest that Oskar pictures his father to have died in this manner, and not in the most horrific way Oskar could imagine: squeezed between two elevators. In addition to the unexpected nature of the event, which is an important element of traumatic experience already

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22 Ibid., 180.
23 Ibid., 224.
revealed by Freud, Oskar feels bad about his own inaction: the inability to answer his father’s last phone call. Indeed, he realizes that “that secret was a hole in the middle of me that every happy thing fell into.” This results in feelings of guilt towards both his father and his mother, from whom he hid the original phone with his father’s messages on it. In fact, these feelings towards his mother create the distance between them that cause his wandering behavior.

Oskar’s response to trauma runs parallel to the novel’s plot, which is a typical key-lock plot that functions as a vehicle for the novel’s investigation of notions of trauma and representation. The symbol of the lock is a present absence, which alludes to the empty coffin of Oskar’s father that represents the characters’ (most recent) trauma. In addition, the key-lock plot illustrates the nature of Oskar’s response to the loss of his father; by finding the lock that belongs to the key, he hopes to be able to assign meaning to the death of his father, and to feel more secure in a post-September 11 world. Nevertheless, as Sørensen points out, “the outcome of the search is [...] as disappointing as any post-modern quest for epistemological insight.” Analogous to Everything is Illuminated, the search merely reveals the traumas of others. The Blacks that Oskar visits seem to be a collection of random, often quirky, individuals. It is important to note, however, that the majority of these are seriously traumatized themselves. For Oskar, and also for the reader, the world, or at least New York City, appears to be comprised solely of traumatized people.

Eventually, the search for the lock leads Oskar to William Black, who auctioned off his late father’s belongings, and thereby accidentally left the key to his father’s deposit box in the vase that Oskar’s father bought. During the conversation with William Black, Oskar acquires little knowledge about his father’s reasons for buying the vase, the main topic is the death of William Black’s father. Oskar resents this, for he states, “I didn’t want to hear about death. It was all anyone talked about, even when no one was actually talking about it.” This in part reflects Oskar’s sense of exceptional sorrow and suffering, yet also displays the lack of meaning and significance of much of what is said about trauma. This is similar to Thomas Sr.’s realization that, despite his excessive letter-writing, he has not written anything meaningful.

After the death of his father, Oskar starts writing letters to people he admires (such as Stephen Hawking). In one of these letters, Oskar asks why he cannot stop inventing. Since the

24 See Cathy Caruth, Unclaimed Experience, 1-10. & Ann E. Kaplan, Trauma Culture, 24-41.
25 Foer, Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close, 71.
26 See Sørensen, “American Post-9/11 Fiction.”
27 Foer, Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close, 295.
death of his father he has been inventing things that would prevent or rescue people from
harmful situations. Clearly, Oskar’s inventing is a symptom of trauma, and he often does it
unwillingly, almost compulsively. Indeed, it functions as a coping mechanism for the trauma
that he has not yet recovered from. His other responses to trauma include shaking his
tambourine in unfamiliar neighborhoods, bruising himself (this is, of course, related to his
feelings of guilt), and “zipping up the sleeping bag of himself,” which signals repression of
emotions. Although many aspects of Oskar’s behavior indicate a melancholic state of mind,
which makes him “wear heavy boots,” he does not seem to experience the same difficulty
communicating trauma as his grandparents. Nonetheless, a close reading of his efforts to
articulate his sorrow brings to light many problematic facets. First of all, it is only toward
strangers that Oskar can express himself on the subject of his father’s death. Not
communicating with the people close to him, Oskar gathers information on the Internet (this
is where he finds the pictures of the man falling from the tower). Moreover, his knowledge of
random facts is characteristic of contemporary U.S. society, in which search engines such as
Google play a dominant part in many people’s lives. Incidentally, one of the chapters is called
“Googolplex” which is Oskar’s word for an immeasurable quantity of something.

In addition, it is remarkable that, in conversation with strangers, Oskar often adopts
the discourse that prevailed during the aftermath of September 11, using phrases such as
“terrorist attack,” whereas in more “private” settings, he refers to the event as “the worst day.”
This indicates two things: first of all that Oskar, in conversation with other victims of trauma,
both tries to claim the events as “his” and emphasize their “level of importance” on the
“scale” of traumatic experiences, and secondly that he is unable to truly make sense of the
events. The former realization recaptures Derrida’s notion of the “constructedness” of the
response to the events of September 11.28 The successful attribution of phrases such as
“terrorist attacks” to the events through a “techno-socio-political machine” demonstrate what
has really been lost in the events, namely the “system of interpretation, the axiomatic, logic,
rhetoric, concepts, and evaluations that are supposed to allow one to comprehend and to
explain precisely something like ‘September 11’.29” To name the events after their date, using
phrases such as “9/11” or “September 11,” illustrates the powerlessness of language to
adequately describe the events, which demonstrates that their meaning has not (yet) been
grasped. Thus, similar to the general American response, Oskar appropriates the

28 For a detailed discussion see “Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides: A Dialogue with Jacques Derrida,”
in Giovanna Borradori, Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida
(Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 85-94.
29 Borradori, Philosophy in a Time of Terror, 93 (italics in original).
“constructed” phrase “terrorist attack” in communication with others, to conceal his inability to make meaning of and qualify the event. At home, however, and in his writing, he uses his “own” phrase (“the worst day”) which far better indicates his state of knowledge on the traumatic events of September 11. Additionally, the repetition of the constructed names (and images) of the events functions to “neutralize, deaden, distance” the trauma, which in the novel most clearly can be observed in the character of Grandma, and her initial response to the TV images of September 11.30

Despite the disappointing outcome of Oskar’s search, and his painstaking attempts to communicate with his mother (he translates his father’s last message into Morse code and makes that into a bracelet for her), the quest’s ending serves as an unburdening of the heart for Oskar, and the reaffirmation of the mother-son relation. Upon returning home, after Oskar and Thomas Sr. have been digging up the coffin, Oskar’s mother is waiting for him. In the conversation that follows Oskar’s mom tells that his father had also called her on her cell phone. This, plus the fact that, for the first time since her husband died, she cries in Oskar’s presence, causes Oskar to conclude that: “[it] was also incredibly simple. In my only life, she was my mom, and I was her son.”31 It turns out that Oskar’s mother had been orchestrating his search all along, calling in advance to the Blacks that he would visit. Albeit a strange way to secure the safety of her son, she emerges as the absent yet constant factor in Oskar’s post-traumatic period. Moreover, when Ron’s background becomes known to Oskar, the apparent distance between son and mother shrinks to a minimum. His mother’s new “friend” turns out to have lost his wife and daughter in a car accident, whereupon he met Oskar’s mother in group therapy.

To conclude the character analysis, I want to emphasize that the novel is, on this level, predominantly concerned with issues of trauma and representation, through both oral and written means. It attempts to investigate the multiple and serious complications of representing trauma within the symbolic sphere, and lays bare the limitations of language in this process. The novel also provides insight into the symptoms of trauma, and herein underlines its (inevitable) bodily manifestation. In doing this, it does not undermine trauma’s severity as well as complexity and thereby safeguards its integrity in dealing with these issues. Nonetheless, this only forms part of the novel’s functioning as a trauma narrative. Its formal aspects add another layer of awareness regarding trauma’s complex nature, yet also address trauma’s temporal form, stressing the notion of movement, of time passing. This

30 Borradori, Philosophy in a Time of Terror, 87.
31 Foer, Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close, 324.
notion is chiefly accomplished by the active participation of the reader that is required by means of the novel’s form.

**Extremely Loud’s Form: Emphasizing the Process of Reading**

Already in the first chapter, Oskar narrates how he used to do a game with his father called “Reconnaissance Expedition.” This particular segment of the novel can be used as a tool, or method, in order to understand how the novel functions as a whole, i.e. how to interpret the interplay between form and content. For Oskar’s last expedition, his father gave him a map of Central Park without providing any further clues. Oskar desperately tries to extract these, but is kept in the dark by the many things he finds: “The more I found, the less I understood.”

When connecting dots on the map of Central Park that mark the places where he dug up something, he points out: “I could connect them to make almost anything I wanted, which meant I wasn’t getting closer to anything.”

The apparent random structure of the dots resembles the ostensible arbitrariness of the structure of the novel as a whole. Indeed, there seems to be no logic behind the different functions of each of the formal aspects. As Huehls points out:

> Sometimes it claims actually *to be* the thing that we are reading about (e.g. the colored handwriting or Oskar’s book) while at other times it seems merely content *to represent* that thing (e.g. the cards, letters, and elements of grandfather’s letters. [...] Lacking an internal and consistent logic, this undecidability has given reviewers good cause to chastise Foer. And yet, I would like to entertain the possibility that such undecidability might be the point.

The incorporated images, pages from Thomas Sr.’s books, as well as the name and index cards, thus function differently each time they appear. As noted before, pages from Thomas Sr.’s book can be found when he is having a “conversation” with someone (performative function), and when he recounts flipping through the book (representational function). The pictures of doorknobs in his chapters are part of the collection of pictures he took from everything in the apartment, and thus merely serve to document the real doorknobs. These images are what Huehls calls “ontological substitutes.”

Nevertheless, in a novel about the search for a lock these images become highly symbolic, representing the boy’s search and, more generally, the post-traumatic quest for knowledge and healing. The most interesting

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33 Ibid., 10.
34 Huehls, “Foer, Spiegelman, and 9/11’s Timely Traumas,” 50.
aspect, however, is the notion that the “undecidability might be the point.” When Oskar has
dug up several things in Central Park, he questions which of them present clues and which are
just things. He is desperate to know how to know when he is right. In reply, his father states:
“Another way of looking at it would be, how could you ever be wrong?”36 In this manner, if
undecidability itself is a clue, there is neither a right nor wrong interpretation of the things
Oskar dug up. This also implies that the dots on the map of Central Park, and the novel itself,
do not have a fixed interpretation or meaning.

Now, while this analysis further establishes the novel’s effective exposure of the
complex nature of trauma (and healing), the distinction Huehls makes between
representational and performative functions of the formal aspects of the novel should not be
assigned too much importance, for, as pointed out in chapter two, representation is always a
construction of reality, and a mere “reflection” of reality does not exist. Although it is
interesting to analyse each instance of formal experiment, the main issue is that the
incorporation of these techniques creates a specific temporal form. The meaning or function
of images, blank pages, name cards, etc., becomes known through the process of reading.
This implies that the meaning of certain images is only understood when read within the
novel’s (narrative) framework.

The result of this active process of reading, and engagement with the novel’s contents,
is twofold. Firstly, as Atchison points out, “Foer […] uses concepts of co-creating, by inviting
the reader to fill in the gaps or participate in the formation of the text, as a means to amplify a
moral awareness of handling difficult representations.”37 The novel’s form thus prompts self-
reflection on the issue of representing trauma. This, plus the insight into the nature of trauma
and healing that the reader gains from the novel, opens up a space for (secondary) witnessing
which can subsequently facilitate the working through of personal traumas. The second
function of the emphasis on the process of reading and understanding is the implied link with
the notion of time passing. The reader constantly has to renegotiate the acquired knowledge,
and “never lands on a stable or true understanding.”38 The novel’s ostensible incoherent
structure only adds to this notion. For instance, Oskar can narrate a certain event in the first
chapter that will be described later, from a different viewpoint, in one of Thomas Sr.’s or
Grandma’s chapters. What is most important, however, is the way in which this particular
structure advocates a certain notion of handling trauma. A novel that embraces and

36 Foer, Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close, 9.
37 Steven T. Atchison, “The Spark of the Text: Toward an Ethical Reading Theory for Traumatic Literature”
(PhD Diss., The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 2008), 10-15.
38 Huehls, “Foer, Spiegelman, and 9/11’s Timely Traumas,” 50.
emphasizes the movement of time seems to suggest that the most effective way to handle trauma is by mourning. As noted before, the difference between mourning (working through), and melancholy (acting out), is that the latter prevents one from moving on because it forces a psychological fixation on the (traumatic) past. In this sense, mourning can be seen to represent the (forward) movement of time, whereas melancholia represents time that stands still (at the moment of trauma’s impact). These considerations should also be taken into account when determining the function of the novel’s ending: while the reversed order of the images suggests that some sort of closure, through the reversal of time, has been reached, it is only by means of its “cinematic, real-time performance of motion” that this flipbook can function. Thus, it is only through time’s forward movement that the images can be reversed.

That the significance of certain formal elements only becomes known through the process of reading indicates that the traumas represented in Extremely Loud are to a large extent textual. The analysis of the novel’s content already demonstrated this as it examined the novel’s focus on the process of writing in relation to trauma and healing. Analyzing the many images in Oskar’s chapters, it becomes clear that it is only through reading the adjacent pages that their relevance becomes apparent. These images are selected from Oskar’s book “Stuff That Happened to Me,” yet it remains unclear why a particular image is included in Oskar’s book unless the context (Oskar’s story) is understood. Pierre Janet’s distinction between visual memory and narrative memory, the former of which denotes fragmented traumatic memory, the latter the “normal” cognitive registration of experiences, illustrates the importance of images for an effective representation of trauma. Additionally, Marianne Hirsch wonders whether the (re-) production and circulation of images of a traumatic event is a “contemporary form of witnessing or even mourning.” Foer’s decision to incorporate images in his September 11 trauma narrative thus seems natural, yet the notion that these images solely represent a melancholic state of mind (of either the characters or the author) should be reconsidered. On the one hand, pictures can said to be counterproductive for traumatic recovery, for, as Hirsch points out, they freeze time. Their inherent temporal form conflicts with the proposed effect of the novel’s structure. Additionally, Roland Barthes’ observations reveal that a picture is always something “that-has-been” and therefore insists on retrospection, allowing a “return of the dead” each time it is looked at, which causes a

39 Huehls, “Foer, Spiegelman, and 9/11’s Timely Traumas,” 43.
40 Codde, “Philomela Revisited,” 248.
42 Ibid., 71.
reinforcement of the link with the pre-traumatic past and thereby with the trauma itself. In this sense, pictures increase melancholia, and their “platitude,” the little that can actually be seen in the picture, can abate the emotional reaction to a traumatic experience and thereby serve as a coping strategy, which logically prevents an effective process of working through.

On the other hand, pictures have two distinct effects that can prove beneficial in dealing with trauma. First of all, when a picture is taken, it is not yet known what exactly will be in it. This only becomes clear when the picture is developed or looked at on the camera’s digital screen (it would be interesting to investigate whether the radically reduced amount of time between the act of photographing and the, now digital, presence of the picture, has altered the perception of the “time lapse” between the two moments—unfortunately, this does not fit within the scope of this dissertation). Nonetheless, however short the moment may be, there is a deferred moment of understanding, which resembles the reaction to a traumatic experience. As noted before, trauma is not cognitively registered at the moment of occurrence, and thus only known in its belated form. According to Hirsch, this time lapse, shared by both trauma and photography, can “enabl[e] photography to help us understand the traumatic events of September 11.”

In both cases, a certain amount of time is needed for the process of “meaning-making” to start. Secondly, the “platitude” of pictures does not exclusively flatten emotions. On the contrary, pictures can pierce through the layers of protection and emotional distance that one has constructed because they have a distinct bodily affect. As Hirsch explains, “images do more than represent scenes and experiences of the past: they can communicate an emotional or bodily experience to us by evoking our own emotional and bodily memories.” Barthes calls this the picture’s “punctum,” which is the “element [that] shoots out [...] like an arrow, and pierces me.”

This “wound” or “prick” is what causes a picture to be more than representation, since it creates a material connection between the picture’s object and the spectator. A victim of trauma can consequently be helped by pictures: by means of the punctum certain scenes can be evoked that have been lost in the incomplete registration of the traumatic event. This can provide access to the blind field of the victim’s memory. Nonetheless, it would be ineffective, or even harmful, to solely evoke these scenes. What is needed, instead, is the incorporation of these scenes into a narrative frame.

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43 Roland Barthes notes that the photograph’s Referent is always present, yet always-already in a deferred state: “[i]t has been here, and yet immediately separated; it has been absolutely, irrefutably present, and yet already deferred.” In: Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 9, 76-77.


45 Ibid., 82.

Hirsch, referring to the pictures she took on September 11 and the months that followed, states that they all required explanation when she shared them with friends later on. Thus, the fact that a picture only reveals a fragment of reality causes its “platitude” yet also triggers questions on what is missing, what has not been caught within the frame. It is both the bodily affect and the need for a narrative framework that causes the effectiveness of pictures within trauma narrative.

What Foer thus combines, in Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close, is the bodily manifestation of trauma (for both the characters and the readers, through the incorporation of images) and the notion that representation of trauma needs to be encoded in a narrative frame. The latter results from both the emphasis on the process of writing and communication in the novel’s content and the mode of reading required by the novel’s form. Moreover, the novel advocates a certain notion of handling trauma, which can be discerned through an analysis of the required mode of reading. Because readers constantly have to participate in the construction of the story, by filling in the gaps and “connecting the dots,” the focus shifts from the novel’s content to the process of understanding (the novel and trauma). This creates awareness of both the complexity of trauma and the difficulty of representing it. This understanding of the complexity and severity of trauma has also been realized through the aforementioned emphasis on its bodily manifestation. Another important aspect is that the many images and other formal experiments have to be related to their context in order to comprehend their significance in relation to the novel’s plot. This subsequently increases the importance of narrative for the representation of trauma. A last result of the novel’s formal structure concerns the notion of healing. Because one of the novel’s main concerns is the process of understanding and witnessing, it creates a specific temporal form that emphasizes the movement of time. Relating this to trauma and healing, it can be concluded that the desired means to deal with trauma is to mourn, or work through, the experience.

Indispensable for the process of working through is the translation of traumatic memory into narrative memory, and this is exactly what Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close does. As one of the first novels to deal with the trauma of September 11, it effectively exposes the nature and complexity of trauma, and the difficulty of representing it through language and literature, while at the same time insisting on the importance of narrative for traumatic representation and the process of working through.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Since its beginning, Freudian psychoanalysis has received fierce criticism, due to its complexity, eccentricity, and “unscientific” methods. Of course, the theory and practice can by no means be called unproblematic, and the extreme emphasis on sexual motivation as well as Freud’s own sexist morals for a large part contributed to the negative reception. It is to be lamented, however, that psychoanalysis’s contemporary negative connotation is largely due to its equation with a particular process (and the vocabulary that accompanies it) that runs from personal suffering, via working through, to closure, redemption, and healing. In the aftermath of September 11, the general U.S. response has often been labeled this way. Kaplan notes how the U.S. media were criticized for relating to the events through a “therapy-lens.”¹ In more general terms, Sontag points out that “politics was being replaced by psychoanalysis.”² Certainly, these observations are true, and in novels such as Foer’s, the emphasis is almost exclusively on the personal: the emotional, inner lives and struggles of the characters. In this respect, Mishra is very right to point out that in Extremely Loud, September 11 could have just as well been “a natural disaster, like the tsunami.”³

Nonetheless, what this dissertation has attempted to demonstrate, is that there is a valuable aspect in Freudian psychoanalysis that does not so much relate to its discourse of therapy and healing, but to its specific approach to trauma, as can be distinguished in its method of the talking cure. As pointed out in chapter two, Freudian psychoanalysis does not consider trauma to belong to “the excess of the Real.” In order to illustrate the direct relation between this notion of trauma and Foer’s novels, it is necessary to offer a final analysis of a particular aspect of Freud’s method. Undoubtedly, Freud is most often quoted on his assertion that dreams offer the “royal road” to the unconscious. Dream analysis is thus considered essential for the treatment of “hysteria” and other psychological disorders, and an integral part of the talking cure. However, Freud points out that dreams do not simply reflect the unconscious. Instead, the “raw material” (what Freud calls “latent content”) of a dream, is transformed by a process of “dream-work” into the “manifest content,” which is the dream as it is remembered. Clearly, the “latent content” is the unconscious, which does not offer itself for analysis. Now, it would seem natural to assume that, for an effective treatment of the patient, the dream’s “latent content” needs to be “reached,” for this would bring to light the

unconscious struggles and wishes. Yet, Freud’s method of analysis focuses on the “dream-work”: the process of production of the dream. In fact, Eagleton argues that for Freud, the “‘essence’ of the dream [...] is not the raw materials or ‘latent content,’ but the dream-work itself: it is this ‘practice’ which is the object of analysis.”⁴ It is this particular interpretation of dream analysis that has a direct relation to trauma and its representation.

First of all, as mentioned in earlier chapters, Freudian psychoanalysis does not strive to reach the “Real of the trauma.” Freud’s notion of “Nachträglichkeit” indicates that trauma can only be known in its belated form, which is the occurrence of symptoms. Contrary to contemporary trauma theory, psychoanalysis does not consider the “Real” of trauma to lie beyond reach, in a pre-linguistic realm, since for psychoanalysis the “essence” of the dream (and thereby the unconscious) is the way it is produced. In other words, psychoanalysis is concerned with the how instead of the what: its object of analysis is the construction of trauma in the Symbolic, instead of its inscription in the Real. This interpretation of trauma has important consequences for its representation: if the “essence” of the dream, the dream-work, which is a transformation of its raw materials into a (relatively) comprehensible whole, is related to symbolic representation, and thereby literature, it can be concluded that literature is not a mere reflection of reality, but a form of production. Moreover, it is this aspect of production that is most important for literary analysis.

Clearly, this line of thinking shares many similarities with the essentials of post-structuralism. Contrary to the Yale deconstructionists, whose focus on language as a “prison-house” or “endless labyrinth” has resulted in a deadlock on notions of reality and representation, Derrida’s object of analysis is the production of reality within the Symbolic. His statement “Il n’y a pas de hors-texte,” indicates that we should not look beyond language for truth, reality and meaning, but instead look at the (power) processes within. This is of course similar to Freud’s argument that the “dream-work” is the essence of the dream. In terms of literary representation, Foer’s novels make explicit this process of production, and thereby combine a psychoanalytical as well as poststructuralist approach to trauma and representation. In both Everything is Illuminated and Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close, it is not so much the content that is of relevance, as the processes of production. This is why, in Everything is Illuminated, the disappointing outcome of the search is immediately revealed, and in Extremely Loud the arbitrary process of “connecting the dots” is highlighted. The emphasis in both novels is on the processes of communication and articulation of the traumas.

In *Everything is Illuminated* the focus is on the process of writing, whereas in *Extremely Loud* the process of reading, and the temporal experience of the novel’s reader, is negotiated. Yet, in both cases, the writer and reader are seen as producers of the text, and the main concern is their process of constructing and experiencing the text. The trauma narrative that draws attention to its “constructedness,” by emphasizing absence and difference (the words, or images, on the paper raise questions about what is left out, or how it could have been represented differently), attests to both a psychoanalytic and poststructural notion of trauma, language, and representation. The self-reflexive and unconventional form of Foer’s novels obviously goes hand in hand with such an approach. These novels do not offer the illusionary comfort of a coherent reflection, or representation, of reality. Rather, by exposing the (processes of) production of the narrative, they function both as a Freudian talking cure and a poststructural examination of the construction and appropriation of language.

Thus, it is not strange or coincidental that Foer’s novels demonstrate both a poststructural awareness of the “limits” of language and representation, as well as a belief in the “therapeutic” function of the talking cure (through writing and reading), for these notions are not at all antagonistic on a theoretical level. As a consequence, what Foer’s novels do, instead of offering the reader a story of trauma and healing, is that they effectively expose trauma, in all its complexity, by means of narrativization. It is not despite language, that trauma is exposed, but because of language. While for contemporary trauma theory language is the main obstacle on the road to recovery, because it blocks the path to the “Real” or “truth” of the trauma, for Freudian psychoanalysis language is effectively the solution to a state of traumatic suffering. It is important to point out that contemporary trauma theory does not consider the representation of trauma to be irrelevant, or useless. On the contrary, trauma literature is particularly valued in this respect. Yet, there is an important difference: the value of language and symbolic representation *an sich*. For trauma theory, literature is valuable because it is the closest one can get to the “Real of trauma,” for psychoanalysis, language and literature is valuable because this is the place where trauma is constituted, can be exposed, and possibly healed.

As pointed out in the introduction, the post-September 11 world feels different and more “real.” Nevertheless, since the field of research on the characteristics of this period of time is still in its infancy, it is difficult to determine the exact levels of change and continuity. In dissertation I have attempted to contribute to the evaluation of the contemporary world by illustrating the perception of trauma and representation put forward in the novels of one of the main voices of a new generation of American writers. It can be concluded that this
contemporary author handles trauma differently than many of his postmodern predecessors. The “limits” of language do not force Foer to resort to the world of Tralfamadorians, and their “unearthly” notion of time, or other existentialist writing similar to Vonnegut’s. Instead, in a positive “twist” to poststructural notions of language, Foer moves beyond the excess of postmodern “serene linguistic nihilism” towards a more practical and real-life interpretation of the value of language and literature. In this sense, the novels articulate the literary perspective of “New Sincerity,” which already emerged in the 1990s but undoubtedly had to be redefined after September 11, as it faced a trauma of fictional proportions. In response to this trauma, Foer, in line with this new literary style, shows a concern with “traditional” values of family, love and home, as well as a new faith in the redemptive power of (trauma) literature. Both aspects have been criticized and labeled as sentimental, just as psychoanalysis has been denounced for its vocabulary of trauma and healing. Nevertheless, these connotations only offer a single side of the coin, and conceal the valuable aspect of both psychoanalysis and the “sentimentality” in Foer’s novels. For what to do when all truths, meaning, and value has been erased? Ultimately, Foer responds to the crucial question posed by Nicole Krauss: “Once you’ve given up everything, […] don’t you have to set down the first mark?” Foer does this by means of a return to a psychoanalytic conception of trauma, and a Romantic understanding of literature as healing. In other words, the “hip” and “unconventional” young author is not so new in his understanding of literature and trauma. This is easily forgotten due to the postmodernist attempt to deconstruct and devalue earlier literary and psychoanalytic perspectives. Nevertheless, like Jonathan Bate, who writes about literature’s capacity to heal and change the world, albeit in an environmental context, Foer clearly believes that literature is “the place where we save the earth.”

6 Terry Eagleton, Literary Theory, 125-127, 160.
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