

Holocaust and Jewish identity in Jonathan Safran Foer's Narratives

Good afternoon.

My paper comes from a section of my doctoral dissertation where I study the work of Jonathan Safran Foer, a Jewish-American novelist teaches creative writing at New York University. Born in Washington, D.C., to Albert Foer, a lawyer and president of the American Antitrust Institute, and Esther Safran Foer, the daughter of Holocaust survivors born in Poland. Mrs. Foer now works as the Senior Advisor at the Sixth & I Historic Synagogue. Foer graduated from Princeton in 1999 with a degree in philosophy, and traveled to Ukraine to further expand the work he had started in his dissertation. This text became his first novel, *Everything Is Illuminated*, published by Houghton Mifflin in 2002. and it earned him a National Jewish Book Award (2001) and a Guardian First Book Award (2002). Foer has authored three fictional novels: *Everything is Illuminated* (2002); *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005) and *Here I am* (2016). He has also written *Tree of Codes*, in 2010 an experimental novel designed with the style of die-and-cut and *Street of Crocodiles*, a 1934 collection of short stories based on the work of Bruno Schulz, transforming a backdrop pre-war stories into a backdrop post-war novel. *Tree of Codes* is an artwork, in the form of a book, created by Foer. The publisher, Visual Editions, describes it as a "sculptural object". Foer himself explains the writing process to the New York Times as follows: "I took my favorite book, Bruno Schulz's *Street of Crocodiles*, and by removing words carved out a new story". My paper researches the narrative strategies used by Jonathan Safran Foer in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly*

Close to show how the author displays elements of Jewish identity and Holocaust memories. In addition, it explores the presence of trauma in survivors' lives.

This paper analyzes the author's narrative approach in his critical reassessment of some past events involving individual and collective traumas: the attacks of September 11th and the firebombings of Dresden during World War Two, the Holodomor – the Ukrainian genocide, and more. In particular, I study *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (2005) and the firebombings of Dresden during World War II. I explore the narrative strategies, photographs, and different discursive forms present in the novel to highlight the postmodernist relationship between literature and history and how trauma connects them.

According to Hutcheon (1991), "In historiographic metafiction there is no pretense of simplistic mimesis. Instead, we create our own versions of reality. But, if we are to create our own version of reality, these versions should be based in critical reasoning. The recreation undertaken in a work of historiographic metafiction is the revisiting of historical events that actually existed, and the critical reflection about these events and the factors that led them to be considered "historical facts". By presenting ideas in this way, postmodern narrative restates or rewrites the past, in fiction and in history. And this is what Foer does in his work.

Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close is presented in three sections by narrators who maintain a dialogic relationship: Oskar, a nine-year old boy whose father passed away in the attacks on September 11th, accidentally breaks a vase on the one-year anniversary of the death of his father. Inside, he finds a key in an envelope named "Black". With his wild imagination, Oskar embarks on a quest to find every

person in New York City with the last name "Black" in order to solve the "mystery of the key";

Both Oskar's grandparents, parents of his father, Thomas Schell, and survivors of the Dresden firebombings that occurred between February 13th and 15th in 1945, tell accounts of their memories about this earlier trauma; [pausa] and finally, Oskar's grandmother narrates another story through a letter she wrote to her grandson, sharing her life story and offering young Oskar elements of his own identity, elements that his father should have shared with him throughout his upbringing. The second narrative tells the story of Oskar's grandparents, his father's parents, who are survivors of the Dresden bombings. The vision of his grandparents can be explained by Márcio Seligmann-Silva (2003, p.47-48): [pausa para transparência Sellingman-Silva]

Testimonial Literature is a concept that in recent years has caused many theorists to revise the relationship between literature and "reality." The concept of testimony shifts the "real" to a shady area: to testify, as a rule, is something exceptional that requires an account. This story is not only a journalistic report but is also marked by the singular element of the "real" [...]. One who testifies uses language in an exceptional way to recount his story: he breaks the seals of language that try to conceal the "unspeakable" that sustains it. The language of testimony is first and foremost a feature that comes from loss, from an absence, but that never compensates in a way that is perfect or even satisfying. [my translation]

The grandparents, both Dresden survivors, are characters that personify elements of trauma, that reveal traits of silence and impact the narrative. As an example, after the firebombings Oskar's grandfather lost the ability to speak and began to communicate by means of a notebook, where he wrote brief messages, often offering the "listener" repeated responses, obtained by flipping the pages of

his notebooks. Additionally, the grandfather has two tattooed hands: on the left, he tattooed the word "Yes" and on the right, the word "No". [slide] This is his way of simplifying everyday conversations.

The grandmother, at some point in her life, decided to recount her history, using an old typewriter without ink. The result of her efforts is a book of two thousand blank pages, as the narrator describes:

[pausa – transparência das páginas em branco]

The pages of her grandmother's story, in white, reveal the erasure of her past, as if the War had silenced everything that had been living there; As if the incendiary bombardment had been able to burn grandfather's memories or his ability to talk about his life up to that episode. The life of the grandmother, until the bombing, became a buried story, muted, she managed to get on with life, but never go back to the past.

Orlandi (2007) expands on this concept;

When man, in his history, perceived silence as meaning, he created language to hold it. The act of speaking is to separate, to distinguish and, paradoxically, to glimpse silence and to avoid it. This gesture discipline it to mean, for it is already a project of meaning settlement. Language stabilizes the movement of the senses. In silence, instead, sense and subject move widely. In short: when man individuated (instituted) silence as something significantly discernible, he established the space of language. [...] The words are multiple, but the silences are too. [my translation] (ORLANDI, 2007, p. 27-28)

Thus, we can consider that the importance of the silence of both the

grandfather and the history, typed by the grandmother resides in the fact that the past, for them, could be a space without any element to be rescued, with nothing better to teach, nothing Important to be revisited and passed on. One should point out the link between the two narratives, connected by the grandfather's letters sent his son, Thomas, victim of the terrorist attacks. All the envelopes the grandfather sent were empty, as if he had nothing to say. And all the letters were stored in a piece of the grandfather's luggage, used to fill the empty coffin of his son who was symbolically buried.

Freud and Lacan propose about the concept of traumatic neurosis, introduced by Freud in 1893, that trauma is capable of triggering pathological manifestations, as seen with Oskar's grandfather: [pausa para transparência do Freud]

The root cause of traumatic neurosis is not insignificant physical damage, but the effect of the shock- the mental trauma. Similarly, our research revealed that for many [...] of the hysterical symptoms, precipitating causes could only be described as psychological trauma. Any experience that can evoke distressing emotions- such as fear, anxiety, shame or physical pain- can act as a trauma of this nature, and whether it does or not naturally depends on the susceptibility of the affected person [...]. [emphasis added] (Freud, 1987, p. 43)

Nowadays, artistic manifestations observed in the post-modern world are marked by a diversity of experimentations with language. In *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, Foer incorporates various media elements; he plays with elements of typographic style and richly intersperses images throughout the text. The following examples can be cited: the use of photographs and the use of pages that are either left blank or complemented with colorful markings and annotations. We

can especially see this when Oskar's grandfather uses different mediums, like notebooks, to write letters and transmit messages in the absence of an ability to speak. When the grandfather runs out of space his notebook, he begins to write smaller, leaving less space between the words and scrambling the letters, as if he was beginning to write on a page that had already been written on. At one point, the grandfather makes a call to the grandmother and communicates by using the alphanumeric keypad of a public payphone, as seen in the following passage:

[transparency - telefonema and overlapping text]

What follows is nearly three pages of messages coded by a alphanumeric keypad that, since the reader cannot read or understand, present the reader with yet another stretch of silence.

In addition to the clear unfolding of the trauma for this young couple, the trail of the presence of the Jewish culture and identity is present in the section where the grandfather, on the night of the bombardment of Dresden, goes in search of Anna, his girlfriend, and passing by Zoo, see the horror of destruction and the suffering of animals. **Tza'ar ba'alei chayim** (literally means: "the suffering of living creatures"[1]) is the Jewish principle which bans inflicting pain on animals. This concept is not clearly enunciated in the written Torah, but was accepted by the Talmud (Bava Metzia 32b) as being a Biblical mandate. It is linked in the Talmud from the Biblical law requiring people to assist in unloading burdens from animals (Exodus 23:5): "If you see the donkey of someone who hates you fallen down under its load, do not leave it there; be sure you help them with it."

The grandfather recalls what he found when he passed the zoo on the day of the bombing, as perceived in this somewhat lengthy and final quote:

I don't know how many animals I killed, I killed an elephant, it had been thrown twenty yards from its cage, I pressed the rifle to the back of its head and wondered, as I squeezed the trigger, Is it necessary to kill this animal? I killed an ape that was perched on the stump of a fallen tree, pulling its hair as it surveyed the destruction, I killed two lions, they were standing side by side facing west, were they related, were they friends, mates, can lions love? I killed a cub that was climbing atop a massive dead bear, as it climbing atop its parent? I killed a camel with twelve bullets, I suspected it wasn't a carnivore, but I was killing everything, everything had to be killed, a rhinoceros was banging its head against a rock, again and again, as if to put itself out of its suffering, or to make itself suffer, I fired at it, it kept banging its head, I fired again, it banged harder, I walked up to it and pressed the gun between its eyes, I killed it, I killed a zebra, I killed a giraffe, I turned the water of the sea lion's tank red, an ape approached me, it was the ape I had shot before, I'd thought I'd killed it, it walked up to me slowly, its hands covering its ears, what did it want from me, I screamed, 'What do you want from me?' I shot it again, where I thought its heart was, it looked at me, in its eyes I was sure I saw some form of understandings, but I didn't see forgiveness, I tried to shoot the vultures, but I wasn't a good enough shot, later I saw vultures fattening themselves on the human carnage, and I blamed myself for everything. [FOER, 2005, pp. 211]

Thank you.