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## 1. Introduction

“I would never command you to write a story that is as it occurred in the actual, but I would command you to make your story faithful”, Alex writes to Jonathan in *Everything Is Illuminated* (Foer 1-2).<sup>1</sup> Alex’s statement illustrates a central problem discussed by the work: what does it mean to write truthfully in creative literature when one is dealing with the great traumas of history? *Everything Is Illuminated* is a fusion of the magic realist novel, the postmodern novel and the memoir, blending parody, humour, the absurd and the fantastical with accounts of one of the worst atrocities of the twentieth century. To represent the unimaginable, it is sometimes necessary to go beyond history to explore the nature of events that can hardly — or perhaps not at all — be fully understood. It is exactly its position in the crossing point between these different genres and writing styles that makes the novel able to explore the question of what the boundaries of artistic freedom are. To what extent can a writer imagine the Holocaust without breaching the responsibility to remember the victims and tell the story to future generations?

*Everything Is Illuminated* is the debut novel of the Jewish American writer Jonathan Safran Foer and was first published in 2002. It quickly became a bestseller and was met with general critical acclaim, receiving *The Guardian First Book Award* and *The National Jewish Book Award* (Burkeman; Solomon). The work is a fictionalized account of the author’s own journey to Ukraine in search of his grandfather Safran’s Ukrainian home town Trochenbrod, which was destroyed during the Second World War (Burkeman). In Foer’s work, Trochenbrod is referred to as Trachimbrod, a magic realist variant of the actual shtetl.<sup>2</sup> The novel takes for its subject people, events or places which once existed, but the journey, the village and the characters of the novel are all fictionalized versions, including the narrator who goes by the same name as the author, Jonathan Safran Foer.

The story is told through three interwoven strands of narration. In the first narrative, the fictional Jonathan travels to Ukraine in search of Augustine, the woman who saved his grandfather during the Second World War. With him on this comical road trip are two members of the family business “Heritage Touring”: his young Ukrainian translator Alex, Alex’s grandfather — who, despite his claim to blindness, is their driver — and Grandfather’s

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<sup>1</sup> Foer, Jonathan Safran. *Everything Is Illuminated*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2002. Kindle file. All future references are to this edition and are given by page number parenthetically in the text.

<sup>2</sup> A shtetl is a small Jewish town.

so-called guide dog, Sammy Davis, Junior, Junior.<sup>3</sup> This journey is narrated by Alex and can be described as a realist quest narrative in which Jonathan tries to find the ruins of Trachimbrod.<sup>4</sup> Alex's first-person account of their journey is marked by his unusual choice of vocabulary and syntax, since he is an English student who aspires to a higher language level than he is able to master. The second segment of the novel is a magic realist story narrated by Jonathan and is a fictionalized history of the shtetl and the lives of his imagined ancestors from 1791 to its destruction during a German air raid in 1942. The third narrative consists of Alex's letters to Jonathan, written after the journey to Trachimbrod, in which he comments on both Jonathan's magic realist and his own realist narrative, and this section adds a metafictional dimension to the novel.

Although the two main narratives, that of the journey in Ukraine and that of Trachimbrod's history, are both characterized by colourful characters, inventiveness and a comic tone, the mode of the stories change as the narratives move closer to the Holocaust. In the realist section, Jonathan does not succeed in finding Augustine and realizes that where Trachimbrod used to be, there is now nothing. In Jonathan's magic realist depiction of Trachimbrod, the shtetl is finally destroyed, its inhabitants unable to prevent each other from drowning in the over-crowded river.

Even though *Everything Is Illuminated* uses historical events as a starting point, it approaches these events in a highly imaginative way, and the fictionalizing of the Holocaust has been an ethically challenging area. Because of its magic realist depiction of Holocaust events, the novel has a potentially problematic relationship to history. In the face of Holocaust denial, there is a moral imperative to tell new generations the truth about the genocide that took the lives of approximately six million Jews (Sicher ix). What happens, then, when the Holocaust becomes an object for extensive fictionalization, for imaginative exploration and even — as is the case with *Everything Is Illuminated* — for fantastical and surreal invention? However, although the novel departs from the notion of historical accuracy through its magic realist depiction of a Jewish small town, the idea of faithfulness is still central to the work,

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<sup>3</sup> Throughout this paper, the name "Jonathan" will be used to refer to the fictional character, and not the actual author. Alex's grandfather will be referred to merely as "Grandfather", which is the name he goes by in the novel as well.

<sup>4</sup> I use the term "realism" to describe this part of the story with some reservations. For Morris, realist "literary modes of writing ... present themselves as corresponding to the world as it is", and they use "language predominantly as a means of communication rather than verbal display", while also "offering rational, secular explanations for all the happenings of the world so represented" (10). Alex's extravagant use of language in the novel is nothing if not a spectacular show of "verbal display"; however, this narrative does correspond to the world "as it is", especially in comparison to the story of Trachimbrod which is overflowing with magical and fantastical occurrences. Because of this, I find it justifiable to distinguish between the two narratives as respectively "realist" and "magic realist".

precisely because it problematizes its own relationship to history. Ideas of truth and what it means to write truthfully are often evoked as the two narrators debate the choices they make in their own storytelling. In this way, the novel challenges us to think about what we mean by “the truth”.

In this thesis, I start chapter 2 by outlining the theoretical issues that arise in the fictionalizing of the Holocaust, before discussing how the relationship between history writing and fiction may be complementary rather than oppositional. Although testimony has sometimes been given a superior status in Holocaust writing (Sicher xiii), I argue that the postmodern novel does not seek to challenge that genre, but complement it. Chapter 3 will explore how the question of Holocaust representation is addressed in the novel. Is it possible to gain knowledge of the past that we can be certain about? *Everything Is Illuminated* complicates the idea of historical knowledge: we can gain some access to the past, but this access is partial and subjective, and imagination is necessary in order to fill in the blanks. In chapter 4, I will look into how the concept of “truth” is defined in the novel itself. The problem about truthful writing is directly addressed in Alex’s metafictional writings, but the discussion of what it means to behave truthfully is also a much-debated topic for Jonathan’s fictionalized relatives. For both Alex and the citizens of Trachimbrod, it may paradoxically be more truthful to lie than to portray the world as it actually is.



## 2. Holocaust Literature

### 2.1. The ethics of Holocaust writing

A novel on Majdanek is either not a novel or not about Majdanek. (Wiesel “Beyond the Reach of Art?” 2)

Elie Wiesel, Auschwitz survivor and testimony writer, illustrates a central problem of Holocaust writing in this quotation which questions the legitimacy of the Holocaust novel: fictionalizing arguably the greatest trauma of the twentieth century is not unproblematic. For Wiesel, the horror of Auschwitz “defies imagination and perception”, and because of this, any fictional attempt to portray the realities of the concentration camps will always be unsuccessful (2). In this way, Holocaust fiction problematizes the very foundations of literature, as Efraim Sicher underlines when he asks if a novel is “by definition ... about something that has not really happened” (xi). To argue that a novel is unable to mediate atrocity suggests that the medium is somehow untruthful and subordinate to factual accounts. For many scholars of literature and history, art risks distorting reality and might even be unsuitable for portraying events of great humanitarian importance. According to Lawrence Langer, art must by definition change how we see life, “and this alters the purity (or in this case the impurity) of the original historical moment” (78). This does not imply that creating art about the Holocaust is altogether impossible, but Langer resists the idea of transforming the event into narratives of resistance, because it was actually “little more than ... a story of Jewish murder” (77). For Langer, then, Holocaust fiction is not impossible in principle, but its validity depends on how the topic is approached. Commenting on the discussion of Holocaust representation, Berel Lang notes that although theorists disagree about the limits of artistic freedom in the context of the Holocaust, there is still a consensus that such representation *is* a challenge (x). Writing about the Holocaust is different from writing about other historical events. Sicher points out that there has been a tendency to hierarchize Holocaust writing according to its closeness to historical fact:

The “Holocaust novel” has been an entangled battlefield, crisscrossed by ideological minefields and rhetorical quagmires. Most discussion of Holocaust writing starts, quite rightly, from the premise that testimony provides a primary source for witnessing, and all that follows must be secondary, inferior or discredited. (xiii)

If the act of testimony becomes an essential vehicle for the transmission of history, this has implications for which modes of narration are considered acceptable. For Wiesel, testimony is the only genre able to convey the Holocaust: while novelists may choose to write about the event, they can never fully understand it if they have not themselves experienced it, and the truth about the concentration camps can therefore only be told through testimony (“Beyond the Reach of Art?” 2). In his opinion, the Holocaust is unimaginable, which is what makes Holocaust art impossible: “Between the dead and the rest of us there exists an abyss that no talent can comprehend” (2).

Investigating this particular historical event in a novel — for example *Everything Is Illuminated* — is therefore controversial. Investigating the critical reception of Holocaust novels not written by survivors, Sue Vice notes that many critics seem to think that “to write Holocaust fictions is tantamount to making a fiction of the Holocaust” (1). She found that the author’s identity is more important to critics reviewing Holocaust novels, as authority “appears to be conferred on a writer if they can be shown to have a connection with the events they are describing” (4). Primary status has often been given to the initial witness accounts because of their proximity to the Holocaust itself. These personal testimonies were written by survivors who wanted to convey the atrocities they experienced to the world (Sicher 3). Primo Levi’s *If this is a man* and Wiesel’s *Night* are examples of such memoirs, depicting their survival in Auschwitz. For Wiesel, the act of witnessing was a moral responsibility, necessary in order to ensure that humanity would not forget the Holocaust, and testimony became both a force of resistance and an act of remembrance (*Night* viii). In his view, the point of the “Final Solution” was not only to exterminate the Jewish people, but also to eradicate the traces of Jewish existence altogether. According to Wiesel, “to forget the dead would be akin to killing them a second time” (xv). Testimonies, then, are necessary in order to preserve memory, but for Wiesel the conveying of this memory must derive from first-hand experience (“Beyond the Reach of Art?” 2). Likewise, Inga Clendinnen privileges testimony over fictional accounts of the Holocaust. For her, reading fiction is different from reading history, since “each establishes quite different relationships between writer and subject, and writer and reader” (Clendinnen 170). In her opinion, fiction is a kind of play which hinders compassion because the reader has no responsibility towards imaginary characters, whereas reading about events that actually occurred places the reader in a moral contract with the individuals who died (170). Clendinnen is still positive about fictionalizing history, because novels can explore the interior of the human mind in a way the historian cannot, but also argues that in novels not

based on actual experience, compassion becomes as fictive as the characters themselves (171-2).

## 2.2. The Holocaust novel

Even though it is debated whether exploring the Holocaust through fiction is acceptable, there exists a considerable body of works which do exactly this. The definition of a Holocaust novel is somewhat elusive because of the wide range of novels the term might be said to classify. Holocaust works burst “the already fuzzy generic boundaries of autobiography and fiction, memoir and fantasy, historical document and realist novel” (Sicher xii). Sicher does not try to attempt to define all Holocaust novels under a single term, proposing that to map the boundaries of an eventual genre might not even be desirable, “given the nature of the Holocaust together with the general postmodern fluidity of generic rules and styles” (xviii). Likewise, Jenni Adams rejects a straight-forward definition of the term, because a “totalizing approach” might risk to “schematize this body of literature in ultimately restrictive and reductive ways” (Traces, Dis/Continuities, Complicities 1). Instead, she defines the term broadly as “literary works for which the historical context of the Holocaust is of major significance” (1). In this definition, a diverse selection of literary works may be considered Holocaust novels if they are in some way concerned with this Second World War genocide.

*Everything Is Illuminated* contains no references to concentration camps or incarceration, but describes two incidents of mass murder conducted by the “Einsatzgruppen” in Ukraine during the war, and the Holocaust is clearly of central importance to the novel which revolves around the effects of past traumas on the post-war generations. Robert Eaglestone defines the work as a third generation survivor novel because of its focus on the grandchildren of Holocaust survivors (*The Holocaust and the Postmodern* 128). Originally, the “second generation” was a clinical term for the children of Holocaust survivors who suffered the legacy of their parents’ experiences (Sicher 133). The “third generation” of Holocaust novelists is a term applied in the same way to the generation whose grandparents lived during the war. Third generation novelists are further distinguished from the second generation by how “they stand at an ironic distance from the crippling effects of trauma” (173). These generational terms do not necessarily refer only to those who had biological ties to Holocaust survivors, but may also include people who grew up during the post-war decades (173). Zeitlin has noted the continuous engagement with the Holocaust among contemporary

artists and has termed the post-Holocaust writers “vicarious witnesses”, whose temporal distance from the event is partly what fuels the need to negotiate it through art:

Far from foreclosing any identification with these events, this very belatedness leads them urgently to seek ways of linking the present to the past. Even more, it seems to engender the desire of representing the past through modes of re-enactment — even reanimation — through which the self, the “ego” of “the one who was not there,” now takes on a leading role as an active presence. (6)

Zeitlin’s concept of the “vicarious witness” seems to resonate especially well with *Everything Is Illuminated*, which includes the inscription of the self as a fictional character who attempts to rediscover the past by returning to the site of atrocity. A novel like this might not contest Wiesel’s view that authentic experience is necessary in order to portray the humanitarian catastrophe of the Holocaust, because its purpose is very different. While *Night* attempted to give readers some degree of understanding about life — and death — in concentration camps, *Everything Is Illuminated* instead investigates how the post-war generations deal with a traumatic family history. However, in order to describe the calamities of his fictionalized relatives Foer is reliant on the imagination, and what characterizes the newer generation of Holocaust authors is exactly the fact that they have to “imagine an experience they have not personally experienced” (Sicher xxi). It is this inventiveness which gives rise to debates concerning Holocaust writing. Is there room for artistry in an atrocity so horrific it can hardly be imagined at all?

### **2.3. Fiction and history**

It is impossible to investigate the relationship between history and fiction without first having established some discussion about what is meant by notions such as *historical facts* and *historical truths*. The view of testimony as the preferred mode for the description of atrocity depends on a hierarchical positioning of real experience over fictional exploration. But such a concept of a stable truth was contested by postmodern theory which questioned totalizing and unified perspectives of history. As Hayden White points out, history writing requires a narrative if it is to be more than a chronological list of events. Like fiction, history has to provide plots in order to present a coherent image of an event (“Emplotment” 38). In his argument, the borders between literature and history are unclear because they are both

dependent on narration. Similarly, Sicher focuses on the similarities between the two different modes of representation as he claims that both fiction and history are narrative constructions and therefore not mutually exclusive (xiii). For Linda Hutcheon, “both history and fiction are discourses, they both constitute systems of signification by which we make sense of the past” (89).

The same scepticism about truth is highly evident in *Everything Is Illuminated*. The narrators of the novel are anything but invisible, constantly reminding us of their presence and their active role in the interpretation of events. For example, Alex is particularly preoccupied with favourable self-representation: “First I am burdened to recite my good appearance. I am unequivocally tall. ... I have an aristocratic smile and like to punch people. My stomach is very strong, although it presently lacks muscles” (Foer 3).<sup>5</sup> His insistence on being physically strong — despite his stomach appearing to be “very fat” (3) — alerts the reader to the unreliability of his narrative. Likewise, although the magical Trachimbrod narrative is told in the third person, it is consistently highlighted as an act of narration. “I’ve imagined her many times” (75), Jonathan writes when describing his first ancestor Brod, a baby mysteriously born from the river after rising from the wreckage of a crashed wagon, showing how imagination has taken an active part in the shaping of his story. While there is a possibility that Jonathan’s first ancestor was named Brod and that she was a real person, her lifetime experiences are so remote from his that he cannot know what she looked like. Jonathan takes the liberty of imagining in the dark spaces of history, but also explicitly points to his story as an act of invention. Right before the bombs are about to hit Trachimbrod, the narrator comments that it becomes “almost impossible to go on” (269), and this interruption directs the reader’s attention to the act of narration, similarly functioning to dissolve the illusion of the narrator as a neutral presence in the text. Also, we cannot be entirely sure what happened when “Trachim B’s doubleaxle wagon either did or did not pin him against the bottom of the Brod River” (8), the villagers having different opinions as to who this Trachim B was or if it really was he who drowned in the river. The Trachimbrod strand of the novel reminds us to be alert to what happened, how it happened and who told how it happened, and in this way it emphasizes the difficulty of determining what actually occurred in a given historical event. In the same way, the realist strand reminds us to be cautious of written history. As Jonathan explains that Ukrainians treated Jews badly during the war, Alex immediately objects,

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<sup>5</sup> Alex’s slightly skewed view of himself and the world, in addition to his unusual way of expressing himself, is what creates much of the comedy in the story, but is also a way of drawing attention to the gap between his descriptions and reality.

claiming that it “does not say this in the history books” (61). In Foer’s novel, everything is done to show the reader that both history and its narration are highly dependent on interpretation and subjectivity.

### **2.3.1. Fiction and the problem of Holocaust denial**

The idea that the concept of historical truth is problematic does not mean that there is no such thing as an actual historical event: it means that events are only accessible through language or visual signs and must therefore involve some degree of interpretation. Friedlander acknowledges the relativism posed by postmodernists and argues that there must be room for art to exist alongside historical narratives, but maintains that there is still a reality underneath the rhetoric of narration, and that this is what separates history and fiction (20). To question the idea of truth can be problematic in the face of Holocaust denial, a phenomenon defined by Eaglestone as “the claim that the murder of approximately six million Jews by the Nazis during the Second World War did not happen” (*The Holocaust and the Postmodern* 227).

Self-titled historian David Irving is among those who argued that the scope of the Holocaust was greatly exaggerated, claiming amongst other things that the Nazi leadership had no intention of exterminating the Jews, and that their deaths were not caused by death camps but epidemics and Allied bombing raids (Evans, *Telling Lies About Hitler* 155). Evans suggests that an increase in such Holocaust denial can be linked to postmodern thought: it is “reflected in the postmodern intellectual climate ... in which scholars have increasingly denied that texts had any fixed meaning” (*In Defence of History* 241). Derrida’s notion of the instability of textual meaning was interpreted by some critics as an attack on reality itself, but for Thomson, such an understanding of deconstruction fails to take into consideration the complexity of Derrida’s understanding of history (Thomson 305). In Eaglestone’s opinion, the postmodern distrust of absolute objectivity is instead something which can combat Holocaust denial precisely because it encourages the investigation of the assumptions underlying the discipline of history (*The Holocaust and the Postmodern* 241). According to him, postmodernism does not deny the concept of truth, but seeks to problematize the ways in which the writing of the past differs from the past as experienced (234). To insist that there exists no objective method of representing history does not imply that no objective history exists — only that accessing and representing it in retrospect is difficult. Fictional writing is a way of making this problem of representation apparent: the narrators of *Everything Is Illuminated* are very aware that they are being “nomadic with the truth” (Foer 179), and since

they explicitly state so, the reader is constantly reminded of the gap between the telling of a story and the historical reality underlying that story. Fiction represents an alternative method of mediating events, but one that does not have the same obligation to objectivity as history, and it may also be used to explore history in ways that do not contradict, but supplement, historical accounts. Eaglestone suggests that fiction works to illuminate history in a way that is not factual but existential:

[T]here is another way of understanding truth which is not contradictory but complementary: not as ‘the agreement or correspondence of a judgement, an assertion or a proposition with its object’, but as an existential uncovering or revelation, a way of showing ‘who we are and how things are in the world’. This truth reveals something not quantitatively but qualitatively different from the historical record.  
(“Identification” 137)

These two different definitions of “truth” show how history and fiction may complement each other. While Holocaust fiction may depart from “facts”, it provides a different framework for understanding historical events. The relationship between history and fiction is not hierarchical according to this view, but supplementary. *Everything Is Illuminated* is not a truthful account in the sense that it does not attempt to describe events as they actually took place. But in depicting atrocities imaginatively, it is still able to say something, in Eaglestone’s sense of the word, truthful about the nature of the events. Similarly, LaCapra suggests that fiction

may also involve truth claims on a structural or general level by providing insights into phenomena such as slavery or the Holocaust, by offering reading of a process or period, or by giving at least a plausible “feel” for experience and emotion which may be difficult to arrive at through restricted documentary methods. (13)

For him, there is no simple binary opposition between fiction and historiography, but a complicated interaction (15). Likewise, White argues that fiction and historiography are similar in important ways and, unlike Eaglestone, White does not see them as representing two different categories of truth (“Factual Representation” 122). In his opinion, what distinguishes the two modes of writing is only the fact that they might deal with different types of events: historiography writes about events that are observable and can be assigned to

a specific time and space, while fiction can *also* write about events that are entirely imaginary (122). Both aim to portray experience, although novels might do this figuratively. For White, “the image of reality which the novelist thus constructs is meant to correspond in its general outline to some domain of human experience which is no less ‘real’ than that referred to by the historian”, and this also holds for “even the most ludic and seemingly expressivist discourse” (122). Both must meet the standards of the truths of *correspondence* and *coherence*: history must, like literature, be coherent in order to connect otherwise separate events in order to make sense, and fiction must, like history, correspond to a representation of the world and “be ‘adequate’ as an image of something beyond itself” (122).

If we apply White’s definition of truth as correspondence and coherence, *Everything Is Illuminated* may be no less “truthful” than a historical account of the Holocaust. Like history, a novel of the Holocaust corresponds to the actual event even though the method of portrayal differs. As LaCapra, White and others have argued, the dichotomy between fiction and fact could be false if one accepts that the areas of history and literature overlap. Holocaust fiction, including magic realist fiction, might represent reality differently through symbolism or by imagining events, but is still not confined to itself: indeed, its very purpose is to portray people and places correspondent to the outside world. As Foer’s narrator Alex noticed, truthful writing may not necessarily be the same as depicting events as they actually occurred.

#### **2.4. The Holocaust testimony and the postmodern Holocaust novel**

As shown, fiction and historiography need not automatically be considered oppositional methods of depicting events. Although testimonies are closer to the historical episode to the extent that they are based on real life experiences, they are also dependent on narrative techniques and a subjective point of view. This is not to say that fiction can in any way replace the uniqueness of the survivor’s experience; instead, I argue that they should be seen as different forms of representation which may serve different functions, but which can both be seen as ways of processing trauma through literature. Ruth Franklin argues that one *should* indeed write fiction about the Holocaust (13). For her, there is not one way to write about the Holocaust — instead, we need to “represent the vast multiplicity of voices and experiences that constitute the Holocaust” (20). Likewise, Lang holds that the Holocaust is both speakable and “ought to be spoken” and criticizes proponents of the opposite view, because to insist that the event is unimaginable while simultaneously trying to imagine it is a

“straightforward contradiction ... even if we give the phrase an honorific gloss by calling it a paradox” (17).

Testimony and fiction also share important traits. Like fiction, testimonies need to employ literary methods of narration by choosing and organizing events which are mediated through language. Franklin criticizes the supposition that the testimony is a genre set apart from fiction because every “*canonical work of Holocaust literature involves some graying of the line between fiction and reality*” (11; her emphasis). She maintains that although witness accounts attempt to portray remembered events, memory itself is an act of narration, and testimonies are, like fiction, the result of careful editing and the use of creative, imaginative language (11-3). Likewise, Sicher questions the accuracy of memory, with is “always reconstructed, always mediated, and always filtered through subjective hindsight” (xiii).

Eaglestone argues that many of the characteristics of the testimony are to be found in postmodern literature as well (“Identification” 136-7). In attempting to define testimony as a genre he suggests that one of its most distinguishing features is that it resists identification (118-9). Identification is the “grasping, or comprehending, of another’s experience as one’s own by ‘putting one’s self in their place’” and can be considered a major part of the reading process (*The Holocaust and the Postmodern* 16). The disturbance of that identification is achieved through interruptions in chronology and the narrative flow, use of narrative frame, and a lack of closure (“Identification” 134-5). This implies that the experience of reading testimony is very different from reading a novel — for Eaglestone, it is not the literature that changed with the Holocaust testimony, but the reading process. But there is a link between postmodern works and the genre of testimony in the sense that both resist identification:

Postmodern novels, too, mix genres, try to defy identification, lack closure and foreground their own textuality. Postmodern texts have found their way to similar textual strategies which have the ‘rhetorical potential and literary resonance’ which allow them perhaps to reflect a wider collective breakdown in the world. (136)

As we have already seen, *Everything Is Illuminated* is a work which draws attention to its own textuality through its intervening narrators and different stylistic registers. The lack of closure is also apparent as the novel ends in mid-sentence with Alex’s grandfather’s suicide note: “I

will walk without noise, and I will open the door in darkness, and I will”, leaving it open to interpretation as to what Grandfather’s last “I will” represents (Foer 275).<sup>6</sup>

The novel’s generic intricacy as a postmodern, magic realist road-trip narrative is further complicated by its autobiographical features. As author and narrator share major biographical traits such as name and background, the novel draws upon the conventions of the memoir, but it is still clearly fictional, thus blurring the borders between art and life. Hutcheon notes that this dissolving of generic boundaries is a typical trait of postmodern fiction (9). She uses the term “historiographic metafiction” to describe novels that encompass the material of history, but which are still distinctly self-reflexive as they attempt to rethink “the forms and contents of the past” (5).

While fiction can never replace the authenticity of experience that witness accounts offer, it does not necessarily follow, as Wiesel proposed, that it is or should be impossible to write a novel about Auschwitz. With regards to narrative structure there is not a clear break between the two genres since they both function to interrupt identification. As Franklin puts it, we “need literature about the Holocaust ... because of what literature uniquely offers: an imaginative access to past events, together with new and different ways of understanding them that are unavailable to strictly factual forms of writing” (13).

## 2.5. Autobiography and fiction

A comparison with Daniel Mendelsohn’s 2006 memoir *The Lost: A Search for Six of Six Million* might illuminate how even though memoirs and fiction approach historical material in different ways, they are both able to return to past events in ways that problematize the current-day access to these events. Like a testimony, *The Lost* insists on being a personal account of real life events as Mendelsohn traces the history of six Jewish relatives who disappeared from the Ukrainian Bolechow shtetl during the Second World War. Like the fictional Jonathan Safran Foer, he travels to Eastern Europe in search of knowledge of his Jewish family. In this, the two works are remarkably similar, but while Foer’s novel is fictional, Mendelsohn’s work includes authentic photographs and transcribed interviews with family members, who gradually help him move towards a fuller understanding of who his

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<sup>6</sup> Alex has earlier reflected on the importance of this phrase, as he wished he had answered “I will” to Grandfather’s request to borrow money to continue his search for Augustine. “I should have uttered nothing more, and allowed my ‘I will’ to speak for everything that I have ever had to say to my Grandfather” (215), he writes, and likewise, Grandfather lets his “I will” become his final words that speak everything he cannot say. Nevertheless, the absence of a final period creates a sensation that the novel opens up, rather than closes, with Grandfather’s death.

family members were and how they died. These two novels use very different approaches to the same topic: while Foer chooses to revisit the past by employing the techniques of magic realism, Mendelsohn uses the method of the historian in tracing reliable documents that might give answers about a historic past that *is* known and partly accessible. In the postscript, he underlines that the events, places and tape recordings are all accurate, determined to maintain the autobiographical contract with his readers (*The Lost* 507-8).

However, much like Foer, Mendelsohn emphasizes the instability of historical knowledge. He is able to find witnesses who lived in Bolechow and knew his family, but their information cannot be blindly trusted. The witnesses disagree, for example, on the date of “The Second Aktion”, an event in which many of the shtetl’s Jews were arrested and deported (223). History books are not always reliable either, as Mendelsohn demonstrates by showing how historian Yitzhak Arad, like many of the witnesses, supplied the wrong date for the “Aktion” (224). Also, as the writer gathers information in order to piece together the story of his family, he enlists the help of fiction, for example in this passage describing the death of his relative Ruchele:

[S]he took her inevitable turn, walked naked onto the plank — with what thoughts it is impossible to know ... but perhaps ... for the most fleeting moment, she thought of Jakob Grünslag, the boy whom she’d dated for a year and a half, his dark hair and eager smile — and standing on the plank, or perhaps at the edge of the freshly dug pit, with the bodies beneath her and the cold October air above, waited. (211)

Here, Mendelsohn attempts to imagine what Ruchele was thinking as she died, but this attempt is also presented as an act of the imagination as he continuously emphasizes that his envisioning may be mistaken by using words and phrases such as “perhaps”, “it is possible that” or “most likely” (210-1).<sup>7</sup> Although *The Lost* employs the tools of historical research, it constantly exposes its own gaps and thereby draws attention to its own limitations.

Interestingly, the Norwegian translation of Mendelsohn’s book also includes a recommendation written by Foer on the front cover, further highlighting the intertextual relationship between the two works (Mendelsohn, *Forsvunnet*). Although these separate explorations of Jewish European ancestry have a different relationship to reality — one insisting on its proximity to the real world, the other self-consciously drawing away from it —

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<sup>7</sup> Additionally, imagining Ruchele’s final thoughts is a way of documenting her inner space. Here, fiction supplements history by giving us access to the individual’s interior and reminds us of Ruchele’s unique identity.

their function is strikingly similar: both are preoccupied with problems of certain historical knowledge, narration and subjective interpretation. When searching for evidence of the past, both autobiographical and fictional accounts encounter problems in representing events we no longer have direct access to. In this sense, it may be argued that magic realism is just as suitable to depict a past now only accessible through indirect sources.

## **2.6. Conclusion**

The idea of testimony as the only acceptable genre for Holocaust writing no longer holds as there will soon be no one left to testify. As Sue Vice notes, any “new literary perspectives on the Holocaust after the middle of the third millennium can only be written by descendants of survivors or by novelists with no connection to the event” (8). Although the last generation of Holocaust survivors is now disappearing, the need to remember remains, but the act of remembering is taking on new forms. For Ruth Franklin, the “telling of beautiful untrue things” does not entail Holocaust denial (237). The new Holocaust writers have attempted to return Holocaust writing to the realm of aesthetics, and for her this is not an ethical issue: if the literature of the Holocaust is to have endurance and power, it must be able to make its characters breathe (237). In the case of *Everything Is Illuminated*, the question is no longer whether it is ethical to depart from “the truth”, but in what ways techniques such as magic realism and unreliable narration may be used to narrate the Holocaust in and to a postmodernist society. Fiction can never replace the survivors’ accounts, but can retell the Holocaust in new and different ways and continue the act of remembering into the future. As we are entering the final period of witnessing, writers have to imagine what older generations could remember, and new techniques are needed to represent the past in order to preserve memory.

### 3. Representing the Holocaust in *Everything Is Illuminated*

#### 3.1. Is the Holocaust representable?

The discussion of truth in relation to history brings up, in the case of the Holocaust, the additional problem of the difficulty of portraying genocide to those who have no personal experience of large-scale atrocities themselves. Is it at all possible to represent and understand the Holocaust through literature? *Everything Is Illuminated* stresses these problems of representation through the use of magic realism and by foregrounding language, at times breaching linguistic conventions, which can be seen as an attempt at finding a new language in which to express that which can hardly be described at all. The issue of understanding the past from the future is further inscribed in the novel as Jonathan struggles to gather reliable information about past events. As the failure of his quest to find Augustine suggests, establishing any certainty about what happened is difficult. How can we, in contemporary times, grasp an event when methods of historical inquiry are only partially helpful in discovering what happened? In *Everything Is Illuminated*, the juxtaposition of a magic realist and a realist narrative works to question our assumptions about history. The need for Jonathan to use magic realist inventiveness in order to craft a family history suggests the limits of history and the need for imagination in trying to construct a coherent image of a past that is only partially accessible.

#### 3.2. Magic realism and Holocaust narratives

Bowers defines magic or magical realism as “narrative art that presents extraordinary occurrences as an ordinary part of everyday reality” (131).<sup>8</sup> She emphasizes the contradictory quality of the magic realist novel, which “fuses the two opposing aspects of the oxymoron (the magical and the realist) together to form one new perspective” (4). The depiction of Trachimbrod bursts with such “extraordinary occurrences”, none of which are perceived as magical or strange to its inhabitants. With a telescope, Brod is able to see into the future and listen to two children read from *The Book of Antecedents*, a book where the lives of all the citizens of Trachimbrod are recorded, and she is able to read her own future in the book about her past (Foer 87-9). The local flour mill takes the life of one young male villager every year as God angrily avenges the fact that Jews, fleeing Egypt, made imperfect bread (197-8). A saw blade is partly embedded in the head of Brod’s husband The Kolker, but he lives on,

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<sup>8</sup> As both terms can be used interchangeably, I will here use the term “magic realism” instead of “magical realism” to avoid confusion.

albeit with some unfortunate mood swings which cause him to be abusive (126). Adams has noted that the magic realist narrative is confined to its own diegetic level as an embedded story within the realist narrative: this strand of the story belongs to the realm of the imaginary (*Magic Realism in Holocaust Literature* 30). While *Everything Is Illuminated* can be labelled a magic realist novel, these magical elements only appear in the story about the distant past, and not the immediate present.

Even though the presence of the magical in a Holocaust narrative might seem controversial, the magic realism in *Everything Is Illuminated* does not function to reduce the event to a fantasy; on the contrary, it might even be particularly suited to deal with events which are hard to grasp through conventional logic. Faris points out that works of magic realism often involve an implicit critique of totalitarian regimes in the way they refuse to give in to the notion of a single way of perceiving the world (179). Magic realist narratives are receptive “to more than one point of view, to realistic *and* magical ways of seeing”, which is the result of “a desire for narrative freedom from realism, and from a univocal narrative stance” (179-80). The dual quality of magic realism, in which two different ways of relating to the world interact in the same universe, creates space for different world-views to co-exist, which is in opposition to a totalitarian, unified scheme of the world.

Adams finds that magic realist Holocaust novels have a higher metafictional awareness than the more substantial body of realist Holocaust works (*Magic Realism in Holocaust Literature* 1). She argues that these novels offer an alternative way of mediating the atrocity, “permitting a form of literary engagement with these events that nevertheless acknowledges its ethical and experiential distance from the real” (1-2). In the era after Holocaust testimonies, the inclusion of magic elements into the fictional universe functions to emphasize literature’s distance from the event as it would have been experienced by historical people. A similar position is held by Behlman, who argues that the invocation of Jewish folklore and myth creates a fiction that draws attention to its own fictiveness (60). He sees the use of fantastical narratives as a strategy employed by modern American writers who face the task of writing about an event so distant from themselves in time and space (56). For him, Jewish folklore is not invoked for aesthetic means, but works to create disruption in the narrative and, in the juxtaposition with Holocaust events, is in its innocence “a reminder of what has been destroyed” (58). Sicher, on the other hand, argues that the function of the Trachimbrod narrative is ironic in that it “shows that the return to the past is impossible because the place where Jews lived no longer exists except in fantasy” (174). For Eaglestone, “this strand of the story creates a community which stresses the impossibility of recreating the

community” (*The Holocaust and the Postmodern* 130). Jonathan attempts to reconstruct the past, but after the extermination of the village this is impossible, and the use of magic elements illustrates the absurdity of this attempt at remembering a past which is no longer accessible through a factual frame of reference.

### **3.2.1. Magic realism in Jewish culture and literature**

*Everything Is Illuminated* also draws upon an already established tradition of magic realist writing in Jewish American literature from the middle of the twentieth century. Some of the most prominent of these writers include Isaac Bashevis Singer (1902-91), whose stories often centred on European shtetls in which realistic and supernatural elements co-existed, and Bernard Malamud (1914-86) and Cynthia Ozick (1928 -), who both introduced mythical Jewish figures into the lives of their American characters (Rody 42-5). Rody links the tradition of Jewish magic realist writing to the “magic” elements which permeate Jewish culture, with its religious and Talmudic myths, its vivid oral folklore, and the mysticism of kabbalah (42). She argues that Jewish magic realism shares with colonial magic realist literatures both a position of difference within a totalitarian or imperial world system, and an impulse to invoke a traditional cultural heritage in order to reinvent a community which has been disrupted — a disruption which in the Jewish context became dramatically evident with the Holocaust (41-2). Foer’s invocation of the traditional European shtetl can in this way be seen as a search for the roots of a tradition and a way of life that the Nazis sought to annihilate. Like Holocaust testimonies, Foer’s work is preoccupied with memory, but rather than trying to document the brutalities of ethnic cleansing such as Wiesel does in *Night*, Foer tries to create a fictional memory of life *before* the atrocities began, of the vivid Jewish European culture that was meant to be crushed. In this way, the novel is a document of protest: in literature, the heritage and oral culture of the Jews can be preserved, even if the actual shtetl could not.

However, it should not be overlooked that there is also an inescapable element of pleasure in the portrayal of Trachimbrod, which also celebrates the power of humour, language, art and inventiveness. Examples of such moments are the feuds between the conservative “Upright” congregation and the more secular “Slouchers”, looked down upon by the “Uprighters” for being “willing to sacrifice any Jewish law for the sake of what they feebly termed *the great and necessary reconciliation of religion with life*” (Foer 18; his emphasis). “The Well-Regarded Rabbi”, who always talks in capital letters, is unable to make

a wise decision about who the baby Brod should be adopted by, declares that “THE BEST DECISION IS NO DECISION”, and leaves it all to chance (21).<sup>9</sup> “The Wisps of Ardisht”, a clan whose members smoked so much that they were condemned to “a life of rooftops as shingle layers and chimney sweeps” (16), turn their cigarettes inwards as the Nazis draw closer to Trachimbrod, “cupping their mouths around the lit ends to prevent their being spotted from a distance” (258). Although depictions such as these highlight how Jonathan’s portrayal of Trachimbrod is clearly reliant on the imagination rather than history, they are also in themselves a vivid celebration of art itself. For Faris, a “carnavalesque spirit” is consistent with magic realist narratives, where language “is used extravagantly” in a way that celebrates “invention moving beyond realistic representation” (184).

But these inventive descriptions of the village community are not only charged with positive values, they also draw upon stereotypes of the Jews by exaggerating names and character types, for example in such figures as “the disgraced usurer Yankel D”, “the good gefiltefishmonger Bitzl Bitzl R”, and “the mad squire Sofiowka N” . The invocation of negative stereotypes such as disgraced usurers and untrustworthy religious figures (like the rabbi) shows how a contemporary envisioning of past Jewish culture carries traces not only of nostalgia and magic folklore, but also of anti-Semitism. Anti-Semitism is furthermore a recurrent feature in the twenty-first century narrative — for example when Jonathan is asked by a waitress, on learning that he is a Jew, if she can see his horns (106). In this sense, there is a continuity in perceptions of Jewishness in the past and the present, an anti-Semitism that cannot be ignored even in a fairy-tale imagining of the shtetl meant to celebrate Jewish heritage, because it is an inevitable part of the Jewish cultural memory of Eastern Europe.

But this picture is complicated by the fact that the novel’s Jewish names simultaneously reflect an old Jewish tradition of privileging first names over surnames. Kaganoff explains how in many Jewish small towns it was common to not have family names because the members of these communities usually knew each other intimately (15). Instead, up until the eighteenth century their surnames were not hereditary, but would be closely connected to the individual and could reflect, for example, their place of origin, their profession, the name of their father or even nicknames (7-8). But during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, many countries enforced new laws that required Jews to adopt

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<sup>9</sup> The use of capital letters to represent the rabbi’s speech mimics the shouting which is characteristic for the Upright congregation and is a result of their belief that they are always metaphorically drowning in spiritual waters. The rabbi himself explains this shouting with the following rationale: “IF OUR PLIGHT IS SO DESPERATE ... SHOULD WE NOT ACT LIKE IT?” (17). The congregation’s constant and ongoing screaming throughout the centuries also seems to foreshadow the disaster that will hit Trachimbrod in 1942.

permanent family names (20-21). One of the reasons for this was a desire to assimilate the Jews into Western culture, and many Jews resisted this interruption of their traditions (22). The names of the characters in *Everything Is Illuminated*, such as “the man of law Isaac M” and “the lonely candle dipper Mordechai C”, seem to be a continuation of this old tradition. By using only a capital letter to denote surnames, Foer de-privileges surnames and invokes the lifestyle of the traditional Jewish community, instead using profession or personal characteristics to identify individuals. Jewish names in the novel therefore carry a double function of both honouring heritage while also reflecting anti-Semitic stereotypes. The deliberate forcing together of these opposed elements creates a contradictory portrayal of the Jewish past, as Trachimbrod is described simultaneously with a hint of nostalgia (by keeping old traditions of naming) and of anti-Semitism (as these names often invoke stereotypes of a negative character: “mad squire”, “disgraced usurer”). This contradictory relationship seems consistent with the subversive nature of postmodernism identified by Hutcheon (3), and works to problematize contemporary perceptions of history by offering colliding and non-reconciled descriptions of the Jewish community.

### **3.3. Realism, anti-realism and Holocaust knowledge**

By now, we have seen that the magic strand of the story may have a multitude of functions: it problematizes and celebrates Jewish folklore, language and history itself, while also demonstrating the problem of gaining certain knowledge about history. However, this part of the narrative must also be seen in the context of the realist segment of the story, in which the narrators *are* able to gain some understanding about the more recent past without having only the imagination to rely on. According to Ruth Franklin there have been two dominant but opposing views in Holocaust theory: a “realist” approach which assumes that it *is* possible to gain knowledge of the Holocaust through the established methods of historical research and documentation, and an “anti-realist” approach which argues that it is impossible to understand, and perhaps also to describe, the event, which cannot be compared to any other in history (4-5). While the insistence of the particularity of the Holocaust avoids the ethical danger of using the event as a general metaphor for human suffering, such an attitude might risk diminishing other cases of genocide. For Langer, the idea that the Holocaust is like an event from another planet is a way of protecting ourselves by insisting on the event’s remoteness from ourselves, and claims that removing “its cosmology from our own by

placing it in another universe is little more than an effort to sever ourselves from its acts and values” (6).

In *Everything Is Illuminated*, this discussion is embedded in the narrative. Adams suggests that the realist segment of the story affirms a view that the Holocaust is knowable, but the fantastical elements of the Trachimbrod narrative destabilize the “realist” stance towards historical knowledge, problematizing the possibility of accessing the past in the present (*Magic Realism in Holocaust Literature* 30). As the shtetl records were destroyed in the bombings, the only way to access the past is now through the imagination. On the other hand, the realist narrative which traces Jonathan and Alex’s journey supports the “realist” epistemological stance because of its orientation towards illumination. Adams argues that in the realist section, the narrators *are* able to gain insight into the past as they find both the destruction site of the village and a Holocaust witness in the form of Lista, a woman who survived the Trachimbrod massacre and is the only person still living near the place (31). In this way, “the ‘magic’ elements of *Everything Is Illuminated* work to destabilize a ‘realist’ orientation towards the possibility of knowing and representing Holocaust history” (37-8). By doing this, the novel both inscribes and subverts a “realist” understanding of history by troubling “the opposition between realist and antirealist approaches to the Holocaust through the inscription of both perspectives” (40).

The problem of accessing the past is not only highlighted by the juxtaposition of two different narrative styles, it is also continuously emphasized within the magic realist narrative. As the new-born Brod is brought to the synagogue, the shtetl women have to mentally piece the fragments of the baby together. The women, forbidden from entering the synagogue, watch the mysterious baby through a hole, unable to see all her body parts at the same time, and they “learned to hate her unknowability her untouchability [*sic*], the collage of her” (Foer 20). The fragmentation of Brod functions to show the difficulty of reconstructing historical knowledge, which is piecemeal and not whole. History is furthermore constructed from the future by our knowledge of the past. As Brod grows up, the narrator imagines her as a girl, short “as a malnourished child might be short” (76). Moreover, “her body looks like that of a chronically sick girl ... or a starving girl, a chronically sick girl, a girl who is not entirely free. Her hair is thick and black, her lips are thin and bright and white. How else could it be?” (76). More than a hundred years before the Holocaust, Brod already has the appearance that has become associated with Holocaust victims from post-liberation documentation and popular culture. Jonathan’s comment on her starving appearance — “How else could it be?” — makes it clear that Brod is a retrospective construction: knowing Trachimbrod’s final destruction, it

is impossible to write its history without its ending in mind. In this way, the past is always viewed through the lens of the present.

### **3.4. Representations of history in the realist narrative**

While recreating the story of Trachimbrod is a task which appears to be difficult, then, it can be argued that Jonathan and Alex's contemporary journey does lead them closer to illumination. However, they are not entirely successful in finding trustworthy evidence from the past in this segment of the novel either. I will argue that the Holocaust is presented as partly unknowable also in the realist narrative — for what, exactly, is illuminated? Although our narrators are able to gain some insight into history, this insight is partial and needs imaginative supplementing in order to form a coherent narrative. While it is certainly true that Alex and Jonathan are able to gain a new understanding of history by interacting with witnesses, the novel also complicates the type of knowledge they are able to retrieve, and because of this, I hold that *both* segments of the novel function to problematize the concept of historical knowledge.

In the realist narrative, the narrators' encounter with Lista functions to illustrate the difficulty of piecing together coherent information from those objects and documents that have survived. Alex and Jonathan's road trip eventually leads them to Lista, who cannot help them find Augustine, but is still able to show them the remains of Trachimbrod and shed light on past events. She has made it her obligation to take care of past memories: her house is filled with the clothes, shoes, photographs and personal belongings of the citizens who died during the war. Adams maintains that the existence of material objects supports a "realist" view that the past is accessible through its traces, as these objects are able to provide information from and of the past (*Magic Realism in Holocaust Literature* 32). Some of the boxes Lista keeps contain what could be considered conventional historical evidence, such as a box labelled "Privates: Journals/Diaries/Sketchbooks/Underwear". On the other hand, some boxes carry names of a metaphorical nature: "Watches/winter", "darkness", and "death of the firstborn" (147), or "water into blood" and "chess/relics/black magic" (150). For Adams, this suggests "the availability of all aspects of past" (32). Another possibility I would like to propose is that Lista's boxes function to complicate the idea that we are able to gain stable information about history. The fact that concrete artefacts of the past (journals and diaries) co-exist with metaphors for despair (darkness and winter) suggests that what we can know about the past through physical evidence co-exists with what we can only imagine. In this, the

borders between imagination and reality become blurred, as it is impossible to distinguish facts from fiction. Lista's collection serves to show us that the boundaries between art and history are unclear. This is not to say that history is unknowable, but that we need to invoke both history and art in our effort to reconstruct the past.

Furthermore, the novel's realist strand explicitly undermines the idea that it is possible for new generations to understand the Holocaust. As they search for Trachimbrod, Alex notes that it "was seeming as if we were in the wrong country, or the wrong century, or as if Trachimbrod had disappeared, and so had the memory of it" (115). Because of Lista's fear of cars, they have to walk to Trachimbrod, and it becomes so dark that in the end "it is almost impossible to witness her" (183). Alex's interchangeable use of the word "witness" for the word "see" is not insignificant: witnessing the Holocaust is almost impossible because our knowledge of the past is veiled in darkness, and we only have barely visible traces to guide us. When they reach Trachimbrod, there is nothing there but a great void.

When I utter "nothing" I do not mean there was nothing except for two houses, and some wood on the ground, and pieces of glass, and children's toys, and photographs. When I utter that there was nothing, what I intend is that there was not any of these things, or any other things. (184)

As they reach the centre of the wartime destruction site, there are no more traces of the past, no more material objects to study — and nor will there ever be, according to Lista, who claims that it "is always like this, always dark" (184). Like Lista, we are walking in the dark when trying to gain knowledge about the past. As Lista tells the story of the tragic mass murder of Jews in the village, Grandfather insists that he is able to imagine what it is like, but Lista disagrees: "It is not a thing you can imagine. It only is. After that, there can be no imagining" (187). Lista echoes here the voices of actual survivors like Wiesel by claiming that it is impossible to imagine what it was like to be a victim of the Holocaust unless you were there. In this, she supports the "anti-realist" stance of the Holocaust as unknowable, but she also subverts her own standpoint by telling the story of her survival. They cannot imagine what it was like, and yet she tries to convey it. "It is so dark", Alex says after Lista has told her story, and both Lista and Jonathan agree with this, but Jonathan is not "used to being so far from artificial lights" (187). Jonathan's mention of artificial lights after being told of the mass murder of innocent Jews suggests that Holocaust narratives of hope or redemption are merely an illusion: his statement implies that he had hoped or expected to find some light as

he uncovered the past, but in Trachimbrod, there are no houses, no traces left, only darkness. And in Lista's narrative, no story of courage may bring hope into a story of bleakness and despair. There is no light, no tale of redemption which might break the all-encompassing darkness of the Holocaust, and surviving does not mean overcoming the event, but living in the shadow of it. For Lista, survival is not a success but a burden, and she has made it her life-long responsibility to carefully keep and guard the painful memories of a generation long gone. "We were the not-lucky ones", she says (153). The obligation to remember is presented here as traumatic and not redemptive. To invoke light with regards to the Holocaust is a falsity, and hope is an artificial construct. *Everything Is Illuminated* represents the Holocaust as darkness and a void, and in this way escapes turning into a narrative of redemption which, according to Langer, should be avoided in Holocaust literature:

When we speak of the survivor instead of the victim and of martyrdom instead of murder, regard being gassed as a pattern for dying with dignity, or evoke the redemptive rather than the grievous power of memory, we draw on an arsenal of words that urges us to build verbal fences between the atrocities of the camps and ghettos and what we are mentally willing — or able — to face. (6)

In addition to this, the lack of light suggests the impossibility of illuminating history retrospectively. Trachimbrod is now a dark nothingness, and there is no light with which one can see the traces of the past clearly.

#### **3.4.1. *Something is illuminated: The Book of Antecedents and witness accounts***

But does the dissolution of Trachimbrod imply that we can no longer know the Holocaust? For Jonathan, the quest to learn more about his grandfather Safran and Trachimbrod seems to have failed, as he is unable to find Augustine and the village is no longer there. But instead, he is given a box consisting of objects belonging to the deceased villagers, including *The Book of Antecedents*, written by the citizens of Trachimbrod, comprising everything from records and journals to definitions, rules and "cute, if meaningless, sayings" (Foer 196). It is a detailed documentation of the past, where everything about the shtetl is written down, "until any schoolboy could easily find out what his grandfather ate for breakfast on a given Thursday fifty years before" (196). Some things about this past are illuminated, but the book is not a historical document in the conventional sense. First, it was stolen from Jonathan

shortly after it came into his hands, opening up for the possibility that it too is reconstructed from memory (23). How much of the book he was able to read, copy or commit to memory remains unknown. Second, the entries from the book listed in Jonathan's narrative demonstrate its magic realist character — for example, it mentions Trachimbrod's movable synagogue which the Uprighters and the Slouchers push around the shtetl in an attempt to make it either more liberal or more conservative (206). Third, it originally included a multitude of voices, as all the citizens contributed by adding personal journals and family records. The citizens are active writers and recorders, as shown for example in an entry from *The Book of Antecedents* which is entitled "The novel, when everyone was convinced he had one in him", describing a phase when all the inhabitants wrote their own novels, which were mostly "thinly veiled memoirs" (200-1). They also record their dreams in *The Book of Recurrent Dreams*, and the affiliation between the citizens of Trachimbrod and writing shows that the impulse to create art is strong in the shtetl. The constant recording of events in *The Book of Antecedents* continues even when there is nothing more to write than "we are writing", in order to make the book become "more like life" (196). In the constant documentation of ongoing life, the boundaries between life and the writing about that life blur.

*The Book of Antecedents* functions not as a historical record but is, just like Lista's boxes, a reminder that the border between life and art is unclear. The close connection between life and art is furthermore emphasized in the book's own definition of art: "Art is that thing having to do only with itself ... Unfortunately, there are no examples of art" (202). Art will always exist with a purpose and must, by necessity, refer to something outside itself. Although it documents the past and takes Trachimbrod as its subject, *The Book of Antecedents* is clearly a work of fiction composed by multiple and undefinable sources, a polyphony of voices which together create and recreate the past. Jonathan's literary reconstruction of Trachimbrod is based on a literary rather than a factual document, resulting in a new literary artefact. The reliance on fiction in the creation of new fiction is, ultimately, what allows Jonathan to write the absurd portrayal of Safran, Brod, the shtetl and all the rest of its inhabitants. Jonathan never reaches stable insight into past events outside the limits of fiction. In the space between the entries of *The Book of Antecedents*, a book which we cannot know that Jonathan can remember accurately or has even read, he needs imagination to be able to create the narrative of his family's past. In its magic realist inventiveness, *The Book of Antecedents* is an historical artefact which functions to highlight the fictionality of narratives of the past, and not a text that attempts accurate documentation.

The illumination Alex is able to reach is very different from Jonathan's. Although Jonathan does learn about Trachimbrod's destruction from Lista, he is unable to retrieve the story of Safran and his saviour Augustine. Alex, on the other hand, reaches important moments of insight as his own grandfather is still alive and able to reconstruct the past for him, and in the end, he learns how Grandfather was partly complicit in the murder of his Jewish best friend. As they never find Augustine, then, it is in fact the story of Alex's and not Jonathan's grandfather which is revealed to the narrators. Both narrators gain some understanding of the past, but whereas illumination for Alex involves learning about events as they were experienced by the one involved, Jonathan's enlightenment comes from another work of fiction. This suggests that when there are no longer witnesses, objects alone cannot provide full and coherent information about the past.

### **3.4.2. *Illumination and memory***

Another question is whether shedding light on the past is even desirable. For one thing, the characters' desire to find Augustine seems to be motivated by much more than a wish to learn about her wartime experiences. Alex does not want Grandfather to continue searching for Augustine because even though he is sure she exists, Augustine "is not Herschel, as Grandfather wanted her to be, and she is not my grandmother, as he wanted her to be, and she is not Father, as he wanted her to be" (241). Augustine, then, is not merely a witness, she is a dream of redemption, a dream which, according to Alex, is only an illusion. While Jonathan's motivation for searching for Augustine might be different from Grandfather's, this still raises the question of what, exactly, it is that Augustine represents, and whether finding her would yield the desired results. The name Augustine also seems to invoke Saint Augustine, an influential Christian thinker who amongst other things argued that it is impossible to be without sin (Matthews 14). The associations between Augustine, sainthood and sin further strengthen the sensation that the novel's Augustine functions as an ideal of holiness — as someone who is able to offer redemption and salvation — rather than a historical witness. Their failure to find her in order to be redeemed, and Grandfather's subsequent suicide, perhaps suggests that it is difficult to be reconciled with the past by revisiting it.

Furthermore, the problematic nature of illumination is enhanced by the complexity of the associations tied to this concept in the novel. The title, *Everything is Illuminated*, seems to suggest a novel about a successful attempt at revisiting the past, but as we know this is not the case, and this tension between the content and the title suggests that what is illuminated may

not be the past itself.<sup>10</sup> In the novel, illumination is not only a symbol of enlightenment, but also carries with it associations with flames and death: the Jews of Trachimbrod were locked into a synagogue that was “illuminated” as the Nazis set fire to it (251). Its symbolism is further complicated when at another point, illumination functions as a symbol of love and memory. In the magic realist segment, love-making creates an intense glow that lights up the sky and can even be seen from space in the future (95). “*We’re here*, the glow of 1804 will say in one and a half centuries. *We’re here, and we’re alive*” (96; his emphasis), the irony of course being that there would be no one alive in the shtetl by 1954. As the first astronauts walk on the moon, they are even able to see these lights above the long-gone Trachimbrod (98). The villagers’ insistence that they are somehow both present and alive even long after their death suggests they are still in the world, because the glow allows for the preservation of memory. In this way, love creates lights which carry on into the future, and it is acts of love which will make future generations able to remember the dead. This meaning is also partly literal because these acts of love naturally result in children who carry the responsibility of being the elegists of the murdered.

Illumination, then, is both a moment of insight and an intense glow that can be *either* a force of destruction *or* a light that will preserve memory in the future. While investigating the past can be a way of remembering the dead, the destructive imagery attached to illumination implies that this venture is not without consequences. Also, memory itself can be dangerous, as seen in how the preoccupation with history eventually has drastic consequences for the citizens of Trachimbrod.

In 1941, the shtetl becomes obsessed with remembrance, until activity “was replaced with thought” (258). In the end, it is this obsession which distracts the villagers from the news of war, from acting until it is too late, as the “memories of birth, childhood and adolescence resonated with greater volume than the din of exploding shells” (261). Jonathan observes that the “only thing more painful than being an active forgetter is to be an inert rememberer” (260). Furthermore, memory is untrustworthy because of the high risk of misremembering. For example, Sofiowka is very unsure about what Trachim B did before he drowned, but

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<sup>10</sup> The fact that the book is titled “Everything Is Illuminated” furthermore serves to link it to the medieval illuminated manuscripts — books that were hand-written and decorated with illustrations that were meant to visually contribute to the text’s meaning (Karkov). Foer starts his first chapter about Trachimbrod, “The Beginning of the World Often Comes”, with an illustration of a wagon, a horse and a man falling into a river, thus strengthening the associations between the novel and this older tradition of writing. Additionally, the title hints at the Enlightenment, as the word “illumination” comes from the Latin *illuminare*, which means “to light up” (Karkov). Since the Enlightenment is a historical period which is associated with reason, logic and civilized standards of behaviour, the title seems to be partly ironic, because these values were drastically reversed by the Holocaust.

nevertheless draws a series of different conclusions: “Trachim was making a delivery of peaches, if I remember, or perhaps plums, to a house of schoolgirls across the street. Or was he a postman? Yes, it was love letters” (11). Foer also parodies the importance of memory in Jewish culture in his depiction of the whimsical members of the Jewish society.

*It is most important that we remember*, the narcoleptic potato farmer Didl S said to the congregation, which was reclining on pillows around his living room. ... *Remember what?* the schoolteacher Tzadik P asked, expelling yellow chalk with each syllable. *The what, Didl said, is not so important, but that we should remember. ... Memories are small prayers to God, if we believed in that sort of thing... For it says somewhere something about just this, or something just like this...* (36; his emphasis)

The not particularly religious Didl S does not remember what they should remember and even forgets *why* they should remember, but he is sure that remembering is important. Like Sofiowka, Didl S struggles to remember correctly. When Alex wants to remember something new, for example the American idioms he learns, he presents remembering as an act of creation: “I wrote this on my brain” (32). The use of the verb “wrote” creates a sense that memory is something we actively construct. Memory, then, is both unreliable and subjective, as we do not simply retain but also manipulate the shape of our memories.

By showing how an attachment to the past may be a way both to remember loved ones and a danger, the novel points to the conflicted nature of the narrators’ wish to illuminate history and preserve memory. *Everything Is Illuminated* not only describes two young men searching for their past, but also points to the fact that such an exercise may have both positive and negative consequences. But even though recovering the past might be dangerous, memory undoubtedly carries with it positive associations as well: the villagers may be long gone, but they continue to exist, remembered through the acts of love by which they were able to inscribe their presence in the sky. While Alex and Jonathan’s journey shows that constructing an accurate image of the past is hard, if not impossible, the dead still linger on in memory — however subjective, partial and inaccurate that memory may be.

### **3.5. Language and Holocaust representation**

So far, we have seen that there are opposing views as to whether or not it is possible to understand the Holocaust, and that recovering history is a problem both for the characters in

the realist narrative and for Jonathan as he writes the story of Trachimbrod. Another central issue in Holocaust studies is whether it is at all possible to enhance our understanding through *language*. Wiesel saw it as necessary to create a new language to be able to write about the Holocaust, because the signifier was no longer adequate to express the signified. “Hunger — thirst — fear — transport — selection — fire — chimney: these words all have intrinsic meaning, but in those times, they meant something else” (*Night ix*). In *Everything Is Illuminated*, the high degree of self-reflexivity functions to create a language which admits its own shortcomings in trying to articulate genocide.

In the novel, three episodes involving the liquidation of Jews are described. First, Lista tells about a wartime incident in which the Germans shot citizens of Trachimbrod who refused to spit on the Torah. Second, Grandfather describes an episode from his nearby home village Kolki, where a Ukrainian General ordered every Jew inside the synagogue, which was then burned to the ground. Both of these episodes are described in the realist strand of the story, but the third depiction of an atrocity occurs in the magic realist narrative and describes the final bombing of Trachimbrod. In these three incidents, language is used and manipulated in different ways in order to attempt to find an idiom which is able to tell the untellable, but in a way that also draws attention to the gap between reality and the ability of discourse to describe that reality. This seems to resonate with Lyotard’s idea that the postmodern is “that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable” (81).

### **3.5.1. Realist descriptions of the Holocaust**

Jonathan and Alex first hear the story about the extermination of Trachimbrod from Lista, who in this way functions as a fictional witness: as a survivor she is able to tell how she escaped death because the German gunfire hit her unborn baby. But as she recounts this story to Jonathan and Alex, she separates herself from the trauma by placing herself in the position of the observer, pretending instead that the girl who was shot was her sister, and not herself. Eventually it becomes clear that the sister is really her because of her attachment to the long-gone child: “‘I must go in and care for my baby,’ she said. ‘It is missing me’” (193). By changing her own subject position in the story, Lista attempts to create a distance between herself and the trauma, a distance which is further increased as Alex translates her story to Jonathan. Her story is twice removed from the event itself: it is mediated through a translator, and her point of view in the story has been manipulated. Because of translation her story is

told not once, but twice, as Alex's translations echo her utterances: "They burned the synagogue." "They burned the synagogue." "That was the first thing they did." "That was first" (184). As Alex notices, translation is an act of re-telling and has the effect of renewal: "You cannot know how it felt to have to hear these things and then repeat them, because when I repeated them, I felt like I was making them new again" (184). The inscription of a fictional witness in the narrative is a way of engaging with the initial testimonial response to the Holocaust, but in a way that points out that even first-hand experiences are always mediated, possibly manipulated and always at a distance from ourselves. And yet, expressing ourselves through language is necessary in order to keep the memory alive; storytelling makes old events new, and by telling and re-telling stories we are able to remember the past.

Grandfather's story is, like Lista's, a fictional version of the witness account, but goes further in the use of experimental language as a means of expression, drawing on modernist techniques of representation. Alex's grandfather was an unwilling perpetrator in the war as he pointed out his best friend Herschel as a Jew to the Nazis, thereby causing his death. When Alex and Grandfather start speaking about the event in Kolki, their exchange is at first represented through conventional language, but as the story progresses, commas, periods and eventually also the space between words gradually disappear, giving the impression that Grandfather's story builds up until it becomes frantic and unstoppable, as seen in this exchange between Herschel and Grandfather (called Eli by Herschel). Here, the Nazis have just been made aware that Herschel is Jewish, and he is about to be locked into the synagogue with the rest of the shtetl's Jewish population:

Eli youaremyfriend do not let me die I am so afraid of dying Iamsoafraid it will be OK  
I told him it will be OK do not do this he said do something do something  
dosomething dosomething it will be OK it will beOK who was I saying that to do  
something Eli dosomething I am soafraidofdying I am soafraid you know what they  
are going to do youaremyfriend I told him (250-1)

In this passage, the terror of the moment is recreated, as the lack of punctuation and the squeezing together of words mimic the rapid speaking of hysteria, which again enhances the sensation that time is running out for Herschel as he desperately begs Grandfather to save him. Paradoxically, it is the word "OK" which stands out typographically, an attempt at reassurance which seems in stark contrast to the nature of the situation in which nothing is, in fact, going to be OK. Also, the phrases "youaremyfriend", "Iamsoafraid", and "dosomething"



### **3.5.2. *Magic realist descriptions of the Holocaust***

A similar technique for representing turmoil is used in the magic realist narrative, but only after an initial strategy of omission. The bombing happens on Trachimday — an annual festival dedicated to the search for the lost Trachim B. Each year, the young men dive into the river in search of sacks which are meant to represent the supposedly drowned man, and the designated “Float Queen”, chosen from the village girls, is given the honour of throwing these sacks into the river Brod. The festival, then, is an act of remembering, of respecting old traditions even as Nazi tanks are approaching, and illustrates the almost fatal commitment to memory which makes them passive at a time which desperately requires action. The juxtaposition of the war and the festival, the celebration of joy at a time of increasingly alarming newspaper headings, shows the villagers’ desire for normality when normality is no longer possible, but also invokes a sense of carnivalesque chaos; as celebration turns into death, as the sound of bombs and the sound of festivities intertwine, everything is turned upside down, and the normal standards of life no longer apply. As the Float Queen throws her sacks into the air on March 18, 1942, bombs explode over the shtetl.

Jonathan refrains from a direct description of the bombing at this point, but inserts a page of ellipses which seem to mimic the slow rise and fall of the sacks, and this presents the moment in slow-motion in a way that echoes the immobility of the villagers (270-1). The decision to avoid a detailed description also seems to acknowledge the inadequacy of language as a way to express trauma; as Budick mentions, the “privileging of ‘silence’” has been one possible solution to the problem of representation as the “only way of capturing the deep muteness that defines traumatic experience” (221-2). This silence, however, is broken shortly after. When the bombing is over, the narrative moves on to the event already described by Lista, in which the villagers were forced to spit on the Torah (Foer 271). As the story reaches Trachimbrod’s final moments, then, the realist and magic realist mediations overlap, suggesting that it is possible to find common ground between history and imaginative explorations of that history.

The fact that the account of this mass murder is mentioned in both narratives also functions to legitimize the use of magic realism, creating an impression that although most of the people and experiences described in Trachimbrod border on the eccentric or absurd, the destruction of the shtetl is no less real, and it is exactly its destruction that created the need for imagination in the first place. This argument is also supported by the fact that a creative mediation of the bombing in the magic realist mode does occur, but it is here designated to the

realm of dreams. As the soldiers burn down the synagogue, a page falls out from *The Book of Recurrent Dreams*, containing “The Dream of the End of the World”, in which the bombing is narrated as a dream by the river Brod itself. The novel, then, chooses *two* opposing strategies of representation, both a passage that privileges silence (although even ellipses work as a way to represent that which cannot be spoken) *and* an attempt at description. This works simultaneously to acknowledge the limits of language while also suggesting that finding a form of expression is nevertheless necessary. Also, the use of a dream narrative enhances the sensation that what happened is too unimaginable to be described within the parameters of the main narrative; an event as awful as this can only be expressed through a dream in which the codes of civilized social behaviour no longer apply. Faris mentions that magic realism often works to disrupt “the ordinary logic of cause and effect”, because “the enormity of the historical events” and “the human suffering involved in them” makes us feel dissatisfied with “the traditional ways such phenomena have been integrated into cultural logic” (168). “The Dream of the End of the World” is an example of such disruption of logic, as the Nazi bombing is already prophesized in a dream before it happens (though if this seems at first glance to be fantastical, a brief glance at the history of Jews in Europe would suggest that such fears were not unrealistic).<sup>12</sup> In the face of extreme calamities, the inscription of magic is a way of questioning traditional logic.

Using Brod — the river which shares its name with Jonathan’s first ancestor — as a narrator encloses the story in a cyclical frame of birth and death. His family history starts with a life being born from the river, and in the end it is also the river which pulls them all back into oblivion as if they were nothing more than a dream, creating an impression that the entire story of Trachimbrod has been a fantasy which was ended by the brutal realities of death. This raises the possibility that a life of peace and freedom *was* a fantasy for many Jews, especially in Eastern Europe. The separation between the burning of the synagogue, which occurred in both the realist and magic realist mode, and the dream narrative of the bombing — which, being experienced by a river, could not exist in the realist mode — creates a clear border between the factual and the imaginative accounts of destruction. In this dream, there are no commas, periods or capital letters, just an endless stream of words:

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<sup>12</sup> Trachtenberg explains that dreams are a prominent part of traditional Jewish folklore and were seen to have the power of prophecy (232). The prophecy of the end of the world, then, is also a reflection of the old Jewish belief that the future could be transmitted to humans through dreams.

all pulled at each other to survive but pulled each other into me drowning each other killing each other until I couldn't be seen through all of the bodies blue skin open white eyes I was invisible under them I was the carcass they were the butterflies white eyes blue skin this is what we've done we've killed our own babies to save them (273)

Echoing the initial birth of Brod, Safran's wife is giving birth while drowning, but unlike Brod, this baby drowns with the rest. Zeitlin has noted that many Holocaust narratives end with birth because the renewal of life suggests the failure of genocide and the hope of a new beginning (32). This rhetoric is punctured in *Everything Is Illuminated*, as this is a birth which leads to death, this is where life ends, and as the title of the dream itself reflects, this is, in fact, the end of the world. This potentially bleak view of the future must, however, be viewed in light of the cyclical notion of time in the novel. The chapter in which Trachimbrod is destroyed is titled "The Beginning of the World Often Comes", suggesting that there is not merely one end or one beginning, no final closure, because new beginnings follow closures. With the death of the baby and the eccentric Trachimbrod population, one phase is over, and as the magic realist plot reaches the Holocaust, there are no more extraordinary events and no more babies miraculously saved from rivers. The Holocaust is mass death, a moment of despair in history, and does not allow for miraculous savings. But this does not imply the end of all things, because death allows for rebirth. When Trachim B died, it was the beginning of the world for Brod; likewise, Alex's grandfather commits suicide after failing to find Augustine, but his death gives space for the metaphorical rebirth of Alex and Igor. In his suicide letter to Jonathan, Grandfather explains that Alex has now thrown his abusive father out in order to become the new caretaker of the family, and if Alex and Igor are to have a happy future, they "must begin again" and "cut all of the strings" (275).

The string is a symbol of memory in the novel, but one that connects memory to imagery of incarceration. Sofiowka, the madman of the late eighteenth-century Trachimbrod, once tied a string around his finger to remember something, "and then one from waist to neck, and fearing he would forget this one, he tied a string from ear to tooth to scrotum to heel, and used his body to remember his body, but in the end could remember only the string" (15). The memories of the old even draw the young children in, because children "had the itch of memory as strong as the elders of the shtetl", with strings "tied around them by parents and grandparents" (260). Too strong an obsession with memory is problematic because it can hamper living life in the future; for the Trachimbroders, memory "was supposed to fill the time, but it made time a hole to be filled" (260). Grandfather's death, then, is the result of a

wish to allow his grandchildren to live without being restricted by memory, unlike the unfortunate citizens of Trachimbrod. Looking back might be a hindrance to life, and for Grandfather, Lista's choice to live consumed by memory is not desirable and might even be selfish: "The only way she can live is if she is melancholy. ... She wants us to grieve her, not the others" (191). The writing of a Holocaust novel can be seen as an act of remembrance, yet the novel problematizes its own existence by functioning as a reminder that remembrance can potentially interfere with life.

### 3.6. Conclusion

*Everything Is Illuminated* does try to represent the Holocaust, while also insisting that such representation is problematic. In the novel's descriptions of wartime massacres, language is used in a manner that dissolves the illusion of its transparency, and representation is attempted through stream-of-consciousness techniques, the use of ellipses and gaps, and experiments with point of view such as the river's dream of the bombing and Lista's attempt to move herself out of her own story. The narrators are able to gain a measure of insight into the past, since both Lista and Alex's grandfather are still alive to convey their own experience of ethnic cleansing to the third generation. Lista insists that it is something that cannot be imagined, but the reader is still encouraged to do exactly this as atrocities are presented to us. However, these events are represented indirectly, either through Lista or Grandfather, or in the dream narrative told by the river Brod itself, and the narrators make no similar attempt to retell the massacres themselves. To the extent that we are able to learn a truth about the Holocaust today, this truth will always be mediated, and although it is impossible to imagine, we must still try.

As we have seen, Adams proposed that *Everything Is Illuminated* mediates between the "realist" and the "anti-realist" positions by inscribing both perspectives. While I agree with the proposition that the Holocaust is portrayed as both knowable (through the access to eye witnesses and objects) and unknowable (as seen in how Trachimbrod is now a dark space, in Lista's insistence that understanding is impossible, and in the need for magic realism to describe the past) I would propose that the realist and magic realist modes are less opposed in their relationship to Holocaust history. In my view, the realist strand seems to suggest that the understanding we gain of the Holocaust is not all-encompassing, but partial, because of the unreliability of Lista's boxes as accurate historical documents, the obliteration of Trachimbrod and Jonathan's failure to retrieve Safran's history. In Lista's collection of boxes,

Jonathan and Alex are — as we have seen — able to find material evidence of the past, but unlike the witness accounts offered by Lista and Grandfather, these boxes include *both* objects more conventionally used for historical documentation — such as photographs and diaries — and also fiction, such as *The Book of Antecedents*. In order to form a coherent picture of the past, Jonathan is reliant on *The Book of Antecedents* to form the history of his family, and in the end, his magical narrative intertwines with Lista's story in the novel's realist section.

Both the magic realist and the realist strands of the story, then, complicate the idea that it is possible to know history without the help of art. The inscription of magic realism suggests the need for imagination as a process of reconciling with history, and history itself leaves room for art because it cannot alone supply us with a complete frame of understanding. The Trachimbroders may be gone, but their writing is not — even the past itself tells its own story through fiction. If something is illuminated for Jonathan, it is the understanding that the past cannot fully be reconstructed without help from the imagination and from artistic inventiveness.



## 4. Negotiating the relationship between truth and fiction

### 4.1. “Nomadic with the truth”

So far, we have seen that a reliance on art can be useful in negotiating traumatic experience, which cannot be explored in its entirety through a factual frame of reference. The past leaves blank spaces, but Jonathan still needs to investigate a family history he does not have direct access to. If it is the case that art, which to a greater or lesser extent must rely on the imagination, can be a useful supplement to history, does this also mean that it is permissible to change history in writing?

Foer’s work contains several allusions to the Trachimbrod philosopher Pinchas T, who argued that “it would be possible, in theory, for life and art to be reversed” (Foer 10). While Alex longs for such a reversal, Jonathan resists it. For Alex, altering the truth is permissible if it makes a positive change — writing has the power to improve the world:

We are being very nomadic with the truth, yes? The both of us? Do you think that this is acceptable when we are writing about things that occurred? If your answer is no, then why do you write about Trachimbrod and your grandfather in the manner that you do, and why do you command me to be untruthful? If your answer is yes, then this creates another question, which is if we are to be such nomads with the truth, why do we not make the story more premium than life? ... I do not think there are any limits to how excellent we could make life seem. (179-80)

As Alex points out, their narrative is neither realistic nor truthful, as they both insist on adding comedy to a story which is essentially serious by making themselves and their journey in Ukraine, “which was an ennobled voyage, appear very normal and second rate” (179). In some cases, Jonathan has no scruples about changing reality, for example suggesting that Alex has the family dog “killed in a tragicomic accident” (101). Jonathan also tampers with reality in the description of his grandfather Safran. Unlike his other ancestors, who may or may not have been based on historical persons, Safran is a part of the realist narrative, but he is *also* portrayed in the magic realist mode, and Jonathan’s account of his pre-war life is nothing if not extraordinary. Because he is born with a full set of teeth, Safran cannot be breastfed, and the lack of calcium causes his right arm to wither due to lack of nutrition (166). This, in turn, makes him the object of sexual desire for the widows of Trachimbrod, who all

yearn for him precisely because of that dead arm. Jonathan's fable about Safran seems to be based on the fact that in later photographs, Safran's right arm is never in the picture, which immediately leads him to conclude that the arm must therefore have been deformed (166). Jonathan, then, takes great liberties when inventing Safran's past, and his portrayal angers Alex, who refuses to believe that Jonathan's grandfather, described as notoriously unfaithful, "was such an inferior person": he wonders how he is able to do this to his own relatives (178). If they are to invent facts about the past, why, then, do they not "make the story more premium than life" (179)?

#### **4.2. Metafictional discussions on writing**

On several occasions, Alex points out how story-writing can change our perception of reality. In his writing he can choose how to present himself to others and especially to his brother, Little Igor. For Alex, changing history is permissible and even desirable, if it can lead to a better life for both fictional and real people. "I think that this is why I relish writing for you so much. It makes it possible for me to be not like I am, but as I desire for Little Igor to see me. ... With writing, we have second chances" (144).

According to Alex, writing is essential to him but not to Jonathan: for Jonathan, writing is "interesting" because it allows him to imagine different worlds, but it is Alex who was "born to be the writer" (144). It is Alex, living under violent family conditions in Eastern Europe, who needs writing to change reality, not the more affluent American Jonathan. Writing helps Alex make a sad life colourful, using humour to cover the dark shades of the story. It also allows for acts of compassion. For example, Alex consciously lies to Grandfather in order to shelter him from despair. "I present not-truths in order to protect you. That is also why I try so inflexibly to be a funny person. Everything is to protect you. I exist in case you need to be protected" (226).<sup>13</sup> Even lying can be the truthful thing to do if it is motivated by compassion. It is also his compassion that leads Alex to be outraged when Jonathan chooses to present Safran as being unfaithful to his lover "the gypsy girl", who in the end kills herself. "We have such chances to do good, and yet again and again you insist on evil" (240). For Alex, the only "truthful thing" to do for Safran would be either to marry his lover or commit suicide. It seems that Alex does not think that being truthful is the same as telling the truth:

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<sup>13</sup> Because of his unconventional vocabulary, Alex uses the phrase "not-truths" instead of "lies". This shift removes some of the negative connotations of the word "lie": "not-truths" are in opposition to truth, but sound less like a wilful act of deceit than an alternative way of representing reality.

for him, to be truthful is to be a good moral being, and lying might be necessary in order to be so.

Jonathan is not similarly interested in protection, infidelity and promiscuity being the main character traits of the personality he imagines for his own grandfather. Jonathan has already ordered Alex be “truthful and beautiful” in his writing (54), but as for Alex, “truth” for Jonathan does not simply correspond to “fact”. However, Jonathan does not seem to share Alex’s notion that being truthful is the same as making the right choices or improving life in writing. Most importantly, they differ in the extent to which they are willing to rewrite the aspects of reality they are actually able to know and understand. At one point, Alex even wants Jonathan to alter the course of the war for the sake of Grandfather (144). But Jonathan does not rewrite the fate of the people he knows, as neither the war nor Grandfather’s betrayal of Herschel are excluded from the novel. This suggests that while making minor plot changes, such as removing an irritating dog from the narrative, might be acceptable, there is a limit to which aspects of the truth it is permissible to change in fiction. While Jonathan shows no uneasiness about being inventive when depicting the Trachimbrod community of the past, he is less willing to revise their present-day situation.

Safran is an interesting case in this point because he is a bridge between the two points of mediation, both fictional and real at once. As Safran ponders his possible pasts and futures, he realizes that he marks “the division between what was and what would be” (263). This statement is true for more than his own situation, because he also marks the division between the aspects of history that can be known and those which need to be extracted with the help of the imagination. In the novel, it is Safran’s childhood before the war that Jonathan invents, not his life as a refugee in America. This is also noticed by Alex. “Could you write in this manner if he [Safran] was alive? And if not, what does that signify?” (179). Writing about the dead is different from writing about the living. While manipulating history when imagining a long gone past may be necessary, there is an ethical obligation to tell the truth about those still alive today.

Another possibility is that the insistence on fidelity to contemporary history is an attempt to recover from trauma by working through it rather than rewriting it. As Alex has learnt from an upbringing of physical abuse, telling lies cannot remove pain, because there “are only so many times that you can utter ‘It does not hurt’ before it begins to hurt even more than the hurt” (117). A strategy of avoidance in the face of pain and loss is not necessarily beneficial. On the contrary, returning to trauma is a part of the human experience, as Lista and Grandfather eventually reveal the stories they tried to suppress, and Yankel thinks about the

wife who left him even though it hurts (92). “Why do we do that? Why are the painful things always electromagnets?” Alex asks, his inclusive “we” suggesting that he sees the impulse to revisit painful memories as a tendency human beings share (103). Alex himself acknowledges the therapeutic effect of retelling as he later urges a reluctant Jonathan to talk about his relationship with his grandmother. “I think I’m done talking.’ ‘You must talk,’” Alex insists (158). Because of its curative power, the act of retelling itself might be just as important as the nature of the content in the stories that are told.

Naomi Mandel has suggested that retelling is in fact essential to Foer’s narrative, because a simple concept of a singular truth might not be enough in a Holocaust context. She argues that “for Foer, the demand ... is not for truth but for additional, revisionary narratives: not telling but retelling. Retelling implies that reality is always already a discursive production and that historical events demand not the facts, but multiple versions or accounts” (Mandel 240). She further proposes that the special nature of trauma might change how we relate to fidelity, because trauma is something which “eludes psychic mastery”, and therefore “its reality can only be established through ... retelling” (242).

The discussion of why Jonathan refuses to rewrite contemporary history is complicated by the fact that Alex’s responses to Jonathan’s writings are written during the writing process, and not after. Alex occasionally changes his own story after receiving Jonathan’s criticism — for example rewriting a scene in which Jonathan was charged twice as much as his Ukrainian friends for a hotel room. “Now you pay only once ... This is now an excellent scene” (101). For the reader, however, both versions of the story remain on paper, and this seems to exemplify how there are always several versions of a story, which can sometimes be manipulated by the interest of the writer. The Trachimbrod narrative is not a finished product, but a writing process, presented to the reader in fragments. Alex’s letters function as a series of questions about how to portray reality in fiction, but these questions remain unanswered because of Jonathan’s silence. As such, the novel problematizes its own narrative choices, but does not offer any definitive conclusions.

### **4.3. The function of humour**

So far, we have seen that writing about the present allows for less invention than writing about the more distant past. But to some extent both narrators manipulate the events of their own journey as well, most notably by changing the seriousness of their experiences through the use of humour in their storytelling. “We often make ourselves appear as if we are foolish

people,” Alex notes (179), and the story of the Ukrainian trip undermines the gravity of the trip’s purpose. When Alex first meets Jonathan, he is “underwhelmed to the maximum” because Jonathan is “severely short” and does not have “yellow hairs and muscles” like the Americans he has “witnessed in magazines” (31). Alex’s writing shows both his inclination towards exaggeration and the clear lack of professionalism which marks the family’s tourist firm. A great deal of the novel’s comedy is verbal, produced by a humorous clash between what is being described and the terms of the description, as in the following passage about the drive:

Notwithstanding that we had a deranged bitch in the car, who made a proclivity of throwing her body against the windows, the drive was also difficult because the car is so much shit that it would not travel any faster than as fast as I could run, which is sixty kilometers per the hour. (29)

Jonathan asks Alex not to alter his language mistakes and thinks that “humorous is the only truthful way to tell a sad story” (53). Later, however, they change their opinions about the use of comedy. After having heard Lista’s story of the Trachimbrod massacre, Alex no longer wishes to be funny (219). Likewise, it is not until they have heard the first witness story that Jonathan changes his perception of humour. “I used to think that humor was the only way to appreciate how wonderful and terrible the world is, to celebrate how big life is. . . . But now I think it’s the opposite. Humor is a way of shrinking from that wonderful and terrible world” (158).

But laughter is not only a way of shrinking from the world, it is also a bodily response to a sadness that can find no other way of being articulated. When Alex once overheard his little brother crying, he reacted with an uncontrollable, silent, and powerful laughter (68). Likewise, when the vegetarian Jonathan is finally able to get hold of a potato in a hotel restaurant, it accidentally drops to the floor, and as they all burst into violent laughter, Alex realizes that their response has nothing to do with the potato: instead, the laughter is prompted by the same dark comedy (68). The use of humour, then, is a way of trying to mediate a sad story by acknowledging the dual nature of laughter as a natural response to both the comic or absurd and the traumatic. Humour is understood at different points as being either a way to tell a horrible truth *or* a way of shying away from that truth, and the narrators’ change of opinion with regards to the suitability of comedy suggests that being able to understand the past is a process, and the attempt to find an apt language is a part of that process. Using a

comic tone no longer seems appropriate to the narrators as they move closer to the Holocaust, suggesting that contrary to what Jonathan first thinks, humour is *not* the truthful way to tell a sad story. Being truthful must involve some degree of acknowledgement that trauma is precisely traumatic, which might also explain why it is that Jonathan does not want to change history or shrink from the “wonderful and terrible world” (158).

#### **4.4. Love, truth and Trachimbrod**

While the reader, who is only presented with Alex’s parts of the correspondence, is given no direct insight into why Jonathan chooses to write history the way he does, his Trachimbrod story constantly revolves around questions of truth and what it means to be truthful to his relatives. Most notably, this discussion is tied to love, as Jonathan’s envisioning of his colourful relatives focuses on sexuality and close relationships. In many ways, the story of Trachimbrod is a love story, revolving around the parental relationship between Brod and her adoptive father Yankel, the marriage between Brod and the Kolker, and Safran’s relationships to a variety of women, but in particular “the gypsy girl”. However, these love stories have mostly tragic outcomes. Yankel loses his wife to another man. Safran’s “gypsy girl” commits suicide after he marries another girl, and the only person he is ever able to love is his newborn child, who later drowns in the river. Brod’s husband dies young after the accident at the saw mill, and Brod is, like Safran, unable to love. As I have shown, there may be several reasons as to why Jonathan does not wish to shy away from the brutalities of war in his own lifetime, but why does he also insist on crafting a fictionalized family history which is heavily marked by misfortune and grief?

Alex urges Jonathan to avoid tragedy in his fictional story. “If I could utter a proposal, please allow Brod to be happy” (142), he says, but Brod is nothing if not depressed. She invents a name for 613 new types of sadness, found printed upon her body after her death, and in this way she becomes the very embodiment of sadness (210-1).<sup>14</sup> Brod, whose life story is fictive to a great extent, could be happy in fiction, and yet Jonathan insists on her misery:

Brod’s life was a slow realization that the world was not for her, and that for whatever reason, she would never be happy and honest at the same time. . . . She addressed her world honestly, searching for something deserving of the volumes of love she knew

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<sup>14</sup> Her sadnesses also correspond to the 613 commandments of the Torah (210), which is, perhaps, a gesture towards the historical specificity of his ancestors’ suffering.

she had within her, but to each she would have to say, I don't love you. Bark-brown fence post: I don't love you. Poem too long: I don't love you. (79-80)

Brod is characterized not only by her inability to love her foster-father and her husband, but the entire world around her. And yet, she is pretending. “[W]hen she said, *Father, I love you*, she was neither naïve nor dishonest, but the opposite: she was wise and truthful enough to lie” (82; his emphasis). For the characters of Trachimbrod as well as for Alex, lying is a necessity, an act of compassion, a way of improving the world for the ones around them. And yet, when Brod eventually falls in love with The Kolker without having to resort to lies, it is because he has finally told her a truth no one else has revealed to her, that Yankel was not her real father (138).

In one of his letters, Alex interprets what Brod's inability to love means: “I thought about this when you said that Brod ‘would never be happy and honest at the same time.’ ... Love, in your writing, is the immovability of truth” (103). This may also explain why Jonathan does not want to rewrite known history: if love is the consistency of truth, then even a painful truth might be an act of love. For Brod, the choice is between happiness and honesty, but The Kolker nevertheless interprets her acts of kindness as a love truer than love itself: “She wore my teeth marks on her body like other wives might wear jewelry ... and she never even loved me. Now that's love” (264). But even if being untruthful might be a kind act that will protect other human beings from pain, and telling the truth may not always be reconcilable with happiness, the truth may nevertheless be necessary — both for Brod, whose love for The Kolker is only genuine when she learns the sad truth about her father, and for Jonathan, if Alex is correct in assuming that for him love “is the immovability of truth”.

Jonathan's choice to infuse his family history with tragedy may also serve a specific purpose. In *Everything Is Illuminated*, misfortune is seen not as the exception to life, but as its essence. To protect herself from The Kolker's physical attacks, Brod builds a wall in their bedroom, but through a hole in the wall they are able to converse and even conceive several children. When The Kolker and Yankel are both dead, she realizes that “the hole ... is not the exception in life, but the rule. The hole is no void; the void exists around it” (139). Life revolves around absence, and the suffering experienced by the survivors of the Holocaust, though at one level horrific and particular, is also a version of an anguish which manifests itself differently at different points in history. By letting tragedy be the essence of Brod and her descendants, Jonathan shows that living through sorrow and reworking grief is an essential part of life and, furthermore, that this grief can be overcome.

The Dial — a statue made of Brod’s deceased husband which functions as a god and a place of worship for Trachimbrod’s citizens — points out that “people who live next to waterfalls don’t hear the water”, meaning that people who live in grief will one day become accustomed to that grief (265). “Every love is carved from loss”, but “we learn to live in that love”, he also claims (265). Grief is something which is eventually accepted by the griever, which might explain why revisiting trauma through retelling could be seen as a way of coping with tragedy, of — to use the metaphor of The Dial — learning to live with the sound of the water always there in the background. The Kolker and Brod used to live next to the waterfall, but when they learn to accept the sound they celebrate it as a victory over natural forces. “We alternated hugs of forgiveness and shouts of human triumph at the water. Who wins the day? Who wins the day, waterfall? We do! We do!” (265). Their story, told by the Dial to guide Safran into his future, shows the human capacity to overcome the calamities imposed on them in life.

#### 4.5. Conclusion

While both narrators have a commitment to truthful writing, they both interpret the concept of “truth” differently, and their different choices in representing the past are grounded in their opposed understandings of what writing truthfully actually means. However, Alex’s desire to rewrite history for the better is recognized as problematic: in the end, neither Jonathan nor Alex shy away from describing horrific incidents. Even in a shtetl of mythical and magical quality, truth is essential to the novel which addresses the question of how to represent the world faithfully through a series of reflections about the ethical consequences of fictional writing. In order to tell the Holocaust, the novel celebrates polyphony over unity, both through the oxymoronic nature of magic realism and the insertion of multiple voices in the narrative. In addition to the narratives of Alex and Jonathan, a multitude of other voices express themselves in *Everything Is Illuminated*, which includes the villagers’ own dreams as narrated by themselves, their history as written down in *The Book of Antecedents*, Brod’s diary and Grandfather’s letter. The novel, then, is a collage of voices, all with their own agendas and stories to tell. This deliberate fusion of voices seems to hint at the diversity of past experiences, and instead of asserting *one truth* about history it might be just as truthful to allow these different versions to co-exist. This is not to say that there *is* no underlying truth to an event, but that we need multiple narratives that together might contribute in creating a fuller, if never complete, understanding of history.

## 5. Concluding remarks

On the surface, *Everything Is Illuminated* may seem far removed from obligations to truthful historical writing because of its magical features, its humorous presentation of serious events and because of its intermittently unreliable narrators, who sometimes find it acceptable to depart from the truth either in order to protect others or simply to present themselves favourably. For example, Alex claims that he is performing “recklessly well” in his English studies while also being pursued by a number of girls who want to “be carnal” with him in “in many good arrangements, notwithstanding the Inebriated Kangaroo, the Gorky Tickle, and the Unyielding Zookeeper” (2). It seems suitable to pose the same question to these narrators as Jonathan asks of the unreliable mad-man Sofiowka: “Is this someone to trust for a story?” (15).

But in Alex’s metafictional letters and in Jonathan’s invention of troubled ancestors who have persistent difficulties being truthful in the truest way they can, both narrators express a deeply felt concern for truthful writing, which they both find to be a moral responsibility. What may be seen as departures from historical truth — as Jonathan imagines his first ancestor as a river-born miracle and her husband as an abusive monstrosity who lives on eternally as a god — instead function to question our underlying assumptions about truth by demonstrating an understanding of history in which there is no direct correlation between truth and fact. Both for Alex and for Jonathan, the decision of whether to be truthful or not is a moral rather than a factual issue. The question is not which story would create the most accurate image of what actually happened, but which truth it would be more *ethical* and appropriate to invoke in order to help the human beings in question to live through their trauma. The questions the novel poses about truthful writing may, paradoxically, be more about recovering from traumatic experience than about truth at all.

As I demonstrated in chapter 2, the Holocaust is an event which for many critics resists fictionalization. In this paper, I argue that far from denying the Holocaust, *Everything Is Illuminated* instead dramatizes the difficulty of the third generations’ endeavour to reach an understanding about the genocide while also insisting on the necessity of re-telling it. Although Foer departs dramatically from historical records in his magic realist reconstruction of the traditional Jewish village life, these changes are neither the result of an attempt to make a fiction of the Holocaust or a wish to make fiction “more premium than life”. Instead, the novel tries to find a way to mediate a remote past precisely by highlighting its remoteness from ourselves. By fracturing the story into three distinct parts, the work exposes its own

limitations and does not attempt to offer a master narrative of history. Instead, the two narrators — who have limited knowledge even about the areas of history that constitute the subject of their stories — can only attempt to grasp at comprehension by filling in the dark spaces of history imaginatively. Manipulating historical events is therefore not the same as undermining their importance — indeed, the novel seems to be an exemplary illustration of Hutcheon’s assertion that the postmodern “reinstalls historical contexts as significant and even determining, but in doing so, it problematizes the entire notion of historical knowledge” (89). This paradoxical relationship to history, as at once all-important and yet hard to access, is at the core of the novel’s treatment of the Holocaust. The catastrophic event is undoubtedly of pivotal importance to those who continue to be affected by it many generations after, but it is nevertheless a dark area that is dependent on fiction to be remembered as the last survivors disappear. As much as being a novel about the Holocaust, this is a novel which discusses how we *write* about the Holocaust, but without offering any definite conclusions.

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## **Appendix: relevance for the teaching profession**

Because this thesis is written as a part of the teacher-training program at NTNU, it is necessary to establish how it might be relevant in a classroom context. I find that this work has contributed to my competence as a teacher in three important ways.

First, it has required me to work closely with a literary text, and as a teacher, I need to have thorough knowledge about literature in order to be able to use fiction in the classroom. Literature is not only valuable in itself, but can also be a motivating way of practicing language skills such as reading and listening.

Second, my work deals with historical fiction and the relationship between history and literature, and I have argued that literature may supplement history because it allows us to access the interior thoughts and feelings of individuals. This thesis has given me a new understanding about how literature can be used to enhance learning also in other disciplines than English, such as history or the social sciences. I see this kind of interdisciplinary work as beneficial because it allows students to investigate topics from different perspectives.

Third, this thesis deals with one of the most brutal genocides in history and discusses how we can understand and talk about the past. How do we mediate events such as the Holocaust to new generations? This question is especially relevant today because even though the last witnesses are disappearing, the Holocaust must still be taught in schools because of its catastrophic proportions. Also, the Holocaust is a starting point for important discussions about human rights, fascism, discrimination and anti-religious sentiments, issues which continue to be significant in the twenty-first century.