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The Summons of Freedom

Fantastic History in Jonathan Safran Foer's Everything Is Illuminated

PAUL EISENSTEIN

Introduction

The bifurcated form of Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated* confronts readers almost immediately with a dizzying and potentially disquieting novelistic treatment of the Holocaust. Foer's novel, of course, contains—and alternates between—two radically distinct narratives. The first is a serious, first-person, realist account written by the Ukrainian guide Alexander Perchov that chronicles his efforts to help a twenty-one year old American named Jonathan Safran Foer to find Augustine, the woman who Jonathan believes saved his grandfather Safran from a Nazi massacre. The second is an exceedingly fantastical and comically irreverent history written by Jonathan of his grandfather's and Augustine's hometown, Trachimbrod, from the years 1791–1941. Whereas Alex's account records an earnest search for the past and recovers in the process two very powerful Holocaust testimonies—one by Lista, the last remaining survivor of Trachimbrod; the other by Alex's own grandfather, who accompanies Alex and Jonathan on their search for Augustine—Jonathan's fantastical history of Trachimbrod is wildly and sacrilegiously inventive, appearing at times to be interested in testifying only to the marvelous textual forms that an imaginative rendering of history can take.¹ These two narratives are, moreover, interrupted by a third discourse that only deepens the formal variety and self-referential dimension of *Everything Is Illu-*

minated. This discourse consists of a series of Alex's letters to Jonathan, written in the aftermath of their parting, in which Alex comments directly on the difficulty of writing his own narrative and voices some ethical concerns regarding the inventive liberties Jonathan is taking in his history of Trachimbrod (whose installments Jonathan is sending with some regularity to Alex).

For some readers, such multiple discourses might smack of a solipsistic language game that unjustly usurps the place of the actual memories of survivors.² In what follows, however, I want to argue that the novels and letters that Alex and Jonathan are exchanging converge powerfully on the issue of the writer's, and our own, radical freedom to believe (or not) in the impossible and indecent truths of the past. Foer isolates the precise moment at which this radical freedom emerges at roughly the halfway point of the novel, when Jonathan and Alex fail to find Augustine—the survivor-witness who would possess and be able to relate information crucial to the construction of a sequential, value-securing and all-illuminative narrative.³ It is at this juncture that *Everything Is Illuminated* writes in its own point of origin. By withholding from Jonathan the witness and archival materials required for the narrative that might illuminate everything for him—and that would vindicate Alex's naively credulous belief in the recoverability of the past and its affirmative telos—Foer creates a moment in which both Jonathan and Alex become aware of how completely free they are to write, remember, and believe as they wish. This awareness regarding freedom is of a piece with the power of its exercise when it comes to encountering and involving ourselves in the traumatic events of history. If we see the form of Foer's novel as bound up with freedom and the vicissitudes of its exercise, the punctuation of Alex's Holocaust narrative by Jonathan's fantastical historiography does much more than provide intermittent, comic relief from Lista's and Alex's grandfather's traumatizing revelations. Instead, we might see Jonathan's own unreserved exercise of freedom as speaking directly and ethically to the power that Alex has to remain faithful (or not) to the sorrowful Holocaust testimonies of Lista and his grandfather that he encounters. In the end, Foer positions this power as inseparable from Alex's own freedom to reconsider what it means to be human, and ultimately, to change his life—to see all of the signifiers that name his identity as chosen (and thus capable of being revised or discarded), and to see himself and others, via the Holocaust, as bound by a common vulnerability.

The Productive Paradoxes of Holocaust Freedom

This notion of Holocaust freedom, of course, is a thorny one when it comes to discussing the way the Holocaust should be depicted, since some of the most controversial representations of the Holocaust have, in the exercise of a kind of imaginative freedom, been said to cross an important moral limit. The result is that sometimes imaginative freedom itself, in the context of the Holocaust, has come to appear dubious. In his critique of literary and cinematic texts that evince a "surge of the imagination" and "a demonstration of literary brilliance and the power of one's intellect,"⁴ Saul Friedländer has pointed to this source of ethical disquiet by asking, "There may be no rules, but doesn't one feel the urge for some kind of parsimony?"⁵ We might recall here the arraignment of texts such as Paul Celan's "Todesfugue," Jerzy Kosinski's *The Painted Bird*, William Styron's *Sophie's Choice*, and Benjamin Wilkomirski's *Fragments*. These works (and others) have prompted a great deal of worry about the way figurative language and imagined representations can profane or falsify history and even play into the hands of Holocaust denial. Celan's beautifully lyrical poem, of course, occasioned Adorno's claim that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric,"⁶ that "[t]hrough the aesthetic principle of stylization an unimaginable fate still seems as if it had some meaning: it becomes transfigured, something of the horror is removed."⁷ Elie Wiesel has famously claimed that the Holocaust can neither be the source of "literary inspiration" nor be used "for literary purposes," since to use it as such would "mean, then, that Treblinka and Belzec, Ponar and Babi Yar all ended in fantasy, in words, in beauty, that it was simply a matter of literature."⁸ Cynthia Ozick, noting the way the imagination's freedom has resulted in "fraud, hoax, or delusion," asserts categorically that what was perhaps permissible to Daniel Defoe ("fiction masking as chronicle") "is not permitted to those who touch on the destruction of six million souls, and on the extirpation of their millennial civilization in Europe."⁹ And in a similar vein, Berel Lang has argued for the primacy of historical chronicle over literary rendering, since it is the former's "narrow, prosaic, nonironic, nonfigurative foundation" that guarantees a level of authenticity.¹⁰

Lang's four adjectives—narrow, prosaic, nonironic, and nonfigurative—function almost as ethical criteria for Holocaust writing as a whole. In the name of a sober, terrible accuracy, the aforesaid critiques argue for the curtailment of the literary imagination's freedom and/or the use of

literary language in the representation of the Holocaust. In the process, however, such critiques police generic and aesthetic boundaries within Holocaust literature, since they privilege, sometimes quite explicitly, traditional historiography and survivor testimony over anything explicitly invented or fictionalized, and a spare and solemn realism over anything evincing literary adornment or stylization. A moral injunction of sorts clearly motivates the privileges and prohibitions voiced in this critical discourse: to pay proper respect to the Holocaust's victims and to avoid giving any ammunition to Holocaust deniers.¹¹ Traditional historiography and survivor testimony, moreover, are believed to be capable, on their own, of teaching the lessons of the Holocaust, of making the biggest or most authentic impact on readers.

As Geoffrey Hartman has suggested, however, what criteria of this kind end up contesting is the very capacity of art as "a performative medium" to provide "a counterforce to manufactured and monolithic memory"—to memorial narratives that consolidate "the identity of nation or group," that limit "subversive or heterogeneous facts," and that "nationalize consensus by suggesting a uniform or heroic past."¹² For Hartman, the art produced via this performativity can in some cases be troublesome, but because a discourse (i.e., literary criticism) exists that can capture the source of the trouble, even the most problematic of fictions helps to keep the memory of the Holocaust alive.¹³ To take the defense of imaginative Holocaust literature even further, we might ask whether the textual styles involved in historiography and survivor testimony do not themselves remain the product of stylistic choices. Ruth Franklin asks a version of this question when she notes how so many Holocaust memoirs have been understood as novels as well: "Every canonical work of Holocaust literature," she writes, "involves some graying of the line between fiction and reality."¹⁴ This is perhaps to make an obvious point—that historians and survivors choose their styles, just as 21st century subjects who are reading and learning and perhaps writing about the Holocaust must choose to linger and be touched by its terrible and traumatic dimension, must elect to embrace and to be sorrowed by and to learn from the Holocaust.

Whereas these choices are normally concealed, the form of Foer's novel works to reveal them. It does this in the juxtaposition of two distinct modes of narrating history—one operating within the parameters of realistic representation, the other flying above and beyond such parameters—and in the way that the second mode *summons the freedom* of those ignorant of, indifferent to, or otherwise defensive vis-à-vis the traumatic

dimension of history. What Foer aims to show is how the radical power to imagine writ large in Jonathan's fantastical history of Trachimbrod is part of the same human power in Alex to choose a truthful version of history that fully avows the enormity of its sorrow and loss. This human power, moreover, is not just ours to exercise in matters of historical truth or falsity. On the contrary, this is the very same power to share in the suffering of others, the power to empathize, to feel sorrow, and to act in order to arrest intergenerational cycles of violence. It is, in short, a moral and political power, and what is to be learned from the Holocaust has everything to do with its exercise.

The point at issue, then, in the pitting of parsimonious, nonfigurative history and testimony against the inventions of the imagination (in the manner of Adorno, Wiesel, Ozick, and Lang) is that all of the freedom appears to rest with the latter. Freedom appears to be the source of all of the trouble, whereas history and survivor testimony are positioned simply as reasonably compelling rational belief in something authentic and true.¹⁵ Shortchanged in this portrayal of things is the basic ethical wager of the Enlightenment—the notion that the guarantor of truth and ethics lies not in the texts that discursively and intelligibly set forth this or that historical truth or ethical maxim, but rests, instead, in the freedom of human beings to believe a truth or follow a moral law simply because *they can*. This is, in many ways, the gauntlet thrown down by Immanuel Kant, for whom freedom is the ultimate idea against which reason runs aground. If we follow Kant, this means in the last instance that one cannot give a reason for accepting a truth as true or for following a moral law: ultimately, we must believe in such a truth or follow a moral imperative because we are free to do so.

This modern way of conceiving ethics and truth carries with it obvious risks. As Kant himself was forced to concede, it is entirely possible that an individual or individuals might elect *not* to follow the moral law—an unsettling choice that Kant dubbed “radical” or “inextirpable” evil.¹⁶ Nonetheless the notion of freedom remains unavoidably central to our encounters with what transpired during the Holocaust, and to the productive lessons we might take from such encounters. To bite the bullet of Kantian ethics is to regard the Holocaust as very possibly the object of disbelief or indifference, to see that while there are certainly reasons for believing in and being touched by an event like the Holocaust, we must embrace and affirm that the reasons for embracing these reasons cannot themselves be specified: they must, in the last instance, be chosen.

Revaluing the Fantastic

At first glance, the fantastic history of Trachimbrod that Jonathan authors might appear unsettlingly frivolous when juxtaposed with the serious and ultimately catastrophic past recovered and recounted in Alex's story. While it is no doubt the case that Jonathan has failed to find the witness (Augustine) who would enable him to write a realistic book about his grandfather and his village, we might ask whether the failure of his documentary project had to give way so completely to a history that is so false, so lewd, and so full of risible caricatures and absurdities. His grandfather's one hundred and thirty-two mistresses, his twenty-seven hundred sexual encounters, his first orgasm with German bombs exploding audibly in the distance—these features of the portrait of Safran imagined by Jonathan would seem enough to elicit the rebuke that Foer has violated the propriety and decorum we might believe is owed to pre-war inhabitants of an Eastern European Jewish *shtetl*.

To read Jonathan's story is not just to question repeatedly the ethical implications of the imaginative license he is taking at the level of plot and character, but to question also the ontological status of the text itself. This is because Jonathan's narrative of Trachimbrod frequently resorts to non-narrative methods of communication that take a host of shapes on the page, calling attention to the story's excessive textuality. At times, Jonathan's narrative reads like a *tour de force* that seems to symbolize nothing but the nonsensical gesture of symbolization itself: we enjoy (or do not) the dazzling imaginative turns of his story in a manner akin to enjoying the sound of words apart from their sense or meaning.¹⁷

This feature of fantastical narratives explains why, in the case of the Holocaust, they are so rare, why so few works have chanced to approach in such a lively and stylized way an all too solemn historical event. If, as Berel Lang has argued, literature must “aspire to historical authenticity,”¹⁸ what then is to be done with works which so flagrantly cast aside that aspiration, which court laughter and/or disbelief in their reliance on the fantastic?¹⁹ When a writer imagines sexual liaisons between his dead grandfather and a traumatized Holocaust survivor he has recently met, when this writer juxtaposes seismic orgasms and German bombs, we may have every right to ask after a writer's responsibility to history, and after what constitutes that responsibility's betrayal. If, for Lang, narratives such as George Steiner's *The Portage to San Cristóbal of A.H.* and Philip Roth's *The Ghost Writer* “tread on dangerous ground,”²⁰ because they stray so clearly from a recognizably factual world, surely the same danger accom-

panies the handful of other texts that so dramatically (and often comically) challenge known historical facts and even the very laws of the physical world—from Romain Gary's *The Dance of Genghis Cohn* (1968) to Joseph Skibell's *A Blessing on the Moon* (1997).²¹

Like these stories, Jonathan's history of Trachimbrod confronts us with the writer's radical freedom to invent without concern for truth and accuracy, to revel in the power of the imagination to spin magical and marvelous stories. By making this history something overtly presented to Alex, however, and even juxtaposing it formally with Alex's much more serious story, Foer makes explicit the implicit memorial wager of every fantastical Holocaust narrative—the way each one asks us to inhabit the “duration of uncertainty” that Tzvetan Todorov, more than thirty-five years ago, placed at the heart of the fantastic as a literary genre.²² Such uncertainty is linked directly to Holocaust remembrance because so many of the Holocaust's aspects strike us initially (as they do Alex) as impossible and thus possibly false, as unbelievable and thus possibly not to be believed. What fantastic stories isolate, however, is precisely the moment at which we must choose between being engaged by or indifferent to (to believe or disbelieve) disturbing and unbelievable events.²³ The more excessively false and fantastic the story, the more this choice is foregrounded, and the more we are being summoned, as it were, to choose historical truth as disquieting and sorrowful—and to elect to undergo the sort of subjective destitution this entails. For this reason, those of who read about and study the Holocaust today should perhaps think twice about the critique of imaginative freedom voiced by Adorno, Wiesel, Friedländer, Ozick, and Lang, and see instead how literary or figurative language is the ally of historical truth and not its unsettling falsifier. Because truth does not magically compel belief, because sorrow is not an involuntary emotion, and because the values and fantasies that motivated the Holocaust are ones we must genuinely elect to analyze and avoid, we cannot do without fantastical texts that foreground and summon the freedom we must exercise so as to choose truth, sorrow, and an ethic of shared vulnerability. Ultimately, the semi-epistolary dimension of the bifurcated form of Foer's novel is what saves it from the charge that Jonathan's history is a disquietingly indecorous instance of falsification: written explicitly for someone who is actively in the process of choosing the historical narrative in which he will believe, Jonathan's story might be seen as enjoining Alex (and other readers born more than forty or fifty years after the Holocaust) to remain faithful to the shattering testimonies of Lista and Alex's grandfather—to see, in the end, how the departure from accuracy is

fundamentally of a piece with the creation and productive impact of accuracy itself.

Making the Choice

The first-person account of Alex's that we read in *Everything Is Illuminated* is the work of an aspiring author who is struggling with the national and familial history he has encountered on the failed search for Augustine. The fact that Lista (and not Augustine) is the last remaining survivor of Trachimbrod is decisive for Alex, since it confronts him with the fact that the national and familial history that he has been taught is incomplete, or that history itself might run up against something that resists recovery and/or narration. Up until the encounter with Lista, Alex has treated his commission as Jonathan's guide largely as a job. Early on, he confesses to never having met a Jewish person and to “the opinion that Jewish people were having shit between their brains” for spending large sums of money “to unearth places where their families once existed.”²⁴ His idealized version of Ukrainian history is of a piece with this perception. There is, for him, nothing disquieting about Ukrainian history because he has taken as self-evident the scholastic, post-Cold War, nation-affirming myth continuous with the anti-fascist histories of the Soviet period—that Ukrainians saved Jews.²⁵ His master-narrative of history is essentially a sunny one, bearing no material remnants of what got destroyed in the Holocaust and no sense that linear, progressive historical narratives miss or overlook something important about the past.²⁶

At the outset of his narrative, Alex is not at all aware of the struggle that will soon consume him. Much of this has to do with the sort of person he was prior to his journey, a person without inwardness who takes literally the images of wealth and virility he encounters on American television and in American movies, music, and magazines. Living with his abusive father, his dream is to emigrate to America with his little brother Igor, and to live in Times Square.²⁷ As we read of his being hired as Jonathan's guide, Alex's story appears simply to grant him the chance to present himself as the bearer of a manhood he has to this point merely fantasized about. Indeed, writing without any seriousness about the job for which he has been hired, Alex seems more interested in conveying his essential and desirable masculinity: he invokes repeatedly the “currency” he “dig[s] to disseminate ... at famous nightclubs in Odessa,”²⁸ and reports that his “eyes are blue and resplendent,” that he is “unequivocally tall,”

and that "many girls want to be carnal with me in many good arrangements."²⁹

Foer undercuts Alex's story in one obvious way by having him narrate in English. In addition, there are places in Alex's text that contain details that disturb the idealized version he is presenting. These details begin as brief parenthetical asides and later become fuller digressions, but in both cases, their inclusion is accompanied frequently by Alex's insistence that Jonathan share such details with no one, or by his claim that he will later cut from the story he is writing that which he is presently divulging. Where Alex's investment in a certain fantasy of himself (and his family and his country) collides most clearly with the traumatic history of the Holocaust, however, is in the letters that he posts to Jonathan. These letters come just before installments of his story.³⁰ In the first letter, we see Alex clinging prosaically to the fantasy that if they had just had more time, they might have found Augustine. Subsequent letters, however, show him struggling, with increased desperation, with the freedom bequeathed to him by Augustine's absence. This desperation is spurred by the fact that his own narrative is moving toward his grandfather's traumatic revelation regarding the role the grandfather played in the death of a Jewish friend, and by the pronounced melancholia he sees in his grandfather. Averring to Jonathan in one of his letters that "[w]ith writing, we have second chances,"³¹ Alex sees one possible remedy in the kind of story that partakes of what Eric Santner calls "narrative fetishism"—in a story "consciously or unconsciously designed to expunge the traces of the trauma or loss that called that narrative into being in the first place."³²

The beauty of Foer's formal set up is that even as it gives voice to the writer's desire and freedom to craft a fetishistic narrative, it shows us Alex choosing not to do so. In one of the novel's most salient passages, Alex entertains the notion that Jonathan's fantastical history of Trachimbrod provides tacit permission for his own realist travelogue to become, untruthfully, much more heroic, sentimental, and affirmative—in his words, "high fidelity."³³ That is to say, Alex entertains the notion that since he and Jonathan are free to be "nomadic with the truth," they can make their stories "more premium than life."³⁴ In one of his letters to Jonathan, Alex outlines several possible plot directions he is free to pursue in his novel. He imagines, for instance, that he and Jonathan might find Augustine; or that Jonathan's grandmother could be written into the story; or that Alex's grandfather could be written in as Safran's savior. As Alex puts it, describing this last scenario, "He [Alex's grandfather] could be Augustine. August, perhaps. Or just Alex, if that is satisfactory to you. I

do not think there are any limits to how excellent we could make life seem."³⁵

Here, we are faced precisely with the vexing feature of freedom against which traditional historiography and survivor testimony attempt to guard. That is to say, the instant we say that Holocaust representation is always the result of choices that are free, we risk opening the floodgates to all sorts of sentimental or literary-brilliant exaggerations and falsifications. Alex makes plain the warrant for this worry: if the unrecoverable aspect of the Holocaust indeed recalls to us our insuperable freedom and means that any Holocaust writing is the product of a chosen style, then there may indeed be no limit to "how excellent we could make life seem." Why not write stories that are always "more premium than life?" This is linked, too, to what I called earlier the bullet of Kantian ethics: if historical truth and ethical conduct depend ultimately on a subjective exercise of freedom, then we cannot rule out the exercise of that freedom in the direction of the literary or behavioral evils of sentimentalism or disbelief, of indifference or cruelty.

My claim nonetheless is that we who teach and write about the Holocaust must frame the choice as a choice. This is the lesson of the fantastical story that Jonathan writes to Alex, which precisely in its excessive imaginative license, is enjoining Alex to choose to avow the truth of the Holocaust and what it means for the views he holds of himself, his family, his country, and others. What Foer makes plain here is that any hope we have that the effects of confronting and learning about the Holocaust will be lasting—that this hope is linked entirely to a free and entirely elective embrace of its disturbingly sorrowful truths and ethical lessons.

Foer delivers on this hope by having Alex exercise his freedom precisely in this direction. That is to say, rather than pen a narrative that fetishistically works over the revelations involved in his trip, Foer gives us Alex choosing to remain faithful to objects and episodes that cannot be fully redeemed. The reality of this choice, for me, is enough to make Foer's novel forward-looking and even propitious. In so saying, I do not want to minimize how sad and burdensome the past appears in the novel's testimonial scenes. Indeed, the exercise of freedom, as I have been saying, sometimes entails electing to be bound to grave and calamitous and impossibly true events. Thus in his writing of the episode involving Lista, for example, Alex turns his story into a kind of transcription of Lista's testimony—into a form of narration that freely repeats the words of survivors in order to keep them alive.³⁶ And when it comes to the testimony of his grandfather—the story of how, in a lineup in front of Trachimbrod's

synagogue of all its inhabitants, his grandfather had to choose between identifying his best friend as a Jew or else being shot in the head—Alex's own voice is present only in the form of occasional questions (e.g., "What did they do? What happened next?"³⁷). To the extent that authorial artifice is present in the transcription of the grandfather's testimony, such artifice appears in Alex's decision to stretch language to the point of communicating only the terror of Nazi violence and the unspeakable grief of a survivor. The entirety of his grandfather's testimony is rendered without paragraph breaks, and as its substance becomes more horrible and chaotic, it is written without periods; in some cases, many words are run together. Among other things, what this testimony makes clear is the ongoing corrosive guilt bequeathed to those who survived the Holocaust's impossibly traumatic moments. As Alex's grandfather puts it regarding his friend, "Herschel would have been murdered with or without me, but it is still as if I murdered him."³⁸

Clearly, these testimonies—especially the grandfather's, which plays a direct role in his expiatory suicide at novel's end—darken the horizon of Foer's novel. Christoph Ribbat, for instance, has argued that in the grandfather's revelation, we (and Jonathan and Alex) are confronted with "the destructive force of a much more painful, much more direct form of memory as it destroys another person."³⁹ According to Ribbat, "There is no coming to terms with the past in Foer's novel," only the emergence of hidden truths that announce "the impossibility of a sane, harmonious learning process."⁴⁰ For Mechachem Feuer, the form of the novel contributes to its darker or more pessimistic overtones, since Alex's final letter ends with a plea for forgiveness that the novel's final thirty-three pages leave unaddressed, and the novel itself ends with a suicide note of sorts. For Feuer, the absence of any reply by Jonathan to Alex's plea, combined with the suicide, is a sign of Jonathan's inescapably difficult position—a position that points up the impossibility of post-Holocaust friendship or reconciliation between perpetrator and victim.⁴¹

But in exercising his freedom in the service of a sad and burdensome past, Alex is also gaining a capacity to use this power to imagine anew his relationships to others, and to change the very life-world in which he exists. That is to say, even as he relates his grandfather's dreadful, distressful confession, he understands it to have implications for the present and future. These implications are made explicit in Alex's direct address to Jonathan at the end of Alex's telling of his grandfather's story: "he said these things to us and Jonathan where do we go now what do we do what with what we know."⁴² Part of what Alex does is to set about writing the

serious travelogue that makes up one half of *Everything Is Illuminated*. The other part, glimpsed in his letters to Jonathan, is to take up a way of being and a kind of conduct that rejects an idealized fantasy about himself and his family and the legitimacy of pre-given truths in a post-Holocaust world.

When his grandfather asks to borrow his money in order to find Augustine, for example, Alex chooses not to give him the money, claiming that he (Alex) no longer believes in "the Augustine that Grandfather was searching for."⁴³ Who is this Augustine for whom his grandfather wants to continue searching? In an exchange between the two of them, the grandfather says that love, goodness or God are not to be believed in, and confesses to dreaming that the discovery of Augustine would permit reasonable or intelligent belief.

Clearly, the grandfather has run squarely up against the philosophical truth that I have said lies at the heart of the Enlightenment and that the Holocaust lays bare—that there is no intelligible Other capable of making a belief necessary or compulsory, of guaranteeing the meaning of historical truths or moral maxims. Alex's grandfather, we might say, is incapable of the faith-based dimension of modern, post-Kantian truth and ethics. He cannot see how our belief in a moral Law, in love, in goodness, in God—whatever it is that we embrace to motivate our ethical conduct, to lend meaning to the world—is always chosen. As Kant made clear, these beliefs are never intelligent or reasonable, never made completely on the basis of transparent knowledge. On the contrary, they are free. By having the grandfather commit suicide, Foer explores a canonical Existentialist motif—the fact that our freedom confronts us with the fundamental choice of whether or not to go on living. In the case of the grandfather, however, the nature and terms of this choice are deepened. Bereft of a divine guarantor of love or goodness, the grandfather carries out an act of self-punishment that seeks itself to bring into existence the Other with the capacity to expiate, or to stand itself as a meaningful, empirical sacrifice capable of brokering forgiveness, friendship, and reconciliation.

For some readers, the grandfather's suicide is an indication that Foer "does not want the grandfather to get away with his crime unscarred."⁴⁴ And it is perhaps a plausibly just, almost talionic act: having pointed out his friend to the Nazis, the grandfather will give his own life to balance things out. But given the near-total destitution bound up in his confession, Alex's grandfather is clearly already scarred by the very telling of his tale. Moreover, his suicide risks giving far too much away to the perfidious dimension of Nazi violence, which sought precisely to degrade its victims

by placing them in situations designed to induce their complicity and guilt. As an attempt to help Alex and Jonathan (and us) to break an intergenerational cycle of suspicion and enmity, of violence and reprisal, the grandfather's suicide is totally poignant but ultimately superfluous. What the suicide attempts to represent is an empirical foundation for moving forward that neither Alex nor Jonathan really needs. I say this because we know that Jonathan is sending installments of his novel to Alex, even after learning of Alex's grandfather's guilt-inducing act. And because Alex—before his grandfather's suicide—*already* sees how the basis of belief (or truth) cannot be entirely empirical: "We could not find her," he says of Augustine to his grandfather, "but that does not signify anything about whether you should believe in her."⁴⁵

It is perhaps telling that at this very moment where belief is linked most explicitly to freedom, Alex confesses to being an entirely different person, to having eclipsed entirely his social identity and the empirical reasons he had for clinging to the values and truths to which he has clung. This power to choose a good because we are fundamentally free to do so is evinced as well in the novel's final letter, the grandfather's suicide note, which is addressed to Jonathan. In this note, we learn that Alex has challenged and dismissed and forgiven his own abusive father in a radical attempt to break an intergenerational cycle of familial violence rooted in the secret and shameful stories of the past. To do this, he abandons the fantasy of his and Igor's escape to America and gives his father all of the money that he had been saving for that purpose. In his gloss on this act, Alex's grandfather sees it as conveying the possibility of a life without violence. He writes that if Alex and Igor "cut all of the strings,"⁴⁶ they might live a life without violence. At first glance, this cutting of the strings might appear to evoke the myth of self-invention, where human freedom is exercised in the forgetting or banishing the past. But because Foer has so clearly made Alex the author of one half of *Everything Is Illuminated*, because he has so clearly foregrounded the extent to which choice and freedom are indispensable for an encounter with a sorrowful history and for the recognition of a common vulnerability, we see Alex's cutting of the strings as in fact a gesture that enables the free act of taking them up again.

All of this is to suggest that Jonathan's fantastical history has been successful in summoning Alex's freedom. Herein lies, as I have suggested, the ethically auspicious import of the novelistic form of *Everything Is Illuminated*, which shows us how imaginative freedom can lead to an embrace of a sorrowful truth we might prefer to avoid or deny, and to a more honest

and vulnerable way of living—without concealing how such freedom contains opposite and less positive outcomes as well. What Foer lets us glimpse is that the freedom bequeathed to us by the unsymbolizable aspect of the past can enable us to be sorrowed and burdened by it, but also not to repeat or be completely ensnared by it. Though there is a way that generations twice or thrice removed from the Holocaust can come to think that their freedom has been taken from them—*Nothing Makes You Free* is the title of a recent collection, edited by Melvin Jules Bukiet, of "writings by descendants of Jewish Holocaust survivors"⁴⁷—we see in Foer's novel how a genuine confrontation with the traumatic events of the Holocaust can also be liberating or empowering. These traumatic events call forth and depend upon our freedom to write about, believe in, and engage with them. And this freedom extends to acts of writing, belief, and engagement that go beyond the Holocaust as well.⁴⁸

By presenting freedom's difficult exercise in such a positive light, Foer leads us to the operating and unavoidable paradox of Holocaust representation wherein if we try to get rid in advance of all of the potentially unsettling representations—versions that are trite or sentimental or just plain false—we get rid, too, of the ones whose fantastical quality confronts us with the power to choose that is crucial to any Holocaust representation and the impact it seeks to make. Whereas imaginative freedom occasions a great deal of worry today, Foer's novel lets us glimpse how a meaningful engagement with history and the type of individual and social change that Holocaust histories and survivor testimonies aim to produce cannot be separated from it. The exercise of this freedom—writ large in the wildly stylized history of Trachimbrod that is sent by one of the novel's narrators (Jonathan) to the other (Alex)—renders visible a dynamic that is just as present in the writing and reading of Holocaust histories and testimonies, and that is, as the case of Alex makes plain, critical to the changing of one's life. We are thus perhaps at a moment in the discourse of the Holocaust in which the most wildly inventive and imaginative of its representations have a key role to play in forging its legacy—in summoning the freedom required for us not just to confront terrible scenes of devastation but to achieve, even if only one person at a time, the miraculous dream, espoused by Alex's grandfather, of a life without violence.

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NOTES

1. Jonathan's history of Trachimbrod includes transcriptions from a communally-held book of recurrent dreams, transcriptions from a history of Trachimbrod that is being written by the town's inhabitants in the form of an encyclopedia, songs, diary entries, memorial plaques, dramatic interludes, family tree-like charts, and lines upon lines of ellipses.

2. Brooke Allen, for instance, has termed Foer's imagining of the traumatic past of his grandfather's village "the height of callowness," claiming that for the survivors (and the children) the Holocaust has been "a real, solid, ugly fact of all our lives," whereas for Foer, "born more than thirty years after Auschwitz, it is merely the unremembered past, ripe for reinvention and reinterpretation by the artist." See Brooke Allen, "Solipsism," review of *Everything Is Illuminated*, by Jonathan Safran Foer, *Atlantic Monthly* (April 2002): 141.

3. When Jonathan imagines first meeting Augustine, he asks her to tell him everything. According to Alex, Jonathan asks "to hear about how she met my grandfather, and why she decided to save him, and what happened to her family, and if she ever talked to my grandfather after the war." See Jonathan Safran Foer, *Everything Is Illuminated* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002), 148. And to give this imagined story its proper (and redemptive) pathos, Jonathan even wants to know if Augustine and his grandfather were in love. In many respects, Jonathan's search for Augustine shares affinities with the growing ethnography of Holocaust rescue, which has tried to capture and recover the moral values—typically distilled into an ethical maxim—that motivated the act of saving Jews. For this ethnography, see Eva Fogelman, *Conscience and Courage: Rescuers of Jews During the Holocaust* (New York: Anchor, 1995); Ellen Land-Weber, *To Save a Life: Stories of Holocaust Rescue* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000); Hillel Levine, *In Search of Sugihara: The Elusive Japanese Diplomat Who Risked His Life to Rescue 10,000 Jews from the Holocaust* (New York: The Free Press, 1996); Samuel P. and Pearl M. Oliner, *The Altruistic Personality: Rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe* (New York: The Free Press, 1988); and Nechama Tec, *When Light Pierced the Darkness: Christian Rescue of Jews in Nazi-Occupied Poland* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

4. Saul Friedländer, *Reflections on Nazism: An Essay on Kitsch and Death* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 20.

5. *Ibid.*, 98. For Friedländer, "the only open avenue [for those trying to represent the Holocaust] may well be that of quietness, simplicity, of the constant presence of the unsaid, and of the constant temptation of silence" (*Ibid.*, 97–98). The notion of disrespected moral limits explored in Friedländer's *Reflections on Nazism* telegraph the central concept in the edited book of his that appeared ten years later—*Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution"* (the expanded proceedings of a conference convened in 1990 at UCLA and a canonical book in Holocaust Studies). In his introduction to this collection, Friedländer argues on moral grounds for a certain limit to representation, insisting that because "the perpetrators invested considerable effort not only in camouflage, but in effacement of all traces of their deeds," the Holocaust "should not be distorted or banalized by grossly inadequate representations." See Saul Friedländer,

Introduction to *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution"*, ed. Saul Friedländer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 3. As Friedländer puts it, "Some claim to 'truth' appears particularly imperative" (*Ibid.*).

6. Theodor Adorno, "Cultural Criticism and Society," in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981), 34.

7. Theodor Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 171.

8. Elie Wiesel, "The Holocaust as Literary Inspiration," in *Dimensions of the Holocaust*, ed. Elliot Lefkowitz (Evanston, IL: University of Northwestern Press, 1977), 7.

9. Cynthia Ozick, "The Rights of History and the Rights of the Imagination," in *Quarrel and Quandary* (New York: Knopf, 2000), 111.

10. Berel Lang, *Holocaust Representation: Art Within the Limits of History and Ethics* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 34. For Lang, the chronicle is "the zero-point of historiography" (*Ibid.*, 59), the bearer of an authenticity that literary texts, on moral grounds, ought always to keep before them. The problem with imagined representations, for Lang, is the contention implicit in all of them that historical facts "do not speak for themselves, that figurative condensation and displacement and the authorial presence they articulate will turn or supplement the historical subject, whatever it is, in a way that represents the subject more compellingly or effectively—in the end, more truly—than would be the case without them" (*Ibid.*, 69). To follow this line of thinking is to see figurative language as hopelessly caught up in the dangers of misrepresentation, and this is an outcome all the more exacerbated by the passing of time and the deaths of direct material witnesses.

11. The link between invention and denial is manifest in the rift between Elie Wiesel and Alfred Kazin over the latter's questioning of whether or not a particular scene in *Night* actually happened—a questioning Wiesel saw as tantamount to support for Holocaust denial. For a fascinating account of this rift, see Gary Weissman, *Fantasies of Witnessing: The Postwar Effort to Experience the Holocaust* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004). Also relevant in this context is the fake memoir phenomenon, to which belong not only Wilkomirski's *Fragments*, but also, in just the past few years, Bernard Holstein's *Stolen Soul*, Misha Defonseca's *Misha: A Memoir of the Holocaust Years*, and Herman Rosenblat's *Angel at the Fence*. What is unsettling about Wiesel's linking of invention and denial is the way it partakes of an approach used by Holocaust deniers themselves—what Susan Rubin Suleiman has characterized as "the familiar negationist device of reasoning by synecdoche." See Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Crises of Witnessing and the Second World War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 166. Suleiman distills this method in her discussion of the way French Holocaust denier Serge Thion used Wilkomirski's invented memoir to dispute the Holocaust: "If a single detail in a testimony is false, that renders the whole thing false; if a single testimony is a fake, that renders all testimonies fake" (*Ibid.*).

12. Geoffrey Hartman, *The Longest Shadow: In the Aftermath of the Holocaust* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 104.

13. As Hartman puts it, "Fiction is, no doubt, an image maker today, and open to popular misuse, especially in the form of televised simplification. But that is why, first of all, we have literary criticism, a hygiene of reading with iconoclastic overtones" (*Ibid.* 30).

14. Ruth Franklin, *A Thousand Darkneses: Lies and Truth in Holocaust Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 11.

15. The absolute truth or authenticity of survivor testimonies is, of course, far from self-evident. Michael-André Bernstein has argued that all eyewitness testimony is "touched by figuration and by shaping." See Michael-André Bernstein, *Foregone Conclusions: Against Apocalyptic History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 47. Lawrence Langer, on the other hand, has suggested that oral testimonies escape the kind of manipulative shaping that transpires with written testimonies, and are thus more truthful and authentic. For Langer, when it comes to written testimonies, the very "appearance of form is reassuring" (Lawrence Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991], 17). Finally, Kate McLoughlin has also shown how first-person testimony can have no absolute authority because sometimes the same witness can, at different times, give radically divergent testimony. McLoughlin's exploration of this challenge comes in a reading of Philip Roth's fictional portrayal of the Demjanjuk trial, wherein she sees Roth deploy a representational tactic that shares affinities with my analysis of the function of the Trachimbrod section in Foer's novel. Faced with an unrecoverable Truth, "Roth's tactic," McLoughlin writes, "is only to increase the preposterousness, as though, paradoxically, it is only in the face of particularly blatant breaches of consistency and verisimilitude that belief has a chance." See Kate McLoughlin, "Dispute Incarnate: Philip Roth's *Operation Shylock*, the Demjanjuk Trial, and Eyewitness Testimony," *Philip Roth Studies* 3, no. 2 (Fall 2007): 127.

16. Immanuel Kant, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, trans. Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt Hudson (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), 32.

17. At one point in the novel, Jonathan remembers himself and his grandmother shouting words off her back porch at night. He'd shout words like phantasmagoria and antediluvian; she'd shout Yiddish words he did not know the meaning of. See Foer, *Everything Is Illuminated*, 159. This scene is meant to convey the way words have a material dimension that is not entirely absorbed by their meaning or by the things to which they are believed to correspond. The utility of this insight is suggested in the encyclopedia section of Jonathan's story, which contains an entry for the neologism "Ifactiface" (Ibid., 203). Here, Jonathan proposes that one propaedeutic for anti-Semitic violence might rest in the recognition that there is something in the words that structure our identities and our world that resists understanding—or that corresponds to nothing. As he puts it, "[U]ntil we can find a nonapproximate vocabulary, nonsense words are the best thing we've got" (Ibid.).

18. Lang, *Holocaust Representation*, 28.

19. On the subject of Holocaust laughter, see Terrence Des Pres, "Holocaust Laughter?" in *Writing and the Holocaust*, ed. Berel Lang (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1988), 216–33; Sander Gilman, "Is Life Beautiful? Can the Shoah Be Funny?: Some Thoughts on Recent and Older Films," *Critical Inquiry* 26 (Winter 2000), 279–308; and Shai Oster, "Holocaust Humor," *The Utne Reader* 95 (Sept.–Oct. 1999), 82–86.

20. Lang, *Holocaust Representation*, 30.

21. See Romain Gary, *The Dance of Genghis Cohn* (New York: Signet, 1968) and Joseph Skibell, *A Blessing on the Moon* (New York: Berkeley, 1997). Set in 1968, Gary's comical novel is narrated by the Yiddish vaudevillian spirit of a murdered Jew (Moishe Cohn) who haunts—in the manner of a *dybbuk*—the body of the SS Officer (Hans Schatz) who killed him twenty-four years earlier. Skibell's novel records the story of Reb Chaim Skilbelski, who, after being shot and cast into a mass grave, climbs out and commences a journey through a moonless world

that takes him, among other places, to a mythical resort where he is reunited with his entire family and ultimately back to his hometown where he must help to excavate and raise the moon. The most well known, deliberately non-mimetic representation of late is perhaps a cinematic one—Roberto Benigni's *Life Is Beautiful*. For views critical of the falsification and denial inherent in the film's fabular approach, see David Denby, "Darkness Out of Light," *The New Yorker*, November 16, 1998, 114–16, and Thane Rosenbaum, "With the Shoah, Can Tragedy Become Farce?: Considering an Italian Funnyman's Concentration Camp Comedy," *Forward*, October 23, 1998, <http://www.forward.com/issues/1998/98.12.23/arts.html>.

22. Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), 25.

23. This point is made explicitly in Nathan Englander's story "The Tumblers," in which a group of Hasidic Jews from Chelm en route to a death camp find themselves mistaken for circus performers and is shown attempting to practice acrobatic routines on their train. This is, the narrator tells us, clearly "an absurd undertaking. But then again ... no more unbelievable than the reality from which they'd escaped, no more unfathomable than the magic of disappearing Jews." See Nathan Englander, *For the Relief of Unbearable Urges* (New York: Random House, 1999), 42–43.

24. Jonathan Safran Foer, *Everything Is Illuminated* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002), 3.

25. When Jonathan reports that his grandmother's entire family was killed by the Nazis a few kilometers from Trachimbrod, Alex asks, "Did a Ukrainian save her?" and is surprised that no one saved her family (Ibid., 61). When Jonathan says that it's not all that surprising given the fact that Ukrainians were "almost as bad as the Nazis," Alex adamantly rejects this. Jonathan tells him to "look it up in the history books." Alex replies by saying that "[i]t does not say this in the history books" (Ibid., 62) and insists that Jonathan admit that he is mistaken. According to Zvi Gitelman, though Soviet historiography clearly minimized the fact that Jews were the Holocaust's primary victims and that many living in the Soviet Union's western republics (Ukraine and Belorussia) often collaborated with the Nazis, there was no "uniform, universally applied party line on the issue." See Zvi Gitelman, "The Soviet Union," in *The World Reacts to the Holocaust*, ed. David Wyman (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 312. Gitelman suggests, moreover, that part of Khrushchev's attempt to countervail Western charges of official anti-Semitism involved the promulgation of the idea that "gentiles frequently saved Jews in occupied territories" (Ibid.). On the vexed issue of Ukrainian complicity in the Holocaust—an issue only now beginning to be avowed and addressed—see Martin Dean, *Collaboration in the Holocaust: Crimes of the Local Police in Belorussia and Ukraine, 1941–44* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000); Rebecca Golbert, "'Neighbors' and the Ukrainian Jewish Experience of the Holocaust," in *Lessons and Legacies, Volume VII: The Holocaust in International Perspective*, ed. Dagmar Herzog (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2006), 233–52; and Boris Zabarko, ed. *Holocaust in the Ukraine*, trans. Marina Guba (Portland: Vallentine Mitchell, 2005).

26. At first glance, Alex's initial mistaking of Lista for Augustine is perhaps innocent enough: having seen Jonathan's photograph of Augustine, he believes Lista's eyes are identical to the eyes shown in the photograph. But his subsequent comment allows us to see how a certain vision of history might be behind this mistake: "And I was certain, looking at her eyes, that she had saved the hero's grandfather, and probably many others. I could imagine in my brain how the days

connected the girl in the photograph to the woman who was in the room with us. Each day was like another photograph. Her life was a book of photographs. One was with the hero's grandfather, and now one was with us." See Foer, *Everything Is Illuminated*, 148. Imagining Lista's present almost as the culmination of a montage sequence in a sentimental film, Alex's lines here recall the historicism excoerated by Walter Benjamin. That is to say, according to Walter Benjamin, Alex sees Lista's history as a sequence of photographed moments—in Benjamin's terms, "like the beads of a rosary" through "homogeneous, empty time." See Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1985), 263, 261.

27. In one letter to Jonathan, Alex speaks of the money he is saving to emigrate to America and he imagines himself and his younger brother residing in a "luxurious apartment in Times Square" complete with "a large screen television to watch basketball, a jacuzzi, and a hi-fi to write home about." See Foer, *Everything Is Illuminated*, 101.

28. Foer, *Everything Is Illuminated*, 2.

29. Ibid.

30. There are seven such letters included in the novel, with the first one dated three weeks after the trip (September 23, 1997) and the last coming about four months later (January 26, 1998, written four days after Alex's grandfather's suicide).

31. Foer, *Everything Is Illuminated*, 144.

32. Eric Santner, "History Beyond the Pleasure Principle: Some Thoughts on the Representation of Trauma," in *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution,"* ed. Saul Friedländer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 144.

33. Ibid., 179.

34. Ibid.

35. Ibid., 180.

36. Alex writes, "You cannot know how it felt to have to hear those things and then repeat them, because when I repeated them, I felt like I was making them new again" (185). It may be tempting to see Alex's unique position as a translator as authorizing the repetition of a survivor's testimony, but Foer appears to suggest here that there might be a non-appropriative way for nonwitnesses—or members of the second and third generation—to repeat via speech (to themselves or to others) the testimony of Holocaust survivors.

37. Ibid., 248.

38. Ibid., 247.

39. Christoph Ribbat, "Nomadic with the Truth': Holocaust Representation in Michael Chabon, James McBride, and Jonathan Safran Foer," *Anglistik und Englischunterricht* 66 (2005), 213.

40. Ibid. Though Ribbat does see a hopeful opening in the way Foer's novel's "pastiche of styles" enacts a coexistence of representational or aesthetic strategies, he writes that "[e]ven in the richest literary collage, a sense of insecurity refuses to disappear" (Ibid., 214).

41. Menachem Feuer, "Almost Friends: Post-Holocaust Comedy, Tragedy, and Friendship in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated*," *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 25, no. 2 (Winter 2007), 24–48.

42. Foer, *Everything Is Illuminated*, 252.

43. Ibid. 241.

44. I thank an anonymous reader of this essay for confronting me with this notion.

45. Foer, *Everything Is Illuminated*, 245.

46. Foer, *Everything Is Illuminated*, 275.

47. Melvin Jules Bukiet, ed., *Nothing Makes You Free: Writings by Descendants of Jewish Holocaust Survivors* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2002).

48. In his survey of Jewish American Fiction from 1977 to 2002, Adam Meyer traces one direction for the exercise of this freedom on the part of contemporary Jewish-American writers—toward explicitly religious, Jewish themes in their work. See Adam Meyer, "Putting the 'Jewish' Back in 'Jewish American Fiction': A Look at Jewish American Fiction from 1977 to 2002 and an Allegorical Reading of Nathan Englander's 'The Gilgul of Park Avenue,'" *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 22, no. 3 (Spring 2004), 104–20.