

**COMEDY, REALISM AND THE FANTASTIC IN *EVERYTHING IS
ILLUMINATED* BY JONATHAN SAFRAN FOER**

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Born in 1977, into a tightly-knit Jewish family, Jonathan Safran Foer has had no personal contact with cataclysmic violence but for familial tales of his grandparents' ordeals in Eastern Europe. The unspeakable cruelty of the Holocaust, nevertheless, haunts the pages of his first novel *Everything Is Illuminated*, a best-seller which received prestigious awards and earned its young author recognition as revelation of the year.

The central plot is the story of a young writer, the namesake of his creator, who departs on a quest to the Ukraine, supposedly in search of his grandfather's native *shtetl*, and of a woman who may have saved him from the Nazis, but in fact in search of ancestral memories.

Jonathan Safran Foer, the flesh-and-blood author, actually journeyed through the Ukraine to research the roots of his ancestry, which furnished material for his fantastically funny novel. Despite its fictional character, Foer's novel is an attempt to "illuminate" past events of his familial history, in the form of writers' memoirs, in which, according to William Zinsser, two themes are commonly to be found, loneliness, "the universal plight", and humor, "the universal solvent" (1998, p. 5-7).

Loneliness and jest are intricately enmeshed in Foer's fantastic pseudo-memoirs, in which laughter shares much with absurdist black humor, in its postmodern incongruities. According to Lance Olsen,

When wedded, postmodernism and comic vision become a *mindcircus* with an infinite number of rings all astir, all swirling with wild hoopla, all gorgeous and astonishing. Hierarchies are toppled and pedants become fools and fantasy becomes fact and the sacred becomes wonderfully and marvelously profane and every voice is a dodecaphonic symphony (1990, p. 32).

Olsen's quote refers to the Bakhtinian concept of carnivalized genres such as Menippean satire: "Carnival brings together, unites, weds and combines the sacred with the profane, the lofty with the lowly, the great with the insignificant, the wise with the stupid" (1973, p. 101). The alignment of the comic element, grotesque naturalism, and

debauchery, coupled with absurd instances of the fantastic, allots Foer's text obvious characteristics of the menippea.

The metaphor of a mental circus, in which dizzying images follow one another on an infinite number of rings, is singularly appropriate to describe Foer's novel. The ingenious manipulation of literary genres and modes — stark realism, pseudo-memoir, satire, parody, and elements of the fantastic — which alternate with metafictional comments on the writing of the book, besides inserting the novel in the postmodern tradition of John Barth and Thomas Pynchon, point at the relevance of a reading focused on its humorous fantasticality.¹

The novel's multifaceted nature brings it particularly close to Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1963) in the way both works resort to absurd comedy in order to deal with violence and trauma. Vonnegut uses science-fiction to dramatize his personal experiences as a prisoner of war, during the fire-bombing of Dresden. Foer's novel challenges generic classification: its incongruous usage of realism and the "antireal" places it within the range of the fantastic, as it is not merely outside "reality" but also in knowing contravention of "reality". Quoting William Irwin, "the concept of the fantastic is a competition for credence in which an assertive 'antireal' plays against an established 'real'" (1976, p. 8). Foer uses the fantastic as a means to express the memories of a whole people, for whom it is vital to make sense out of past events.

Vonnegut's novels have been pointed out as examples of black humor; Foer's humor, besides or because of its somber quality, is essentially postmodern in nature, as it deconstructs hierarchies, like an aesthetical and metaphysical terrorist, "a freeplayer in a universe of intertextuality where no one text has more or less authority than any other" (OLSEN, 1990, p. 18). The novel is simultaneously humorous and moving in its attempt to frustrate the bitterness of painful memories and to redeem past sins through laughter.

The structure of *Everything Is Illuminated* is tripartite: the search for the lost *shtetl* makes up its realist frame, recounted in the peculiar English of its Ukrainian first-person narrator, Alex Perchov: "disseminating currency" for "spending money"; "manufacture queries" for 'asking questions' are some of his comic lexical creations

¹ Bakhtin observes that the *experimental fantasticality* that appears in the menippea reaches directly back into carnivalistic folklore (1973, p. 92)

Alex has been charged by his father to function as guide and interpreter for Jonathan Safran Foer, a Jewish-American client of Heritage Touring, an agency for Jewish people, where his father “toils”. An admirer of everything American, Alex cannot understand why such people “have cravings to leave that ennobled country America and visit humble towns in Poland and Ukraine”, trying to “unearth places where their families once existed”. For anyone with the capitalist ambitions of Alex, Jews must have “shit between their brains”. His opinion changes after meeting Jonathan Safran Foer, “an ingenious Jew”, to whom he refers as the “hero” (FOER, 2003, p. 3).

The core of the narrative is the fantastic bizarre history of the “hero’s” family from 1793 to the destruction of their native village by the Nazis, in 1942. The fantastic tale, in the 3rd person voice of an omniscient narrator, is exemplary of the diametrical reversal of ground rules of the factual world, which Eric Rabkin advances as the defining principle of the fantastic in literature (RABKIN, 1977).

The alternation between the two narrative lines is “illuminated” — borrowing the author’s title— by interspersed letters from Alex to Jonathan dating from July 26, 1997 to January, 22, 1998. The letters have multiple functions, firstly as a vehicle for commentaries on the book being written by Jonathan with the help of Alex, who provides information and corrections; secondly, as a guide to the chronological development of the narrative; but primarily as a narrative resource to tie up the knots that link the Perchov Grandfather and, unwittingly, his grandsons Alex (Sacha) and little Igor, to the Holocaust of Trachimbrod.

THE BEGINNING OF THE WORLD OFTEN COMES

Humor and the fantastic are closely interlinked in the chapters that recount the origins of Trachimbrod and of its Jewish community. “Making a funny”, in Sacha’s vocabulary, in painful situations is a means for assuaging “the feeling of feeling hurt”. Inventing a story that is both funny and fantastic places its joint creators, Alex and Jonathan, two steps away from the profoundly painful scenes of the destruction of Trachimbrod.

The story is told by a third-person omniscient narrator, with occasional first-person interventions by its author, the American Jew, in references to “my great (...) grandmother”. The narrative scheme enhances hilarity by ascribing the narrator the

power to penetrate thoughts and intentions — mostly weird and/or ridiculous — to pass judgment and to make commentaries.

“The beginning of the world” comes on March 18, 1791, when Trachim B’s heavy double-axle wagon falls into the Brod River and in the middle of the flotsam that rises to the surface — “string and feathers, surrounded by candles and soaked matches, prawns, pawns, and silk tassels that curtsied like jelly-fish, — was a baby girl, still mucus-glazed, still pink as the inside of a plum” (FOER, 2002, p. 13).

Wild conjectures are raised to account for the absence of the driver’s body which was never found. But a really baffling problem haunts the community: and the baby? What about “my great-great-great-great-great-grandmother?” asks the author-narrator, the Jewish hero. “This is a more difficult problem. For it’s relatively easy to reason how a life could be lost in a river, but for one to arise from it?” (FOER, 2002, p. 16).

The baby’s mysterious appearance rather than merely violating the “real world” offers an alternative to the real world. By reversing death into life, the baby’s inexplicable birth presents a satisfying alternative to the fragility of man’s life. Such is the function of fantastic worlds: to offer stability and safety as alternatives to the real world of fluctuation and danger (RABKIN, 1977).

The structure of diametrical reversal of the ground rules of the narrative world, which is the hallmark of the fantastic, can be detected in much fiction to a greater or lesser degree. Continuous reversals in plot, thematic development, and style or in some and even in all four of these levels make a text all the more fantastic, at the maximum point of a scale devised by Rabkin. The episode of the baby’s birth arouses the expected reactions of surprise, delight, shock or fear in the novel’s characters, the inhabitants of the village. For the reader, however, the incongruity of the scene signals the entrance into the realm of the marvelous, where eccentricity becomes the rule.

Besides explaining the origin of both the name of the *shtetl*, Trachimbrod, and of Jonathan’s female ancestor, Brod, the episode establishes the atmosphere of grotesque absurdity which pervades the fantastic world of the village.

Furthermore, it spins the thread that ties the two narrative lines in the novel: a) It discloses the absolute incapacity of the elders to take decisions — it is necessary to promote a lottery in order to choose a father for the baby; b) it puts into relief the fictitious character of the pseudo memoir, transformed into myth: the *shtetl* comes to be known across eastern Poland for its yearly festival, Trachimday, when contestants dive into the Brod river, in search of Trachim’s body; c) it introduces the elements of the

novel's lyrical and touching love story, in spite of its farcical contours. Brod's groom, Kolker, survives a labor accident, but must live with a chainsaw wedged into his skull to the end of his days.

Being funny, says Alex is the only right thing to be done. Jonathan disagrees with alacrity: "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 is the opposite. Humor is a way of shrinking from that wonderful and terrible world" (FOER, 2002, p. 158).

The mingling of the "unreal", comedy and tragedy becomes the nucleus of the novel. It is on Trachimday that Nazi tanks raze the village to the ground, nearly two centuries later. "This was celebration unmitigated by imminent death. This was imminent death, unmitigated by celebration" is the narrator's commentary. In spite of the news of the Nazis' approach, the council of the elders was unable to decide what to do. They were drowned by torrents of words before the speaker could make sense out of his own discourse (FOER, 2002, p. 270).

Comic exaggeration, according to Wladimir Propp, is important both to create the comedy of situation and to build comic characters. In its basic forms, the caricature, the hyperbole and the grotesque, exaggeration reaches its peak when human vices or defects are exposed (1992, p. 88).

Ever since the Venerable Rabbi had suggested, two hundred years before, that the congregation ought to be closer to God, they had been praying suspended from ropes hanging down from the ceiling, one hand holding the prayer-book. When a fly began to pester the hanging congregants on the eve of Yom Kippur, the holiest of holy days, the Venerable Rabbi urged them not to rise to the challenge and to crash to the ground rather than releasing the great book. As usual the prayers were screamed at the top of their voices – in order to be heard by God: AND AS GOD ASKED ABRAHAM TO SHOW ISAAC THE KNIFE'S POINT, SO IS HE ASKING US NOT TO SCRATCH OUR ASSES! AND IF WE MUST, BY ALL MEANS WITH THE LEFT HAND! Those who had followed the Rabbi's urging and had released the rope, holding on to the Great Book, were the ancestors of the Upright Synagogue's congregants who continued for two hundred years to walk with an affected limp, to remind everybody of their respect for God's law. Those who had dropped the prayer book rather than fall were the ancestors of the Slouching Synagogue's congregants (FOER, 2002, p. 17-18).

The use of the grotesque satirizes the adherence to the minutiae of the law, in detriment of its spiritual principles. It is an example of non-explicit violence exerted by isolating those who differ from the standards established by the dominant group. It puts into relief— inside the Jewish community itself — the mechanism of isolation of the different that has victimized the Jews in their millenary diaspora.

The author-hero's voice is heard again in a first-person report of systematic violence against the Jews, facetiously called The Pogrom of Beaten Chests in 1764, “which was bad but not the worst”:

They moved through on horses. They raped our pregnant women and cut down our strongest men with sickles. They beat our children to death. They made us curse our most holy texts. Immediately after they left, the Uprighters and Slouchers joined together to lift and move the synagogue all the way into the Human Three-Quarters, making it, if for only one hour, the Human whole. Without knowing why, we beat our own chests as we do when seeking atonement on Yon Kippur. Were we praying, *Forgive our oppressors for what they have done?* Or, *Forgive us for what has been done to us?* Or, *Forgive You for Your inscrutability?* (FOER, 2002, p. 206-7)

The nihilistic humorous style condemns the actions of Uprighters and Slouchers., who are unable to forget their differences for more than an hour, unveils vices and defects, to satirize bitterly the submission of the villagers, the victims of violence, who blame themselves for the acts of their oppressors.

The unity and cohesion in times of crisis is not repeated in everyday life. The reaction of the women villagers to the mysterious appearance of Brod, the baby who emerges from the river, is definitely hostile. Brod represents the “Other”, the different, and the unknown and possibly dangerous, that arouses fear and disgust, as much as jealousy and envy.

The women of the shtetl raised their impressive noses to my great-great-great-great-grandmother. They called her *dirty river girl* and *waterbaby* under their breath. While they were too superstitious ever to reveal to her the truth of her history, they saw to it that she had no friends her own age (telling their children that she was not as much fun as the fun she had or as kind as her kind deeds)... (FOER, 2002, p. 75)

Thus, Brod was the loneliest of creatures, a genius of sadness, —“Immersing herself in it, separating its numerous strands, appreciating its subtle nuances” — who discovered 613 sadnesses, each perfectly unique. She finds refuge in a sanctuary outside

the village, built by her father Yankel who writes on the ceiling fantastic tales about her origin “tales so fantastic she had to believe them”. Her diary reveals she has so much repressed love in her heart that love itself became the object of her love: “Give me love, because love does not exist and I have experienced everything that exists” (FOER, 2002, P. 78)

So she had to satisfy herself with the idea of love — loving the loving of things whose existence she didn't care at all about. (...) She loved herself in love, she loved loving love, as love loves loving, and was able, in that way, to reconcile herself with a world that fell so short of what she would have hoped for. (FOER, 2002, p. 80)

Love links Brod to Kolker, even after the accident, when he becomes violent to the point of beating her every morning, before leaving for work, and every evening before dinner. She never evaded his fists, rather went out to reach them, certain that the injuries were not marks of violence, but of violent love. The village women gloated at her suffering and continued hating her for being a product of “that terrible hole”. Brod's victimization reproduces within the microcosm of Trachimbrod the universal hatred of Jews, and their position as victims of persecution throughout Western history, chosen for their inability to retaliate. As Alexis Perchov repeats, it is necessary to make a little fun and tell not-truths when writing a tragedy.

The fantastic, as stated above, responds to human needs, by offering means to face harsh, painful realities. This need is at the root of ancient myth, mysticism, folklore, fairy tale and romance, which have, in turn, given rise to modern forms of fantastic literature, such as the inner narrative of Foer's postmodern novel. Though myth has become less and less important as primary explanation, it survives in human culture as icons of permanence and safety. The Trachimday Festival is one such tradition, which is not interrupted even by the news of the Nazi's imminent attack.

Kolker, “the father of the father of my great grandfather” is the origin of another relevant tradition. After his accident with the chainsaw (there were no chainsaws at the time, alerts the Ukranian co-narrator) he undergoes a process of physical and mental degeneration, and, in spite of conceiving three sons in the period, his treatment of Brod becomes dangerously and constantly violent. Shalom-then-Kolker-now-Safran (to confuse the Angel of Death) died, never having seen his third child, who was born at that exact moment of his death. In order to do something kind for the heartbroken

widow, Safran's body was bronzed and the statue placed in the center of the *shtetl* square "as a symbol of strength and vigilance". Because of the perfectly perpendicular saw blade, the statue could also be used to tell more or less accurate time by the sun. But rather than of strength and vigilance, the statue of Safran soon became a symbol of luck and the centerpiece of the ritual performed by soon-to-be-married young men, with dances and propitiatory songs. The narrative shows Safran, the hero's grandfather, in 1941, fulfilling the ritual before the Dial, the statue which had been re-bronzed countless times, so as to withstand the rubbings of generations of believers (FOER, 2002, p. 139).

He was a changing god, destroyed and recreated by his believers, destroyed and recreated by their belief. (...) his face had been polished down so many times by so many beseeching hands, that it no longer resembled that of the god to whom those first few prayed. For each recasting, the craftsman modeled the Dial's face after the faces of his male descendants – reverse heredity. (So when my grandfather thought he saw that he was growing to look like his great-great-great-grandfather, what he really saw was that his great-great-great-grandfather was growing to look like him).(FOER, 2002, p. 140)

Like every bridegroom before him, the hero's grandfather prayed for "the blessings of sound mind, good health, handsome sons, inflated wages, and deflated libido". He had been told a thousand times the story of the Dial, the tragic circumstances of its creation, (which included the sudden changes in Kolker's behavior from deep love to physical violence), and the magnitude of its powers (FOER, 2002, p. 121). The absurd comedy plus the deification of the statue put into relief the combination of humor and the fantastic that informs the text. The realist frame of the novel recounts the progress of the two authors-as-protagonists in their search for Trachimbrod.

A VERY RIGID JOURNEY

The young writer Jonathan Safran Foer arrives in Ukraine to search for his grandfather's ancestral village, Trachimbrod, and for the woman who may have saved his life from the Nazis. His sole clue is a yellowed tattered photograph of his grandfather as a youth standing beside a beautiful young girl with melancholic intelligent eyes, identified by the name "Augustine", penciled on the back.

The quest theme prevails in the novel's frame: like a modern Quixote, the Jewish "hero" roams through the world, in a car "so shit" that it never goes above sixty miles an hour, accompanied by his faithful squire, young Alex. The Squire's Grandfather, who has "golden teeth" and "cultivates ample hairs in the face" — also named Alex, drives the car, despite his poor eyesight. Ever since his wife died, he has claimed he is blind, and takes along his seeing-eye bitch, **Sammy Davis, Junior, Junior** by name, picked up in an abandoned dogs' home — everywhere he goes. The dog's presence on the trip is given professional status by a T-shirt printed with the sayings: OFFICIOUS SEEING-EYE BITCH OF HERITAGE TOURING, which Sammy promptly devours.

Chapters in the realist frame of the novel alternate with the bizarre fictitious history of Jonathan Safran Foer's, the character-narrator's, ancestors. Both narrative lines keep the reader in suspense as they converge perceptibly towards their climactic point: the Holocaust of Trachimbrod. The slapstick tone of the frame as well as the weird black humor of the fantastic tale of Foer's family relieves the mounting tension. The welcome relief provided by laughter is defined by Kant as "a convulsive tottering and relapse from the high and dignified to the vulgar and easy" (Apud OLSEN, p. 106).

In fact, initial scenes of the Quixotic quest do arouse convulsive laughter and distract the reader from the true object of the search. The third chapter in the realist frame, "Going forth to Lutsk" reaches the level of "vulgar and easy" farce, in scenes with the schizophrenic bitch:

Sammy Davis, Junior, Junior converted her attention from masticating her tail to trying to lick clean the hero's spectacles, which I will tell you were in need of cleaning. I write that she was trying because the hero was not being sociable. "Can you please get this dog away from me," he said, making his body into a ball. "Please, I really don't like dogs." "She is only making games with you," I told him when she put her body on top of his and kicked him with her back legs. "It signifies that she likes you," (...) I will now mention that Sammy Davis, Junior, Junior is very sociable with her new friends, but I have never witnessed a thing like this. I reasoned that she was in love with the hero. "Are you donning any cologne?" I asked.(...) "Maybe a little", he said defending the back of his head with his hands. "Because she loves cologne. It makes her sexually stimulated." (FOER, 2002, p. 56)

It is the unexpectedness of the situation that arouses laughter: paradoxically the bitch is attracted to Jonathan, a dog-hater, who is placed in a very uncomfortable

predicament. The main source of comedy is, however, to be found in the Ukrainian narrator's peculiar linguistic ability to mangle English into bizarre new forms. The reader is forced into continuous mental juggling in order to determine the word or expression that should be used, instead of the rhetorical terms and false cognates young Alexis actually uses so freely. "Rigid", his word for "difficult" or "hard", stands out preeminently in the title of the opening chapter "An overture to the commencement of a very rigid journey". "To illuminate" used firstly in the title of the novel, explains or makes clear all kinds of situations. Talking about his grandfather's deep sorrow at the loss of his wife, he feels compelled to apologize for repeating something he had already "illuminated" before. "Illuminating", rather than merely being the task of a naïve narrator with an exaggerated view of his own importance, represents the nucleus of the novel that attempts to "illuminate" the true story of the protagonists' past.

The linguistically innovative style reaches its funniest levels in the scenes that involve difficulties of communication between the Jewish "hero" and the Grandfather. Anxious to impress his client favorably, Alex, the interpreter, reformulates the grouchy old man's speech:

"I hate Lvov," Grandfather rotated to tell the hero. "What's he saying?" the hero asked me. "He said it will not be long," I told him, another befitting not-truth. "Long until what?" the hero asked. I said to Grandfather, "You do not have to be kind to me, but do not blunder with the Jew." He said, "I can say anything I want to him. He will not understand." I rotated my head vertically, to benefit the hero. "He says it will not be long until we get to the superway to Lutsk". (FOER, 2001, p. 57)

The tone of the realist quest changes gradually as the bizarre trio moves slowly but surely toward their goal — Trachimbrod. From "The very rigid journey" they move on to "Beginning to love", "What we saw when we saw Trachimbrod or beginning to love", "An opening to illumination", and, finally "Illumination", in the sequence of chapters. The question Alex (and the reader) has been unconsciously asking himself from the start, "What had Grandfather done during the war?", suggests disturbing possibilities that fall short of the final revelation.

The search for Augustine becomes the specific mission of the two Alexis, Grandfather and Grandson, who are promoted from their minor clownish roles to those

of protagonist and narrator-translator of the plot: the story of what happened to the Trachimbod villagers.

“I am Trachimbrod”, states the strange woman they come upon amidst the desolation of the bare fields. “Could she be Augustine?” Her identity remains dubious, although her testimony of the destruction of the *shtetl* by the Nazis is far from dubious, in view of the concrete evidence of the villagers’ plight:

Many clothes were lying across her yard (...) in abnormal arrangements, and they appeared like the clothes of invisible dead bodies. (...) there were men’s clothes and women’s clothes and clothes for children and even babies. One of the rooms had a bed, a small desk, a bureau and many things from the floor to the ceiling, including piles of more clothes and hundreds of shoes of different sizes and fashions. I could not see the wall through all of the photographs. The other room was also very populous. There were many boxes which were overflowing with items [with] writing on their sides. (...) WEDDINGS AND OTHER CELEBRATIONS, (...) PRIVATES: JOURNALS / DIARIES / SKETCHBOOKS / UNDERWEAR. (...) WATCHES / WINTER; HYGIENE / SPOOLS / CANDLES; FIGURINES / SPECTACLES (...) (FOER, 2002, p. 116;123)

From this bizarre collection Augustine extracts a box labeled IN CASE OF, that contained a photograph of two men and a woman holding a baby in her arms. One of the men had a striking resemblance to Alex, “as if the photo were a mirror”. The secret of the photograph is revealed only close to the denouement of the narrative, in a heart-rending dialogue between the two Alexes, recounted further on in a letter to the “hero”:

Up to this point, readers have been laughing condescendingly at the makeshift interpreter’s lack of familiarity with English, but their supercilious attitude gradually changes into pity for the awkward narrator. The intensity of his feelings can be felt underneath his use of inappropriate terms and peculiar syntax:

What would I inform the hero when he was no longer manufacturing Z’s [Snoring]? What would I inform Grandfather? For how long could we fail until we surrendered? I felt as if all of the weight was residing on me. As with Father there are only so many times that you can utter “It does not hurt” before it begins to hurt even more than the hurt. You become enlightened of the feeling of feeling hurt, which is worse, I am certain, than the existent hurt. Not-truths hung in front of me like fruit. Which could I pick for the hero? Which could I pick for Grandfather? Which for myself? Which for Little Igor? (FOER, 2002, p. 117)

While the Ukrainian narrator decides which “truth” — or not-truths — to tell, the reader is left in the dark, and must refrain his anxiety in the hope that the fantastic story

of the American Jew's ancestors, concocted in collaboration by the two protagonists will throw some light on the matter.

THE LETTERS

Interspersed between the realist frame and the fantastic memoirs being written by the American Jew with the help of the Ukrainian narrator, letters that Alex writes to Jonathan, after his return to America, with commentaries about the progress of the book, lend the novel metafictional character. The style is consistently comic: "Are you being a humorous writer here, or an uninformed one?" he asks the "hero". "I do not have any additional luminous remarks, because I must possess more of the novel in order to illuminate myself." The solemnity of the opening sentences enhances the simultaneously serious and comical tone:

I hanker for this letter to be good. Like you know, I am not first rate with English. In Russian my ideas are asserted abnormally well, but my second tongue is not so premium. I undertaked to input the things you counseled me to, and I fatigued the thesaurus you presented me, as you counseled me to, when my words appeared too petite, or not befitting. If you are not happy with what I have performed, I command you to return it to me. I will persevere to toil on until you are appeased. (FOER, 2002, p. 23-5)

Besides making commentaries on the process of composition, the letters elucidate the reader about obscure points in the plot, as vehicles for first-person reflections or confessions by both Sacha and his Grandfather. The unsigned letter, dated 22 January 1998, is Grandfather's farewell to life and his last will, in which he bequeaths Sacha and little Igor life's most valuable gifts — freedom and peace of mind

22 January 1998

Dear Jonathan,

If you are reading this, it is because Sacha found it and translated it for me. It means that I am dead and that Sacha is alive. (...) I

All is for Sacha and Iggy, Jonathan. Do you understand? I would give everything for them to live without violence. Peace. That is all that I would ever want for them. Not money and not even love. It is still possible. I know that now, and it is the cause of so much happiness in me. They must begin again. They must cut all of the strings, yes? With you (Sacha told me that you will not write to each other anymore), with their

father (who is now gone forever) with everything they have known. Sacha has started it and now I must finish it. (FOER, 2002, p. 275)

The sudden reversal into stark reality causes the characteristic reaction of surprise and wonder, which is the effect of fantastic literature. The necessity of taking a stand transforms Grandfather from a farcical character into an example of dignity and courage. A similar reaction affects the reader, who is wrenched away from careless laughter and thrown into deep reflection. Life and death, laughter and tears are the opposite extremes of man's relentless struggle.

“ILLUMINATION”: WHERE MEMOIRS, FANTASTICALITY AND REALIST FICTION MEET

The novel is at a time outrageously funny and deeply moving, an attempt to use fantastic humor to counter the dangers of facing the past and to redeem it through laughter. Slant references are made to the destruction of Trachimbrod – the epitome of violence and the cause of ancestral trauma – disguised underneath various successive narrative layers.

From the very beginning the reader is aware that the young American intends to unearth the story of how his grandfather had managed to survive the Nazis, and to write the memoirs of his people. Instead of conventional memoirs, however, he makes up a wildly eccentric tale of wonders, with the aid of his squire, Alexis Perchov. The story of the author-character's ancestors, his great-great-great-great-grandmother Brod's and his grandfather Safran's, reaches the highest level of comic exaggeration, the grotesque, that exceeds the limits of reality and enters the province of the fantastic: “An artificial and fantastic construction of combinations not to be found in nature or in society” (PROPP, 1992, p. 91).

Grandfather Safran was born with a complete set of teeth and to escape the baby's sharp teeth his mother had not nursed him. An intervention of the hero-author explains the consequences of the phenomenon: “Thus it was because of those teeth, I imagine that he did not drink milk, and because he had not drunk milk his right arm had died”. Ironically, Safran's withered arm became an asset. It saved his life – he was not drafted into the army – and became an object of sexual attraction to virgins and matrons alike. Ironically, ever since he was ten years old, the hero's grandfather had been paid to visit bereaved widows and diseased ladies, by the congregation of the Slouchers, who had no inkling of the sexual nature of his services (SAFRAN, 2002, p. 178).

The voice of the hero-author is heard again to inform that for fear of being discovered his grandfather had not registered his sexual feats in his diary “the only written register of his life before meeting my grandmother in a refugee camp, after the war” (FOER, 2002, p. 189).

The writing of the book is the nucleus of the narrative: it is discussed in the letters; its plot is the fantastic story of Trachimbrod, supposedly the memoirs of Jonathan’s grandfather; the realist frame leads to the description of the Holocaust in Trachimbrod.

A corner of the veil that hides the secret of Trachimbrod is raised by the photograph of the man who looked strangely like Alex, “as if it were a mirror”. The young man’s deep turmoil is translated in his refusal to accept the evidence that links his Grandfather to the destruction of the shtetl:

“It looks so much like me,” I said.

(And here he put his hands under the table, you will remember, but this is a detail which will make him appear weak, and is it not enough that we are writing this at all?)

“Like a combination of your father, your mother, Brezhnev, and yourself.”

(It was not wrong to make a funny here. It was the right thing to do.)

I smiled.

“Who do you think it is?” I asked.

“Who do *you* think it is?” he asked.

“I do not know.”

“You do not have to present not-truths to me, Sacha. I am not a child.”

(But I do. That is what you always fail to understand. 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.)

(...)

(Here it is almost impossible to go on. I arrived to this point many times, making corrections in the parts you desired me to correct, making more funny and inventions, and writing it as if you are writing it. But every time I try to persevere, my hand trembles so much that I cannot hold the pen. Do this for me. Please. Now this is with you.

The self-reflexivity of the passage puts into relief the book’s process of composition and evidences the mirror-relationship between Alex and Jonathan, both of them writers in the making who try to reconstruct the story of a grandfather, a story that might turn to be heroic or shameful. The revelation that Alexis’s grandfather had been forced to point out his best friend, who was a Jew, to the Nazis, in order to save his own family, raises the question of guilt and innocence. Thus, Alex begs Jonathan, as author-character, to forgive them and “to make us better than we are. “Make us good” (FOER, 2002, p. 149).

The report of the *shtetl*'s final destruction in the voice of its sole surviving inhabitant – could she be the legendary Augustine? – is translated by the Ukrainian narrator for the benefit of the hero-writer who refuses to go on listening after a certain moment. The “truth”, thus, reaches only the reader. In the words of Alex, the naïve narrator “(...) what made this story most scary was how rapid it was moving. I do not mean what happened in the story, but how the story was told. I felt it could not be stopped” (FOER, 2002, p. 186).

Foer's novel fulfills the role of literature of representing violence within a live context, in order to create an image – or anything as relevant – “that may plunge the arrow of a new behavior into our soul, so that we may discern, suddenly, the path to follow” (LINS, 1990, p. 20).

Observations made by Robert Scholes (1975) about science fiction in *Structural Fabulation* are pertinent for an appraisal of Foer's text: the writer must frustrate readers' perception by making them see the world from new perspectives. The self-reflexivity of Foer's text, plus the association of grotesque comedy and the fantastic, bring about the necessary feeling of estrangement to suspend habitual responses.

Comedy has positive values – Don Elgin refers to the comic vision as “ecological esthetics”. The tragic vision of reality so far reinforced by much of Western culture, by reminding man that he is noble and spiritual, separates him from the universe around him. The comic vision, on the other hand, “reinforces man's role as survivor and man's infinitely complex interconnection with life itself” (Apud OLSEN, 1990, p. 22).

The comic conception of *Everything Is Illuminated* inserts the novel in this context: it makes use of destructive, nihilist humor, but hints at a possibility of reconstruction with renewed potential. Foer's post-modern humor refuses to see the truth merely as something existing on a yes-no axle, by presenting both a negative and a positive view of the world. It contains in itself the destructive force of the absurd and the constructive force of the comic vision.

The hero does not return home bearing the expected reward for his quest, but he is granted the redeeming power of writing. The fact that characters at the various narrative levels write diaries, books or reports emphasize the problem of the writer divided between the restrictions of reality and the power of imagination. The association of comedy with the creation of fantastic alternative worlds allows the novel's protagonists to face past sufferings, and the idea of redemption to prevail.

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