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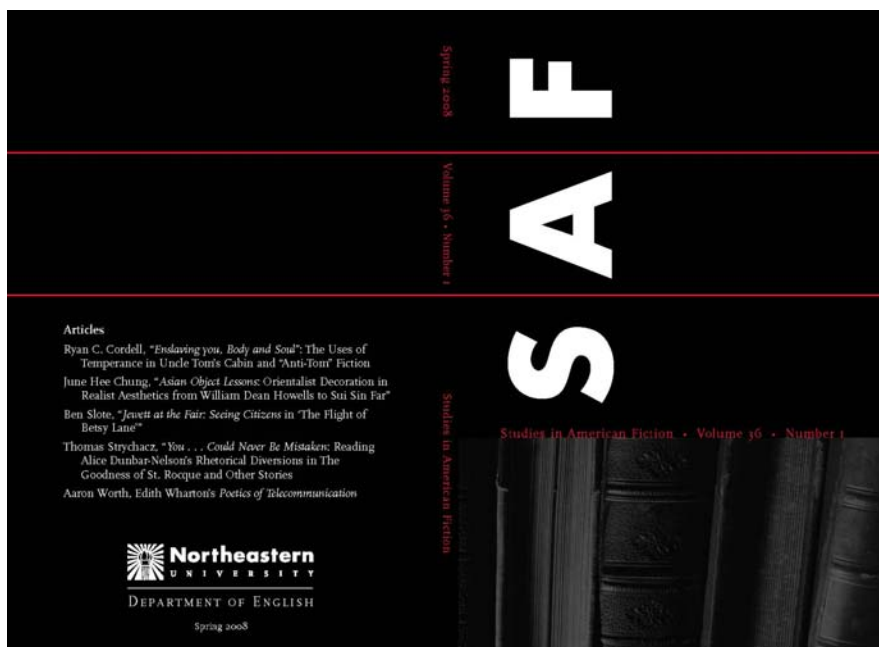# Philomela revised: traumatic iconicity in Jonathan Safran Foer's Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close

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Studies in American Fiction

Philippe Codde, *Philomela Revised: Traumatic Iconicity in Jonathan Safran Foer's* Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close

PHILOMELA REVISITED: TRAUMATIC ICONICITY IN JONATHAN SAFRAN FOER'S *EXTREMELY LOUD & INCREDIBLY CLOSE*

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> Art makes up, what fortune has deny'd
> —Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Book VI

When the Jewish American novelist Jonathan Safran Foer published his sensational debut novel, *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002), at the age of 25, it met with rave reviews, instantly casting its author as one of the great hopes for the future of American letters; the *New York Times* waxed ecstatic and celebrated this work of "such brilliance and such brio" with two reviews in two weeks' time. The novel dealt with the Holocaust in a daringly funny and technically innovative way.[1] While the critics cheered unanimously, many also wondered, somewhat fearfully, where Foer could possibly go with a second novel. When *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* appeared in 2005, it became clear that Foer had upped the ante, not only on the thematic level, but even more conspicuously in the novel's remarkable form, which Salman Rushdie appropriately dubbed "pyrotechnic" in his blurb.[2] Thematically, Foer's second novel tackles some of the remaining historical traumas of the twentieth century that were left untouched in *Everything Is Illuminated*: primarily 9/11, but the bombing of Dresden and Hiroshima also feature as important subtexts. On a formal level, *Extremely Loud* is even more extreme in its deviation from customary novels: it garishly plays with typography and the text is lavishly interspersed with pictures. Because of this seemingly playful approach to a subject matter requiring great *gravitas*, reviews of Foer's second novel have been rather mixed; many consider its form completely inappropriate for representing 9/11. Yet many of these responses seem prompted, understandably, by emotions about the recentness (say, the incredible closeness) of the historical crisis of 9/11, rather than by balanced considerations of artistic representation. What so far has been left out of the debate is the question of the accuracy and suitability of Foer's novels as traumatic histories that attempt to access and to represent a painful past that is by definition inaccessible.

Psychotherapists and other students of testimony such as Dori Laub, Soshana Felman, Judith Herman, and Lawrence Langer have discussed the difficulties involved in testifying about historical or personal moments of crisis—words simply fail to capture these shattering experiences, and verbal testimonies therefore tend to be extremely circuitous and oblique.[3] On a personal level, Jonathan Foer has had his own brush with a traumatizing event in childhood, and perhaps this explains part of his continuing interest in this intriguing phenomenon. This is by no means an attempt to argue that his novels are in any way occasioned or triggered by the author's childhood trauma; I rather want to suggest an explanation for Foer's intimate knowledge and understanding of traumatic events as instanced by his novels. Writing for the *New York Times Magazine*, Deborah Solomon explains that "[Foer's] development as a writer was shaped less by his parents and by his genetic endowments, less even by the novelists and poets he loves, than by a single event: the Explosion, as he calls it."[4] In 1985, when Foer was eight, he was involved in an explosion in the chemistry lab at school, which critically injured two children, one of whom was Foer's best friend, and which left Foer with second degree burns on his hands and face. Although the experience shattered Foer's idyllic youth—or perhaps rather *because* it was such a shattering experience—he had never written a single word about it. His childhood fear that the skin of his face was peeling off after the explosion (Foer told Solomon, "I asked him [his friend] if the skin was pealing from my face. He said no. I asked him again. He said no. I remember making him promise") probably did influence his impressive description of the Dresden bombing in his second novel, where Thomas Sr. recounts how he "grabbed the doorknob and it took the skin off my hand, I saw the muscles of my palm, red and pulsing, why did I grab it with my other hand?" (*Extremely*, 211). Other than that, the childhood trauma typically expressed itself only in the form of traces in his literary work, traces that are at once striking and inconspicuous: both titles of his novels seem to bear on his personal trauma, rather than on the actual stories that are told. A similar mechanism of metonymic indirectness, of dealing with subjects other than those one is actually talking about, is at play in Foer's novels as well. Both novels present the protagonist's search for an inaccessible past, but they end up revealing things unsought for.

Everything is Illuminated tells the story of a quest, undertaken by a Jewish American writer conveniently named Jonathan Safran Foer, for a Ukrainian woman who supposedly rescued his grandfather from the Nazis at a village called Trachimbrod. The protagonist is accompa-

nied on his quest by Alex, a Ukrainian translator who is also an aspiring novelist, and the story of their quest is rendered in the dialogic interaction between two voices: Jonathan's, which imaginatively recreates the mythic past of Trachimbrod, based on some of the material discovered during the quest, and Alex's more realistic account of the journey, an account that is yet marred by linguistic problems (Alex's writing is unintentionally hilarious). The novel stages a confrontation between various means to record history: Jonathan's mythological approach and Alex's witness account, but also the historiographic records set down in the *Book of Antecedents*, an account composed by the Trachimbrod residents to record their daily lives. The quest soon reveals that Trachimbrod has vanished from the face of the earth —it was a Jewish shtetl destroyed by the Nazi *Einsatzgruppen* during the war—and even the combination of the various voices in the book proves not very conducive in gaining access to the unknown past. They find a woman whom they take to be the grandfather's rescuer, but she is not. When she takes them to the Trachimbrod site, nothing is left but a pasture with a memorial stone. So Jonathan's search for his traumatic past simply peters out, and he will never find out about his family history.

Jonathan Foer (the real author) actually did go on a quest for the village of Trachimbrod and for the woman who did or did not save his grandfather. But like his character in the novel, he discovered that nothing remained; Trachimbrod had become an emptiness, an aporia. In an interview, Foer explains that he therefore *invented* himself a family history in a hotel room somewhere in Prague, and this became the origin of *Everything is Illuminated*. "Writing this book," Foer notes, "was like filling this void with a lot of words."[5] Elsewhere, he explains the manifold questions that were raised by this imaginative approach to the past:

> My mind wanted to wander, to invent, to use what I had seen as a canvas, rather than the paints. But, I wondered, is the Holocaust exactly that which cannot be imagined? What are one's responsibilities to "the truth" of a story, and what is "the truth"? Can historical accuracy be replaced with imaginative accuracy? The eye with the mind's eye?[6]

In the process of writing his novel, he discovered something that had never before been on his mind: the importance of his Jewish background, a significant discovery for this secular Jew. Something similar happens in the novel, as the characters discover something they had not been looking for. What their quest reveals is someone else's trauma:

Alex's grandfather had been forced to save his family by betraying his Jewish friend to the Nazis. So the central traumatic instance of the novel turns out to be not so much what happened in Jonathan's family history and his own obsession with the event (what Marianne Hirsch calls "postmemory"[7]), but rather the entrance into the ethical gray zone by Alex's grandfather. The discovery at once creates a division between Alex and Jonathan, or between the perpetrators and the victims, and Jonathan's search for the woman who rescued the Jew paradoxically results in the discovery of the man who betrayed the Jew. As such, the novel's conclusion bears out one of Cathy Caruth's theses: that "history, like trauma, is never simply one's own, that history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other's traumas."[8]

In *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, the plot consists of a similar disappointing quest. It is the story of a precocious nine-year-old boy, Oskar Schell, who has lost his father in the 9/11 attacks. When he came home from school on this fateful morning, Oskar found a number of messages on the answering machine from his dad in the burning towers. When the phone rang a final time, Oskar was too afraid to answer it, and this traumatizing "betrayal" has saddled the boy with a crushing sense of guilt: "That secret was a whole in the middle of me that every happy thing fell into" (71). So he spends his days giving himself bruises and inventing the most egregious contraptions (birdseed suits to jump from burning buildings; skyscrapers that move downwards instead of elevators going up) in an attempt to ease his mind. Before the fatal day, only his father had this soothing effect on him: "Being with him made my brain quiet. I didn't have to invent a thing" (12).[9] About two years after his father's funeral, he discovers a mysterious key in his father's closet, in an envelope labeled "Black." This discovery sends Oskar on a quest through New York City, trying to visit all the New Yorkers by the name of Black, in the hope of finding the lock that matches the key—a transparent metaphor for the door that will presumably give access to his father's past. Much as in *Everything is Illuminated*, it becomes clear in the end that Oskar has been following a false lead that can reveal nothing about his father's last days; the key only divulges someone else's bereavement, as it really belonged to someone else's deceased father.[10] The inaccessibility of one's own traumatic past becomes one of the important themes of the novel, particularly the failure and inaptness of language for historical reconstruction.

This theme already features prominently in *Everything is Illuminated*, which prefigures some of the technical and typographical inventions that characterize *Extremely Loud*. In the former novel, for

instance, the Trachimbrod residents are dutifully recording their daily lives in the *Book of Antecedent*, but when their historical narrative catches up with their present activity, the novel logically reproduces one and a half pages filled with the single sentence "We are writing" (212–13). More interesting, however, is Foer's literary treatment of the Nazi attack on the shtetl: Foer literally and typographically freezes time at the exact moment of the bombing (by filling most of the page with series of dots), in a desperate attempt, as it were, to stall the attack and to give the doomed residents time to escape their impending ruin—the final sentence that interrupts the series of dots reads "There is still time" (271). On the next page, the narrative continues "After the bombing was over . . . " (272), leaving out, in other words, the crucial and traumatic episode of the shtetl's destruction. Hence, the novel's traumatic core has quite literally become inexpressible, beyond verbal representation.

This theme is again taken up, even more prominently, in *Extremely Loud*. Due to the inexpressibility of the traumatic past, several characters have been rendered mute after the painful experiences that shattered their lives. Oskar's grandfather, who barely survived the Dresden bombing, gradually loses his speech; he ends up with a couple of convenient sentences jotted down in notebooks, and a "yes" and "no" tattooed on his hands. His wife, Oskar's grandmother and also a Dresden survivor, spends years writing down her memoirs, failing to notice, due to her "crummy" eyes (30), that the ribbon is missing from the typewriter. Her attempts to record the traumatic past result, in other words, in the production of thousands of blank pages—some of which are also (and significantly) included in the novel itself. When the grandfather, in turn, tries to write down his story (that is: *history*), he runs out of paper, so he uses all the available space, and the pages turn illegible and black (and it is surely no coincidence that this illegible history, this total blackness, is precisely the "Black" that Oskar was trying to find and to illuminate). This seems to be Foer's specific point, indeed: attempts to recreate linguistically one's traumatic histories are doomed to end either in the emptiness of the blank page or in total blackness. Yet other attempts at communication in the novel, using alternative languages, fail just as miserably: Oskar translates his father's last words, preserved on the answering machine, into a Morse code, which he then turns into a bead chain for his mother, but no understanding or communication follows. Foer suggests, then, that the aporia at the heart of the traumatic experience can, indeed, only be filled with words to ease the pain (think of his own literary attempt to fill the void of Trachimbrod), but the words can never really capture or

represent the traumatic past. This image returns in all its literality when Oskar and his grandfather dig up his father's empty coffin (the body was completely incinerated in the Twin Towers, leaving nothing but a void) and then bury the coffin once again, this time filled with thousands of unsent letters from the grandfather to his son.

In his insistence on these alternative forms of communication to try to fill the void left by traumatic experiences, I would argue that Foer is consciously rewriting the classical myth of Philomela. This myth, most famously recounted in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, is probably one of the earliest literary renditions of a traumatized mind. It tells the tragic story of Philomela, whose sister, Procne, has married Tereus, king of Thrace. Because Procne starts to feel lonely in their marriage, her husband agrees to fetch Philomela in Athens and accompany her for a visit to her sister. Tereus convinces the father to entrust Philomela to his care, though Tereus envies the father for his ability to embrace the astonishingly beautiful virgin without sexual intent—as he, of course, cannot. Upon arriving in Thrace, Tereus drags the maiden to a lodge in the woods and brutally rapes his sister-in-law. In shock, the victimized Philomela begs to die for this incestuous transgression, threatening otherwise to make his horrendous crime public. Tereus, however, silences her by cutting off her tongue and keeps her locked up in the cabin. Philomela's story is a beautiful though horrible allegory of one's inability to testify about traumatic events— in this case, the victim is literally muted after the crisis. Philomela does manage to bear witness, not by ordinary linguistic means, but via art. For she weaves her testimony about the traumatic event into a tapestry, which she manages to get delivered to her sister. A furious Procne frees Philomela from her predicament and exacts revenge on Tereus by murdering his only child and beloved son, Itys (she stabs him in the heart, while Philomela cuts his throat). Procne then serves her son to the unsuspecting Tereus for dinner, revealing her maternal crime only after Tereus has eaten his own child. The two sisters escape from an irate Tereus by a divine intervention that transmogrifies them into birds—Procne becomes a nightingale, the tongueless Philomela a swallow, deprived of songs and doomed to twittering.[11] Tereus finally shares their fate and is changed into a bird as well.

Philomela's myth has an obvious bearing on *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*. Foer did not, however, simply create a one-for-one metaphorical rewriting of the Philomela myth; instead he consciously and wittily composed a variation on a number of the myth's predominant motifs. The most conspicuous motif in Philomela's story is obviously the inexpressibility of a traumatic event that one desperately

tries to transmit via alternative semiotic, non-linguistic, means. In the Philomela story, art therefore makes up for the relentless but indescribable brutality encountered in real life (as indicated in this article's epigraph from Ovid), which is reminiscent of Foer's surprise, expressed in an interview with Gabe Hudson, that critics found fault with his adoption of 9/11 as a literary subject, "as if creating art out of tragedy weren't an inherently good thing?"[12] As in Ovid's tale, the three main characters in *Extremely Loud* are muted with respect to the traumatic events that have fractured their lives. They seek other forms of communication, but mostly to no avail: Oskar cannot talk about 9/11 (which he keeps calling "the worst day," unable even to speak its name), and he definitely cannot testify about his failure to answer his father's last phone call. So in a desperate attempt to communicate the central traumatic instance of his young life, he weaves his father's final message, not unlike Philomela, into a bead chain, with the vague hope that his mother will be able to decipher his desperate call for attention. Similarly, Oskar's grandfather, Thomas Sr., has been muted by his experiences in Dresden and he gradually loses his speech. Significantly, the first word he loses is "Anna," the name of his pregnant girlfriend who was killed during the allied attacks on Dresden.[13] When he tries to restore contact with his current wife (Oskar's grandmother and Anna's sister), he can only do so by tapping the numbers on a phone dial, thus creating another coded message, one that his wife is equally unable to decipher.[14] His wife, in turn, can only testify to her traumatic loss in the form of blank pages, as a dramatic reversal of Thomas's equally illegible black pages. Clearly, this suggests a bleaker view on Foer's part than in Ovid's tale about the feasibility of successfully bearing witness to loss. Here, no one seems able to listen to anyone else's wounds.

Another motif that features prominently in Foer's rewriting of the Philomela myth is the triangular, incestuous relationship between Tereus, Procne, and Philomela, which is translated into the sexually laden relationships between Thomas, Anna, and her sister: both are in love with Anna, so after Anna's death, they marry one another in an attempt to substitute for the loss of their beloved one; as a mere replacement, the sister's name is never even mentioned in the novel. Additionally, the protagonists in Ovid's myth are turned into birds, which may account for the emphatic recurrence of bird imagery in Foer's imaginative adaptation: pictures of birds feature on pages iii, 166, and 167 (the latter two literally, and not coincidentally, the central images of the novel); references to these and other birds are distributed throughout the novel (see 78, 79, 80, 81, 165, 211, and 250);

the apartment of Thomas Sr. and his wife is filled with bird cages, and when they make love for the first time, "[b]irds sang in the other room" (83, 84); all of this in addition to Oskar's imagined rescue by means of a birdseed suit. The implied mythological background to Foer's narrative may also motivate Thomas Sr.'s decision to abandon his pregnant wife, a decision that has puzzled many critics who deem it one of the weaker and more implausible elements of Foer's novel.[15] Apart from the fact that they never loved one another in the first place because they never stopped loving Anna (both are "looking for an acceptable compromise" [84]), the mythological context provides an additional explanation for Thomas Sr.'s seemingly rash decision to leave. Tereus was fooled into eating his own son; Thomas may have left when he discovered his wife was carrying a son, for fear that harm would come to the unborn child—a prediction that 9/11 painfully confirmed. Thomas cannot explain his decision to abscond because their relationship is burdened by a mythological precursor, and Thomas simply acts on unconscious, atavistic incentives. Having been abandoned by her husband, Oskar's grandmother significantly "opened the windows, and opened the birdcages" (185). When Thomas Sr. finally hears the recording of his son's last words from the twin towers, he looks at his grandson "like his detector sensed some enormous truth" and "his hands started shaking, like birds trapped under a tablecloth" (255).

A final element suggesting that Foer has quite consciously created a variation on the Philomela myth, is the scene in Dresden, when Thomas and Anna have just made love behind her father's bookshelf (which also serves as one of the outer walls of his garden shed). In Ovid's story, there is a clear rivalry between Tereus and Philomela's father, as Tereus envies the father for his ability to embrace his daughter without drawing suspicion. In Foer's novel, Thomas picks a book from the wall and unexpectedly sees Anna's father staring back at him. The book in Thomas's hands is "an illustrated edition of Ovid's Metamorphosis [sic]" (209).[16] Years later, Thomas looks for this very edition of Ovid's work in the United States, "as if by finding it I could slide it back in the shed's wall, block the image of my hero's face in his hands [i.e. his father-in-law's face], stop my life and history at that moment" (209), but he is unable to recover this remnant from the past, or to shed Philomela's grasp on his personal history.

Precisely because words fail to capture the past in the wake of trauma, Foer, like Philomela, seeks other forms of representation, and the formal experiments that so many critics have objected to are perhaps as close as the author can come to rendering the condition of the traumatized mind. Caruth has noted that "to be traumatized is pre-

cisely to be possessed by an image or event."[17] Bessel van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart explain from the perspective of clinical psychology the difficulties witnesses experience in verbally testifying about traumatic events by relating these difficulties to the different processes by which ordinary experiences and traumatic experiences are engraved in memory:

> When people are exposed to trauma, that is, a frightening event outside of ordinary human experience, they experience "speechless terror." The experience cannot be organized on a linguistic level, and this failure to arrange the memory in words and symbols leaves it to be organized on a somatosensory or iconic level.[18]

Traumatic experiences, in other words, are stored in memory in the form of icons or images, rather than as words—which is also why Pierre Janet already made a distinction between this fragmentary and visual "traumatic memory" on the one hand, and "narrative memory" on the other; the latter form of memory indicating the normal procedures whereby experiences are ordered into a rational, linear sequence.[19] Judith Herman asserts that "given the 'iconic,' visual nature of traumatic memories, creating pictures may represent the most effective initial approach to these 'indelible images.'"[20] Children traumatized by war, for example, cannot possibly testify about their experiences, except in the form of drawings. I would argue that this is precisely what has prompted the controversial form of *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, and why both of Foer's novels are such interesting and convincing representations of trauma.

The protagonist of *Everything Is Illuminated* is clearly possessed by, or obsessed with, an image, for when he sets out on his quest for the woman who allegedly saved his grandfather—again like the real Jonathan Foer—he is armed with only a stack of pictures of the mysterious woman. It is also a picture, found among the remnants of Trachimbrod, that finally reveals Alex's grandfather's complicity in the Holocaust. So even in this first novel, Foer already suggests that pictures can reveal more about the past than the rich variety of verbal records that feature in the novel, though he seems to become increasingly pessimistic about their testimonial value.

The obsession with pictures is taken to the extreme in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, which graphically reproduces images that are imprinted on the nine-year-old's mind during the traumatic years following his father's death. As Foer emphasizes, "To speak about what happened on September 11 requires a visual language." Elsewhere, he adds: "I also think using images makes sense for this particular book.

First because the way children see the world is that they sort of take these mental snapshots; they hoard all these images that they remember 20 or 40 years later. And also because September 11 was the most visually documented event in human history."[21] In the Hamish Hamilton 2005 edition, no fewer than 63 pages (of a total of about 350 pages) are devoted to these iconic impressions. An astonishing number of critics have lambasted Foer for using these visual elements. The more positive or balanced reviews simply discarded these images as distracting or irrelevant; some even considered them completely random images, even though the images are all directly related to Oskar's confused and impressionable mind.[22] They are, in fact, the photographs that Oskar keeps in his pictorial diary, *Stuff that Happened to Me*. More acerbic critics have condemned the novel for being "pleased with its bag of tricks, its crushing banalities, its sound and fury signifying zilch," for being "[e]xtremely cloying and incredibly false," and for offering only "a narcissistic realism, in love with its own gimmickry."[23] Harry Siegel even accused Foer of being "a fraud and a hack" who has crossed "the line that separates the risible from the villainous," to which Vivan Gornick added a trenchant description of Foer as "a writer of talent who exploits holocaust to mythicize the most aggressive self-pity in modern American history" (32).[24]

What these critics fail to ask, however, is whether these techniques are any less appropriate to represent 9/11 than is Spiegelman's celebrated use of the comic form to represent Auschwitz—or to represent 9/11, for that matter, in *In the Shadow of No Towers*.[25] What Foer's detractors especially objected to is the by now famous flipbook at the end of the novel, with pictures of a man jumping from one of the towers.[26] Oskar copies these images from a Portuguese website and imagines that the falling man might be his father. The traumatized boy needs the falling man to be his father because he craves closure: "I want to stop inventing. If I could know how he died, exactly how he died, I wouldn't have to invent him dying inside an elevator that was stuck between floors. . . . There were so many different ways to die, and I just need to know which was his" (257). So Oskar reverses the order of the images and turns them into a flipbook that makes the man return to safety. In doing so, however, Foer is not trying to achieve a banal, premature, and unrealistic closure of 9/11 as some critics would have it. He is not pretending that history can simply be reversed or undone: what Foer emphasizes instead is precisely that it is only by a reversal of these images (by a nine-year-old boy) that one can go back in time, which emphasizes not only the radical inaccessibility of the past, but also the impossibility of closure. In the

final pages of the novel, Oskar indeed imagines time going backwards (as in Martin Amis's *Time's Arrow* or Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five*), in exactly the way his grandmother imagines reversed time undoing the firebombing of Dresden (306–7). But the entire closing section of the novel is written in the past conditional mood, which clearly indicates the illusory nature of the entire endeavor: "I would have said 'Dad?' backward, which would have sounded the same as 'Dad' forward. He would have told me the story of the Sixth Borough, from the voice in the can at the end to the beginning, from 'I love you' to 'Once upon a time . . . ' We would have been safe" (326). The form of the novel, far from being playful, is actually an accurate representation of a young boy's traumatized mind, and it does not trivialize or seek premature closure for 9/11. The iconic nature of the novel bears out Nietzsche's idea—which Foer is fond of quoting in interviews—that "everything we have *words* for is dead in our hearts."

Some readers, however, will still hear these pyrotechnics as indeed extremely loud and therefore lacking in subtlety. But Foer should also receive credit for a more delicate approach to trauma. I am particularly thinking of an interesting detail in Foer's rendition of Thomas Sr.'s traumatized mind. In Dresden, Oskar's grandfather was madly in love with Anna, who carries his unborn child, but neither Anna nor the child survive the firebombing. Years later, the grandfather's first child is born in the United States, and this child is Oskar's father. More than twenty years after the Dresden carnage, the grandfather writes a letter to his son describing the events of the bombing, and in this letter he mentions his activities in the immediate aftermath: "I looked for my parents and for Anna and for you" (214). This "you" obviously refers to his unborn child, but the letter is addressed to his son who was born many years later. Foer creates here a very subtle confusion of time levels (typical of trauma patients), as well as a confusion between the surviving son and the child lost during the moment of crisis—a subtlety reminiscent of Vladek's confusion between his dead and his living son in Spiegelman's *Maus II.* Oskar's father has correctly marked this "you" with his red pen, which again suggests that even these pyrotechnical elements that strike many readers as trivial and facetious turn out to be of marked relevance for a full understanding of the psychological complexity of this highly underrated novel. At moments like these, a novel that seems to be extremely loud, suddenly becomes incredibly close, as its boisterous voice is reduced to a silent, touching whisper.

Notes

[1] Jonathan Safran Foer, *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002; New York: HarperCollins, 2003); hereafter cited parenthetically. Janet Maslin, "Searching for Grandfather And a Mysterious Shtetl," *New York Times*, April 22, 2002 <http://query.neytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9D04EED6103FF931A15757C0A9649 C8B63>; Francine Prose, "Back in the Totally Awesome U.S.S.R.," *New York Times*, April 14, 2002 <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9B01E4D81E3 AF937A25757C0A9649C8B63>.

[2] Jonathan Safran Foer, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2005). Herafter cited parenthetically.

[3] See Dori Laub and Soshana Felman, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (London: Routledge, 1992); Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (1992; New York: Basic Books, 1997); and Lawrence Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1991).

[4] Deborah Solomon, "The Escape Artist," *New York Times Magazine*, Feb. 27, 2005 <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/02/27/magazine/27FOER.html>.

[5] Hans Bouman, "Ongeloofbaar grappig," *De Volkskrant*, Sept. 27, 2002 (translation mine) <http://www.jonathansafranfoer.nl>.

[6] Jewish Life, "An Interview with Jonathan Safran Foer," United Jewish Communities <http://www.ujc.org/page.html?ArticleID=42514>.

[7] Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2002), 22.

[8] Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1996), 25.

[9] Oskar's inventions clearly serve the same purpose as Foer's own imaginative approach to history. In an interview with Robert Birnbaum, Foer explains Oskar's behavior in strikingly similar terms: "Every invention of his is an act of trying to fill in a hole." "Birnbaum v. Jonathan Safran Foer," *The Morning News*, April 19, 2005 <http://www.themorningnews.org/archives/personalities/birnbaum_v_ jonathan_safran_foer.php>.

[10] This chance meeting with another mourner does have its effect, however, as this complete stranger who shares his loss of a father is the first person to whom Oskar can confess that he did not dare to pick up the phone to answer his father's last call, and whose forgiveness he asks for being unable to lift the receiver.

[11] In alternative versions of the myth, Procne becomes a swallow, and Philomela a nightingale.

[12] Gabe Hudson, "Everything is Interrogated," *The Village Voice*, March 24, 2005 <http://www.villagevoice.com/books/0513.hudson.62454.10.html>.

[13] In that sense, Thomas loses Anna for the second time—a double loss reminiscent of Tancred's being doomed to witness Clorinda's double dying in Tasso's *Jerusalemme Liberata* (for a discussion, see Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 1-9).

[14] Decoding this extended message proves quite a challenge for the reader as well. Though I cannot claim even to have tried to decode the entire two and a half pages of numerical code (has anyone?), the few sentences in the beginning yield interesting results. Thomas Sr. wonders what the sum of his life would amount to, and the decoded message reads: "My name is [3,5,4,3,2,5,8,6] and I just arrived at the airport. I need to find [6,7,3,4,6,5,3,5,7]!" (PAGE). The name he gives himself is definitely not Thomas Schell (the best I can come up with is "Elie Blum"), which may indicate that Thomas changed his name after the war when he emigrated to the United States. This suggestion becomes all the more plausible considering the symbolical implications of his name; after losing Anna, he feels that nothing is left of his existence but an empty shell. Earlier in the novel, Thomas describes his first meeting with Anna: "she saw through the shell of me into the center of me, . . . the center of me followed her, but I was left with the shell of me" (113). If the coded name is indeed supposed to be Elie Blum, this creates entirely new and suggestive layers of meaning leading to dizzying effects, sending the reader on a speculative quest for the "real" but unrevealed past by Foer—a quest for answers that is as impossible and futile as Oskar's own quest (was Thomas a Jew who escaped the fate of Simon Goldberg, the Jew hidden by Anna's father who was finally sent to Westerbork, and who showed a special interest in Thomas? Or is the "Elie Blum" name a fake one, which the German Thomas adopts after the war, out of guilt for what happened to the Jews? Or is the name simply supposed to make no sense at all?). The reader is equally frustrated by undecipherable, coded messages that presumably reveal something about a past that has really become inaccessible.

[15] See, for example, John Updike, "Mixed Messages," *The New Yorker*, March 14, 2005 <http://wwwnewyorker.com/archive/2005/03/14/050314crbo_books1>.

[16] This scene is recounted in a letter from Thomas Sr. to his son, the only letter that he actually sent. Thomas Jr., Oskar's father, has circled the word "Metamorphosis" in the letter with a red pen to indicate the spelling error. Again, the mythological background of the story may explain why Thomas Sr. sent precisely this letter to his son: while he cannot explain to him why he abandoned his wife and his unborn child, his mention of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* may be interpreted as a subliminal explanation and apology.

[17] Cathy Caruth, ed., *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1995), 4–5.

[18] Bessel van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart, "The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma," in Caruth, ed., *Trauma*, 172.

[19] Pierre Janet, *Les médications psychologiques: études historiques, psychologiques*

et cliniques sur les méthodes de la psychothérapie, 3 vols. (1919–25; Paris: Société Pierre Janet, 1984), 274.

[20] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 177.

[21] Gabe Hudson, "Everything is Interrogated"; Alden Mudge, "Up Close and Personal: Jonathan Safran Foer Examines Violence through a Child's Eyes," *Bookpage*, April 2005 <http://www.bookpage.com/0504bp/jonathan_safran_foer.html>.

[22] See Tom Barbash, "Mysterious Key Sends Boy Sifting through his Life's Wreckage after 9/11," *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 3, 2005 <http://www.sfgate.com/ cgi-bin/article.cgi?f+/c/a/2005/04/03/RVG8RBUL551.DTL>; Michael Faber, "A Tower of Babble, *The Guardian*, June 4, 2005 <http://books.guardian.co.uk/review/story/0,,1498126,00.html>; and Jennifer Reese, "Book Review: Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close," *Entertainment Weekly*, March 21, 2005 <http:// www.ew.com/ew.article/0,,1039032,00.html>.

[23] Ross G. Douthat, "After Tragedy," *National Review*, June 20, 2005, 50; Harry Siegel, "Extremely Cloying & Incredibly False," *New York Press*, April 13, 2005 <http://newyorkpress.com/18/15/news&columns/harrysiegel.cfm>; Tim Adams, "A Nine-year-old and 9/11," *The Observer*, May 29, 2005 <http:// books.guardian.co.uk/reviews/generalfiction/0,,1,00.html>.

[24] Siegel, "Extremely Cloying"; Vivian Gornick, "About a Boy," *The Nation*, April 25, 2005, 32.

[25] Art Spiegelman, *Maus II: And Here My Troubles Began* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1991); *In the Shadow of No Towers* (New York: Viking, 2004).

[26] John Updike was one of the few critics to appreciate the novel's flipbook, considering it "one of the most curious happy endings ever contrived, and unexpectedly moving" ("Mixed Messages"). Robert J. Hughes considered it "fairly offensive to see a novelist co-opt such an indelible image of desperation and death for such a trite purpose." *The Wall Street Journal*, March 18, 2005 <http://online.wsj.com/ article/SB1111100729>.