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Voices and Silence  
in the Contemporary Novel in English

Edited by

Vanessa Guignery

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## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE TRANSLATION OF TESTIMONY  
AND THE TRANSMISSION OF TRAUMA:  
JONATHAN SAFRAN FOER'S *EVERYTHING  
IS ILLUMINATED* AND LIEV SCHREIBER'S  
FILM ADAPTATION

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## Abstract

In recent years the literary imagination has exhibited a growing interest in the figure of the translator/interpreter. Much of this interest has been focused on the tension between the professional code of ethics and the exigencies of interpreting practice. Positing the evolution of a "three-person psychology" in the act of translating Holocaust testimony between the witness, the translator and the listener, this article investigates the use of the figure of the interpreter as symbolic of our own engagement with testimony and the transmission of trauma in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything is Illuminated* (2002) and Liev Schreiber's eponymous film adaptation of the novel. It is suggested that to speak the 'unspeakable', and to reiterate it in translation, is proposed in Foer's novel simultaneously, and paradoxically, as a form of assimilating trauma and of taking responsibility, while in Schreiber's film the emphasis is on victimhood rather than on empowerment.

In Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything is Illuminated* (2002) the traumatic experience of the Holocaust is described as hermetically sealed up in itself by one of its characters: "It is not a thing that you can imagine. It only is. After that, there can be no imagining" (188). Of course, the novel itself is an attempt at imagining the traumatic experience of the Holocaust in the past and in the present; it is also a reflection on how to bridge the

unbridgeable chasm between the instant and the act of bearing witness—the process of speaking the unspeakable and of transmitting the trauma, but also of taking responsibility towards what, in the words of Naomi Mandel, "has been deemed beyond the range of human thought" (206), for all of which it offers the figure of the interpreter as a symbol.

Testimony, as Jacques Derrida argues in his *Demeure, Fiction and Testimony*, commits the survivor to reiteration. It thus dissolves in the instant of its enactment its own indivisibility, its uniqueness (33). "The act of bearing witness", as Ursula Tidd elucidates, "carries the instant outside itself, projecting it into the future, addressing it to the Other. The witness thus progressively effects the destruction of his or her own testimonial moment, yet testifies also to a unique moment that cannot be divided without losing its value of veracity and reliability" (407).

But what if the testimony is taken out of the witness's mouth, as it were, and its iteration effected through that of an interpreter? In which ways, we may ask, does this affect the "testimonial moment"? How, indeed, does the introduction of a mediator to the bipolar system of speaker and listener—effectively turning it into a triangular set-up, or a "three-person psychology"<sup>1</sup>—influence the process of communication? And conversely, how does the reiteration of the "testimonial moment" affect the interpreter? Suspended between speaker and listener, is not the interpreter at the same time listener and speaker, too, and thus 'incorporates' attributes of both?

Recent trauma theory, as Amy Hungerford critically notes, coincides with the "deconstructive shift from language as representation to language as performance" (80). Thus, as Shoshana Felman suggests, the experience of listening to Holocaust testimony may produce symptoms of trauma equivalent to the traumatic symptoms produced by actually experiencing the Holocaust (52). Cathy Caruth, although not writing specifically about the Holocaust, argues further that the experience of trauma "exceeds itself", that it may be separated from the individual and may, in fact, occur in "future generations" (136). The operative mode of this process of transmission is the identification with the victims.

Both trauma theory and trauma fiction, as Anne Whitehead observes, share the "epistemological belief that the Holocaust is not knowable through traditional frameworks of knowledge and that it cannot be represented by conventional historical, cultural and autobiographical narratives"; they are therefore "committed to exploring new modes of refer-

<sup>1</sup> Hanneke Bot challenges the "myth" of the "uninvolved interpreter" interpreting in mental health and develops a "three-person psychology" which seems applicable in the context of the translation of testimony as well (27).

entiality" (83). The recent focus in literary negotiations of the Holocaust—the almost archetypal experience of trauma which in effect initiated much of current trauma theory (9)—on the figure of the interpreter, of which Foer's novel is an example<sup>2</sup>, or so we would argue, is part of that exploration. Demonstrating the impact of speaking the unspeakable and inviting identification, the figure of the interpreter is imbued with symbolical significance as the transmitter of both testimony and its traumatic effect.

Testimony, as is significant with respect to an exploration of voices and silence in contemporary fiction, appears to be situated at the interface of both. As Susana Cavallo recently observed: "The insufficiency of language, the failure of representation, the fallibility of memory, but most important, the very nature of trauma, engender silences that make testimony simultaneously the most eloquent and the most elliptical of writing" (1). The elliptical quality of testimony and the silences engendered by trauma have frequently been explained and even prescribed by established notions of "the unspeakable". Naomi Mandel has recently argued against such "a rhetoric of the unspeakable in Holocaust writing" (203). Investigating the process of metaphorisation to which the name "Auschwitz" has been subjected, she explains how it has come to stand for the unspeakable: "A complex challenge to communication, comprehension, and thought, the word refers to the limit of words, pointing toward a realm inaccessible to knowledge." (205) Arguing—similar to Thomas Trezise (52) or Hilene Flanzbaum (280)—that "the presumed 'unspeakable' quality of the Holocaust" to some extent "is a cultural construct, replete with the interests and assumptions that govern any cultural construct, less a quality of the event itself than an expression of our own motivations and desires", Mandel makes a plea for "*speaking* the unspeakable" (205). To do so, she contends, "would extend or efface these limits, diminishing the distance between us and that realm, highlighting the complex relation between what language includes and excludes, and forcing us to confront the implications of such effacement for thinking, writing, and speaking about what has been assumed to be unspeakable" (205).

Foer's *Everything is Illuminated* almost appears to be a literary answer to Mandel's plea. The novel and—since the choices made by the director and screenwriter illuminate some of the points to be made here—its film

<sup>2</sup> Another example is Julia Pascal's play *A Dead Woman on Holiday*, first performed in 1995 and published as part of her *The Holocaust Trilogy* in 2000. For the growing interest in the figure of the interpreter and a discussion of Pascal's play, see Kern-Stähler.

adaptation, written and directed by Liev Schreiber and released in 2005<sup>3</sup>, will be at the centre of our attention, because by focusing on the interpreter of trauma and the act of interpretation they offer a particular solution to the problem of speaking the unspeakable. Predictably, by doing so, both enter highly contentious ground. For one, Derrida's doubts as to the veracity and reliability of the reiterated and thus no longer indivisible testimony are, it seems, exacerbated by its dissociation from the actual—if, in this case, fictitious—witness. In addition, as pointed out by Hungerford, an ethical predicament inheres in current trauma theory. Thus, it is essential to distinguish the mediated "experience of trauma [...] from the trauma that the survivor herself has experienced and then represents in her testimony" (74). "It is not", as the survivor in Foer's novel has it, "a thing that you can imagine. It only is. After that, there can be no imagining" (188). More importantly, trauma theory in the vein of Felman or Caruth, and thus conceivably also trauma fiction, ultimately challenges the singularity of the Holocaust. As Hungerford observes, given the transmissive quality of trauma,

the Holocaust is not unique but exemplary, and exemplary not so much of other genocides, as of everyday life. The suggestion implicit in this notion of exemplarity—that the "Holocaust experience" is not confined to the events we have come to call the Holocaust—implies, further, that the experience of the Holocaust continues in the present; it is not the facts of the Holocaust—its history—that is "an inexorable and, henceforth, and [*sic*] unavoidable confrontation" with existential questions, but the experience itself. (80; see also Leys, to whom Hungerford refers)

Finally, these ethical conundrums with a view to representing the Holocaust are compounded by recent challenges to established notions of 'translation' and the function of the 'translator/interpreter'. In particular the postmodern conception of the text not as a sacred, 'untranslatable' source but as a "tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable centres of culture" (Barthes 146) and postmodern theory's emphasis on translation not as a derivative copy of "the original" (see Hermans 1985, 9) but as "a proliferation function in [the] process of productivity" (Littau 92) have initiated what Maria Tymoczko and Edwin Gentzler refer to as the "*power turn*" in translation studies (xvi), an engagement with questions pertaining

<sup>3</sup> Subsequently, reference to Schreiber's film adaptation of Foer's novel will be made parenthetically (time code).

to the translator/interpreter's agency and the power involved in translation<sup>4</sup> which, if related to the translation of testimony, carry momentous implications.

With regard to contemporary "Holocaust etiquette", which, as Hilene Flanzbaum maintains, "stipulates verisimilitude and a commitment to exposing each scrap of the grim reality so that audiences can fully comprehend the horrors of the Holocaust" and which prescribes that art itself perform the function of a "witness" (274), the subversive and iconoclastic potential of the proliferation function is evident. As with the claim for the transmissive quality of trauma or the recognition of the ambivalence of the testimonial moment, its subversive potential lies in opening discourse about the Holocaust to the not-strictly-factual, to the fictional narrative imagination. And there, as Flanzbaum has it, "is the rub": "The very idea of lying, even lying within the clear realm of fiction, appears to run perilously close to Holocaust denial". Flanzbaum herself argues vehemently against the notion of 'sanctifying' the Holocaust through artistic authenticity. Her plea is that "words like 'truth,' 'verisimilitude,' 'reality' as the pre-eminent categories upon which we make aesthetic judgments about the representations of the Holocaust need to fall by the wayside" (285).

Flanzbaum's remarks were made in "defense of liking" Roberto Benigni's controversial *Life is Beautiful* (273). When released in 1998, the film provoked a heated and prolonged debate not only on the 'authenticity' of its representation of the Holocaust but also on the propriety of fusing a Holocaust narrative with comedy<sup>5</sup>. Two decades earlier, Leslie Epstein's Holocaust novel, *King of the Jews* (1979), first making use of what many perceived to be a misplaced sense of humour, had also been received highly controversially<sup>6</sup>.

Foer's more recent novel, brimming with side-splitting humour, garnered, almost unanimously, positively raving reviews and prestigious literary prizes<sup>7</sup>—strangely so, one is tempted to add, because the novel, as

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Venuti (1995 and 1998), Álvarez and Vidal, Bassnett and Trivedi, Fawcett, Hermans (2002) and Baker.

<sup>5</sup> For the controversial discussion of Benigni's film see, for instance, Viano, Gilman, Marcus, Ben-Ghiat, Ezrahi and Flanzbaum; Renga provides a comparative discussion of Benigni's film looking at French and Italian Holocaust films. For an earlier exploration of 'the Holocaust and laughter' see Des Pres and Lipman.

<sup>6</sup> For the reception of Epstein's novel, see, for instance, Alter, Broyard and Wisse as well as Schiff and Goldman.

<sup>7</sup> Foer's novel was awarded the National Jewish Book Award and the Guardian First Book Award in 2002 and the William Saroyan International Prize for Writing

well as its film adaptation, written and directed by Liev Schreiber (2005)<sup>8</sup>, do not only rely on fictitious 'testimony' (although no attempt is made to claim its extrareferential authenticity, as Benjamin Wilkomirski did<sup>9</sup> and as was assumed in the case of Jerzy Kosinski) but through the figure of the interpreter also emphasise the "proliferation function" as fundamental to our perception of the mediated testimony.

Perhaps the generally positive reception of *Everything is Illuminated* signals a recent, or maybe still ongoing, change in reception patterns which corresponds to Flanzbaum's appeal that instead of insisting on "truth", "verisimilitude" and "reality" in representations of the Holocaust, "we might heartily applaud those works that somehow compel viewers (and especially large numbers of them) to take another look—a deeper look, a more thoughtful look—at the event" (285).

Interpreting trauma, as has been shown in the context of forensic translation at war crimes trials or addressing ethnic strife, is highly affective<sup>10</sup>; it appears to facilitate and sustain the transmissive experience of trauma of which the interpreter himself or herself may become a symbol in literary texts. However, interpreting and translation can also be employed in trauma fiction to "manufacture funnies" (Foer 5). It can be hilariously funny, and it can be so even when the subject matter is as abjectly harrowing as the Holocaust. Obviously, it can be so only against the dictates of 'authenticity', because there is nothing funny about the Holocaust; but it can be so, if—in the words of Flanzbaum—it compels readers to "take another look" at the event.

In *Everything is Illuminated*, Jonathan Safran Foer deals with uncovering and giving voice to the experience of atrocities of the past. The novel reflects on the role of the interpreter in unearthing what was hidden; more importantly, it gauges the unreliability of language (as witnessed by its malleability), but also the capacity of language—however mutilated and contorted it may be—to convey the horror of traumatic experience and the ethical conundrums inherent in confronting it; finally, it addresses, with its

in 2003. For examples of its positive reception by the press see, for instance, Hitchings, Lawson, Mendelsohn and Prose.

<sup>8</sup> Schreiber's film won a series of prizes at film festivals in Bratislava, São Paulo and Venice as well as the Special Recognition Award of the National Board of Review, USA. Press reviews were, however, rather mixed, see, for instance, Atkinson, Bradshaw, French and Scott.

<sup>9</sup> Kosinski's *The Painted Bird* (1965/1975) and Wilkomirski's *Fragments* (1995/1996) both purport to be 'authentic' memoirs of Holocaust survivors.

<sup>10</sup> See, for instance, Buur.

very linguistic structure and its metafictional comments, the problem of representing the “unrepresentable” and of speaking the “unspeakable”.

To appreciate the way in which *Everything is Illuminated* makes use of the interpreter and his translations to intervene in the debate on the “unspeakable”, it is necessary to consider the complex narrative structure of the novel. Its two narrators—the naïve Jewish American student Jonathan Safran Foer, returned to New York from the heritage trail in Ukraine, where he had been looking for the woman who saved his grandfather from the Nazis some fifty years earlier, and Alexander Perchov, his well-meaning, boastful and hilariously inept interpreter—take turns in sending each other their narratives. Alex’s instalments, accompanied by his letters to Jonathan, cover the actual expedition from Lvov main station to the desolate field where nothing of the *shtetl* of Trachimbrod remains. Inserted between Alex’s missives are Jonathan’s imaginative renderings of the history of Trachimbrod, and of his antecedents, from the end of the eighteenth century to its destruction in 1942. Both their narratives inexorably converge as it emerges that Alex’s grandfather, the driver of the expedition, was himself perpetrator and victim of the events uncovered in the course of the “ennobled voyage” (179).

On a superficial level, much of the humour in Foer’s novel is indebted to the quirky character of the interpreter and his slightly—sometimes glaringly—off-the-mark translations. During the Nuremberg Trials, the effect which the personality, and the voice, of the interpreters had on the trial and on the perception of the persecutors and the witnesses was frequently remarked upon<sup>11</sup>. What to some of the commentators of the Nuremberg Trials was an irritation is skilfully exploited by Foer in his novel. The incongruity of his interpreter and the subject matter, Alex’s seemingly wilful ways with the English language and the resulting humour turn into a profound enquiry into the nature of language and of the representation and transmissive experience of trauma.

The manipulative power of the interpreter is demonstrated early on in the novel when Alex, intent on avoiding to offend his charge, gives a new spin on his grandfather’s expletives, who is exasperated not only for having lost his way through Lvov but also because he realises that the impending journey will make him revisit his own, repressed past. “He made us lost often and became on his nerves”, Alex explains and continues: “I had to translate his anger into useful information for the hero”.

<sup>11</sup> For a detailed discussion see Kern-Stähler.

“Fuck,” Grandfather said. I said, “He says if you look at the statues, you can see that some no longer endure. Those are where Communist statues used to be.” “Fucking fuck, fuck!” Grandfather shouted. “Oh,” I said, “he wants you to know that that building, that building, and that building are all important.” “Why?” the hero inquired. “Fuck!” Grandfather said. “He cannot remember,” I said. (58)

Of course, Alex’s imaginative translation, retreating on the deceptively safe ground of overthrown communism, unbeknownst to himself or “the hero”, as he calls Jonathan in his narrative, hits the mark precisely because it exposes the denial which manifests itself in not being able to remember. This, on another level, is also expressed by the imaginary blindness of the grandfather from which he suffers since the death of his wife two years earlier.

Juxtaposing spoken Ukrainian and English, Liev Schreiber reproduces in his film the actual process of translation. The flexibility of Alex’s translations is exposed here by the English subtitles which augment his efforts for the benefit of the viewer. With respect to evocations of the communist past, however, Schreiber resorts to a combination of images and language rather than inter-lingual comparison. In the film, the Soviet past is shown to be that of an occupation which has been overthrown. Passing some ruined apartment buildings in the ubiquitous panel flat style, Jonathan’s “What is it?” is answered by Alex with a curt: “Soviets”. When Jonathan persists: “What happened?”, Alex gloats with obvious pride: “Independence” (00:36:51–58). The no longer enduring statues are not mentioned in the screenplay.

As quick-witted and manipulative as Alex appears to be in the novel, we never once question his sincerity. Indeed, as he signs off his letters: “Guilelessly, Alexander” (26, etc.); guileless is how he appears to us, and so does his narrative. This although, or perhaps precisely because, he quite explicitly—and “guilelessly”—discusses the narrative choices open to him. This quality in Alex is also suggested by his literal understanding which compels Jonathan to spell things out for him and the reader to reflect on the careless use of language. The ambiguity of language, as well as its inadequacy to represent atrocities—because its metaphorical nature inevitably glosses over the horrific events—is revealed, for instance, when Jonathan shows to Alex the photograph of his grandfather and the young woman called Augustine:

“See this?” he said. “This here is my grandfather Safran. [...] This was taken during the war.” “From who?” “No, not taken like that. The photograph was made.” “I understand.” “These people he is with are the

family that saved him from the Nazis." "What?" "They ... saved ... him ... from ... the ... Na ... zis." "In Trachimbrod?" "No, somewhere outside of Trachimbrod. He escaped the Nazi raid on Trachimbrod. Everyone else was killed. He lost a wife and a baby." "He lost?" (59)

—and the stark interpretation: "They were killed by the Nazis" (59).

Like his seeming ignorance of the polyvalent use of words and the resulting humour, Alex's other linguistic limitations serve to throw into sharp relief more profound predicaments as, for instance, the arbitrariness of language, the problems of intercultural communication or the vagaries of history. Thus, when Jonathan declares his intention of visiting the *shtetls* in the Ukraine, Alex demands: "The whats?" "Shtetls. A shtetl is like a village" (60). Alex's ignorance in this case is not only, of course, indicative of the gaps in his English vocabulary but also of the void of the 'lost' Jewish presence in the Ukraine. The ensuing dialogue serves to undermine the reliability of language even further as it may be assumed that its speaker is aware of its various connotations but is constrained by social conventions. Alex's peevish remark—"Why don't you merely dub it a village?"—is answered by Jonathan as follows:

"It's a Jewish word." "A Jewish word?" "Yiddish. Like schmuck." "What does it mean schmuck?" "Someone who does something that you don't agree with is a schmuck." "Teach me another." "Putz." "What does that mean?" "It's like schmuck." "Teach me another." "Schmendrick." "What does that mean?" "It's also like schmuck." "Do you know any words that are not like schmuck?" He pondered for a moment. "Shalom," he said, "which is actually three words, but that's Hebrew, not Yiddish. Everything I can think of is basically schmuck. The Eskimos have four hundred words for snow, and the Jews have four hundred for schmuck." I wondered, What is an Eskimo? (60)

Alex depends on Jonathan's explanation which is, of course, fundamentally misleading inasmuch as the prudish American shies away from imparting the primary meaning of the Yiddish synonyms (referring to the male genitals) and thus leads Alex off the track to wonder about the one word that seems to be unambiguous—a ploy which not only alerts us to the "proliferation function" inherent in language itself, but also, no less importantly, to its potential to circumvent the "unspeakable".

In the film, in line with its significantly different denouement—here, Alex's grandfather, it is later revealed, is himself Jewish—the scene is acted out quite differently. When Alex, baffled by the unknown word, asks for its meaning, it is his grandfather who first—although more as to himself—says in Ukrainian (with subtitles): "It's a village" (00:31:04).

Jonathan, unaware of what the old man said, explains: "It's Yiddish. It means village" (00:31:06). With Alex even more puzzled by his grandfather's unexpected intervention, the dialogue then shifts to the discussion of Jonathan's photographs, never once referring to *schmuck* or *putz*, nor playing out the puns on the 'lost' wife and baby or the 'taken' photograph.

The void created by the Jewish absence in the Ukraine is thus subtly historicised in the film in that Alex's grandfather is seen to remember it as a presence. (The viewer does not know, at this stage, that he is Jewish himself). The technique used by Schreiber is strangely reminiscent of the arrangement of photographs of synagogues in the Jewish Museum in Berlin. With his celebrated architectural voids, "by withholding a representation", Daniel Libeskind provokes the visitor of his building "into remembering images of the destruction on his or her own" (Kligerman 34). In the museum, these architectural voids are contrasted with a wall on which are displayed antique postcards representing synagogues throughout Germany. As Eric Kligerman suggests, "these synagogues conjure up in our mnemonic reservoir the images of their destruction during *Kristallnacht*. The wall is itself a map that puts on display the hundreds of voids spread across Germany" (47). This device is echoed in Schreiber's film on several levels. It is introduced at the very beginning of the film when the opening credits are superimposed on a map of Ukraine onto which old sepia and black and white photographs have been pinned. Following the red lines of a road, the camera slowly pans along the map and the photographs, most of which are unmistakably of Eastern European Jews (the first picture shows a *bar mitzvah* in his prayer shawl, other pictures include Hebrew characters or show orthodox men). These representations of 'voids' are then contextualised by a voice-over spoken by Alex:

I will be truthful and mention that before my rigid search I had the opinion Jewish people were having shit between their brains. Primarily this is because all I knew of Jewish people was that they paid father very much currency in order to make vacations from America to Ukraine. (01:40–02:00; cf. Foer 3)

And, a significant addition to Foer's text, he continues: "I was of the opinion that the past is past, and like all that is not now, it should remain buried, along the side of our memories. But this was before the commencement of our very rigid search. Before I encountered the collector—Jonathan Safran Foer" (02:03–02:30).

Only a little later in the film, the collector, Jonathan Safran Foer, is shown in front of just such a wall covered with the representations of voids. He has pinned on it all kinds of items pertaining to the history of his



family (07:44) which he collects because “sometimes [he is] afraid to forget” (1:10:12). The notion of voids, conveyed by the opening credits and the wall, is visually alluded to in the film once again when Jonathan spreads out his map and photographs in the hotel before encountering the void of Trachimbrod (31:08).

For Trachimbrod, literally, is another void. “There was nothing”, Alex states in the novel: “When I utter ‘nothing’ I do not mean there was nothing except for two houses, and some wood on the ground, and pieces of glass, and children’s toys, and photographs. When I utter that there was nothing, what I intend is that there was not any of these things, or any other things” (184). Whatever remains of Trachimbrod is collected in cardboard boxes and stacked in the house of an old woman whom they think to be “Augustine”, the girl in the photograph with Jonathan’s grandfather. But it turns out that she herself, her real name is Lista, is one of the few survivors of the Trachimbrod massacre. Asked by Alex for Trachimbrod, the old woman answers, as, indeed, she does in the novel: “You are here. I am it” (1:01:57–1:02:00; Foer 118). Her house being an unlikely *lieu de mémoire*, the void of the three-dimensional space once taken up by the *shtetl* and its inhabitants is set off by the collection of artefacts representing it and, unexpectedly, by the old woman herself. Both Schreiber and Foer—Jonathan’s wall has no equivalent in the novel but the description of the cardboard boxes in Lista’s house matches the images of the film rather closely (147)—thus make recurring use of the same technique of invoking the “mnemonic reservoir” of the reader/viewer to contrast images of destruction and voids. In the novel this technique is made explicit by the apparent paradox of Alex instructing Jonathan to look at the statues which “no longer endure”. Here, too, are voids, for “[t]hose are where Communist statues used to be” (58).

Jonathan, in their relationship of interpreter and client, is entirely dependent on the information Alex offers him. In Lista’s house, Jonathan, at first, is excluded from her explanations as she sorts through the boxes. For Alex does not translate for him, and “[t]he hero did not ask me once what she was saying, and he never did ask me. I am not certain if he knew what she was saying, or if he knew not to inquire” (152). Yet, the text marks very clearly the point when, finally, Jonathan is included in the conversation: “I am the only one remaining” the old woman says. “‘What do you signify?’ I asked, because I just did not know. ‘They were all killed,’ she said, and here I commenced to translate for the hero what she was saying, ‘except for the one or two who were able to escape’” (153).

When his grandfather and Lista send Alex and Jonathan out of the house, in his own retrospective narrative, Alex, himself suddenly excluded

from the continuing narration and prevented from interpreting for Jonathan, is made aware of the potentially disruptive power of narrative which, of course, is also his power as an interpreter over Jonathan: “Part of me hated this, and part of me was grateful, because once you hear something, you can never return to the time before you heard it” (156).

Significantly, Alex several times reflects on the choice they have of stopping to delve into the past. The reluctance, but also the need to know, to hear or see the testimony is observed by Alex in Jonathan’s reaction to the faded photographs Lista shows them: “I gave the hero each picture as she gave it to me, and he could only with difficulty hold it in his hands that were doing so much shaking. It appeared that a part of him wanted to write everything, every word of what occurred, into his diary. And part of him refused to write even one word” (154).

The ambivalence of the writer towards the testimony described here—and surely this is not merely about Jonathan in the story but about the (second generation) Holocaust writer in general—shows them in their function as ‘transmitters’ of the Holocaust, just like Alex. And just like Alex, the Holocaust writer admits into his or her own being the trauma they seek to transmit—for this, it is implied, is the transmissive nature of trauma and, indeed, a narrative necessity.

In growing desperation, apprehensive of the outcome of this very rigid search, Alex states in one of his letters to Jonathan: “*With writing, we have second chances*” (144). But in his narrative he ostensibly does not take this route. Reflecting on what in effect appears to be the transmission of trauma, he maintains that “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.” Acknowledging the potential of this hurt, he delineates his narrative options: “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?” (117). In the event, Alex purports to give Jonathan a truthful account, although he asks him to edit certain passages once he has read them (which have, of course, been retained). But it becomes clear that the text itself, suggesting its own unreliability, answers the proliferation function: “*We are being very nomadic with the truth, yes? The both of us?*”, Alex admonishes Jonathan, elaborating on the question of narrative choices:

*Do you think that this is acceptable when we are writing about things that occurred? If your answer is no, then why do you write about Trachimbrod and your grandfather in the manner that you do, and why do you command me to be untruthful? If your answer is yes, then this creates another*

*question, which is if we are to be such nomads with the truth, why do we not make the story more premium than life? (179)*

Alex's questions, simple as they seem, strike to the core of Holocaust fiction and the answer, in Foer's novel, is also deceptively simple. Because sometimes good persons live in bad times (227), and to make sure that impossible choices are not inflicted on us or on anyone, it is necessary (247)—as Mandel also argues—to break the silence, to “utter things that are not uttered” (Foer 245), and to take responsibility for the past and its effect on the present. Neither the writer nor the translator is relieved of the narrative choices he or she has to make—the choice between remaining silent and voicing the unspeakable being almost an impossible one, too.

When Alex continues to interview Lista, the traumatic dimension of the “unspeakable” is explored in his rendering and the point of no return is reached. Lista explains how some survived the massacre: “‘Some departed before.’ ‘Before they came?’ ‘Yes.’ ‘But you did not.’ ‘No.’ ‘You were lucky to endure.’ Silence. ‘No.’ Silence. ‘Yes.’ Silence. We could have stopped it there. We could have viewed Trachimbrod, returned to the car, and followed Augustine back to her house” (184).

But instead of taking the easy way out, of accepting the survivor's silence, they persevere, and Lista continues her narrative. The text makes use here of a recurring device to foreground not only the situative context of the translation but also—because, of course, the novel is written completely in English (in contrast to the film which makes use of Ukrainian and subtitles)—to imply the distance of the listener which at the same time is subverted by means of constant repetitions; as in a real translation, they interrupt the flow of the narrative. However, for the reader, the interruption here is not a sequence of, to them, meaningless sounds, but an insistent reiteration of the horrors and thus—even if it divides the testimonial moment—brings home the import of the narrative even more effectively: “‘They made us in lines,’ she said. ‘They had lists. They were logical.’ I translated for the hero as Augustine spoke. ‘They burned the synagogue.’ ‘They burned the synagogue.’ ‘That was the first thing they did.’ ‘That was first.’ ‘Then they made all of the men in lines’ ” (185).

Earlier, Alex had remarked that “once you hear something, you can never return to the time before you heard it” (156). Yet Foer's novel emphasises not only the effect of the narrative on the listener (and the reader) but also on its interpreter (and, once again, the reader): “You cannot know how it felt to have to hear these things and then repeat them, because when I repeated them, I felt like I was making them new again” (185). In Foer's novel, the reiteration of testimony, rather than effecting

the deconstruction of the testimonial moment, paradoxically reconstructs it in a mediated form. And this in full acknowledgement of the loss of veracity and reliability it suffers. As it is said about one of the characters in the parallel narrative of Trachimbrod: “she repeats things until they are true, or until she can't tell whether they are true or not” (87). Far from intending to deny the Holocaust, Foer emphasises the narrative and mediated character of Holocaust testimony. For it is only as a narrative—which we need to translate into our own idiom, like Alex in the novel—that we can assimilate it, and through repetition<sup>12</sup>. In the text, Foer reflects on this when he has Alex write to Jonathan: “*I have considered making you speak Ukrainian [...], but that would make me a useless person, because if you spoke Ukrainian, you would still have need for a driver, but not for a translator*” (101). Not only would Alex have written himself out of the story with this—more importantly, his essential function, to reiterate, to mediate and to transmit, would have been left a ‘void’ because, yes, there is the need for a translator, always.

Significantly, in Foer's novel, the nature of the “unspeakable”, that which is recounted by Lista through Alex, subsequently turns into the “unlistenable”. As Jorge Semprún, a survivor of Buchenwald, claims in his *Literature or Life?* (1994): “[Y]ou can always say everything. The ‘ineffable’ you hear so much about is only an alibi. Or a sign of laziness. You can always say everything: language contains everything...” (13). To Semprún the more salient question is: “But can people hear everything, imagine everything? Will they be able to understand? Will they have the necessary patience, passion, compassion, and fortitude?” (14). Discussing Semprún's testimony, Thomas Trezise argues with reference to Theodor W. Adorno: “the very difficulty of hearing is what makes of listening itself an obligation” (60). Jonathan finally refuses to listen to the unspeakable: “‘I don't want to hear any more,’ the hero said, so it was at this point”, Alex relates, “that I ceased translating” (186). In the film, he quietly walks away, but only *after* Lista has finished her story, to collect soil from the

<sup>12</sup> For the effect of repetition on trauma, see LaCapra: “Indeed trauma is effected belatedly through repetition, for the numbingly traumatic event does not register at the time of its occurrence but only after a temporal gap or period of latency, at which time it is immediately repressed, split off, or disavowed. Trauma then in some way may return compulsively as the repressed. Working through trauma brings the possibility of counteracting compulsive ‘acting-out’ through a controlled, explicit, critically controlled process of repetition that significantly changes a life by making possible the selective retrieval and modified enactment of unactualized past possibilities” (174).



German philosopher's choice of words is "the abstraction and generalization by which Heidegger hedges the concepts of death and technology, in effect excluding for either of these the likelihood, perhaps even the possibility, of an interior view—the view of the subject" (18). We do not wish to claim that Foer referred directly to Heidegger's phrase, but his own seems to provide a counterpoint to the latter in that it re-establishes the subject, its humanity, and its capacity for the transmissive experience of trauma. For the novel's humour is like a slippery spiral down which we slide ever faster to the dark centre of trauma.

Schreiber's film, too, makes much of the incongruity of its subject matter and the figure of its translator to exploit the "manufacturing of funnies". The 'stereotypically' Eastern European Alex (played by Eugene Hutz) in his shiny track suit, bedecked with gold necklaces and naively enamoured of American popular culture, is an unlikely 'transmitter' of the Holocaust. In the film, more obviously than in the novel, Alex's initially uncritical fascination with things American is situated in the wider and highly charged context of cultural translation, or rather the translation of cultures, in the age of globalisation. Schreiber does completely away with Jonathan's historical narrative and focuses exclusively on the quest for the vanished *shtetl* of Trachimbrod. But against the background of the Americanisation of the Ukraine—perhaps most strikingly visualised in the film when the legendary 'Odessa staircase', famously portrayed in Sergej Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), is contrasted with skate-boarders doing their stunts in the park at its bottom, thus caustically recalling the well-known downward passage of the pram in the earlier film—Alex's role as a mediator seems to be emphasised with a view to the silencing and voicing of identities in the past and in the present.

In the film, the most decisive and—as we would argue—sadly reductive change made with respect to the novel is that here Alex's grandfather Alexander is Jewish and was himself a victim of the Trachimbrod massacre<sup>14</sup>. In progressive flashbacks we see him in front of the firing squad, shot at and, finally, after having risen unscathed from the mass grave into which he had been thrown, as he divests himself of his jacket with the yellow Mogen David stitched to its breast to cast it among the dead and leave the site of the massacre—not to return until he completes his own "very rigid search" with Alex and Jonathan. Any guilt Alexander—or Baruch (meaning: "blessed"), as his Jewish name is—might have incurred rests, in Schreiber's screenplay, rather with his having denied his

Jewish identity and thus having 'betrayed' the victims of the Holocaust. He does not, as he does in the novel, point his finger to denounce his Jewish friend, if only to save the lives of his family, and his own. Thus the dimension of innocently becoming guilty and the whole intricate web of being perpetrator and victim at the same time, which is so central to the novel and, indeed, one of its most striking features, is largely ignored in Schreiber's film. It is only hinted at by Alex's increasing apprehensions about his grandfather's past as the story unfolds and before he knows that he is Jewish. The trope of the "unspeakable" is also invoked in this context, when Jonathan suggests to Alex to voice his concerns towards his grandfather which Alex rejects: "No, that is impossible" (53:30–33). The resistance to voicing the unspeakable with respect to his grandfather is never really overcome by Alex in the film. To Jonathan's question what he means when he says that his grandfather seems to him to be distressed, he retorts irritably, denying, but simultaneously emphasising, the inadequacy of verbal communication: "What do you mean, what do I mean? I do not mean anything. [...] When I want to say something else, I say something else" (53:51–54:01).

In the film, Alexander/Baruch never breaks the silence about his past, the flashbacks remaining in his mind, exclusively. However, a lot of silent understanding seems to pass between Alex and his grandfather, visualised through smiles, touches and eye contact. When Alexander/Baruch kills himself, in the film, his face seems suffused with happiness, his eyes wide open, obviously 'seeing' again, until they are closed by Alex. Of course, in the novel, Alexander kills himself too, and here, too, he does so in complete happiness. His motive, however, is an entirely different one. Here, he experiences happiness because he has finally broken his silence and confessed his feelings of guilt. Seeing that Alex (Sasha, as he calls him), too, has grown through the ordeal of the rigid search and his translation, he feels a strong certainty and a fervent hope: "*All is for Sasha and Iggy [Little Igor], Jonathan*", he writes to the American in a letter translated after his death by Alex:

*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? (275)*

The film, in striking contrast, suggests that, by killing himself, Alexander/Baruch finally takes his place among the victims and acknowledges his Jewishness thus to be reconciled with his past and the ghosts of

<sup>14</sup> The sentimental resolution of the film was criticised, for instance, also by Peter Bradshaw, because it "does not quite do justice to the subject's cultural and historical mass".

that past. Indeed, his burial on the bank of the Brod, alternating with shots of Jonathan at the grave of his grandfather, completely restores him to the Jewish community. Even the design of his tombstone is identical to that of Jonathan's grandfather. Strangely, however, while Alexander Baruch's name in Cyrillic merits a transliteration in subtitles, stressing that he has been returned his Jewish name, the Hebrew characters on the stone are not transliterated. Inscribed in both stones is the abbreviation of 1 Sam 25:29 (הבצלה; he-bet-tsadeh-nun-tav), frequently found on Jewish tombstones: "May his soul be bound up in the bond of eternal life". Above the deceased's name, both stones show the Mogen David which has thus also been returned to Baruch. This, and that both Jonathan and Alex each throw a fistful of the same earth of the bank of the river Brod on each grave, knits a dense, highly symbolic—and highly sentimental—web of parallels, emphasising their common Jewishness. This is only strengthened when Alex—leaving the grave with the dog, Sammy Davis, Jr., Jr., and his brother, Little Igor, playfully running and jostling to show, presumably, that life goes on—loses the *kippah* he wore for the ceremony but retrieves it to place it more firmly on his head. The reconciliation with the past thus extends also to Alex. His initial voice-over, rejecting the importance of the past and voicing anti-Semitic sentiments, is now countered by the memories invoked by the "very rigid search" and by his acceptance of his own Jewishness<sup>15</sup> of which the past of the Holocaust is an integral part: "everything is illuminated—in the light of the past. It is always along the side of us" (1:32:48–57).

Foer's *Everything is Illuminated* is not, it has to be stressed, testimonial literature in the established sense. It is inspired by autobiographical detail only with respect to the author's own experiences of following the 'heritage trail'—and this in a much less colourful way than described in the novel. "There wasn't an Alex", Foer stated in an interview:

There wasn't a grandfather, there wasn't a dog, there wasn't a woman I found who resembled the woman in the book—but I did go, and I just found—nothing. It's not like anything else I've ever experienced in my life. In a certain sense the book wasn't an act of creation so much as it was an act of replacement. I encountered a hole—and it was like the hole that I found was in myself, and one that I wanted to try to fill up. (Wagner)

*Voicing the Void* is the title of an important study on Holocaust writing by Sara R. Horowitz, and it is a phrase which seems to describe fairly accurately what Foer attempts to do with his novel. The void is, of course,

<sup>15</sup> Ironically, according to matrilineal Jewish law, Alex would not be Jewish.

not only a material void, although it is this as well. It is also the silence imposed by notions of the "unspeakable" in approaching the Holocaust which is being replaced with the narrative voices in Foer's novel.

The initially raised questions of how the "testimonial moment" is affected by its reiteration through an interpreter and how, in turn, the process of its communication and the person of the interpreter are affected by the transmitted testimony seem to be at the core of Foer's novel. Offering the figure of the interpreter to us as symbolic of our own engagement with the testimonial moment, becoming in part witness and listener at the same time, in a highly self-reflexive manner it draws our attention to precisely those problems which shape what may be called a three-person psychology between the witness, the transmitter of testimony and the listener. While obviously in Foer's narrative witness and translator are fictional—his novel participating in a process described by S. Lillian Kremer as witnessing through the imagination—its many readers are not. By constantly highlighting the ever-shifting semantics involved in the process of translation through Alex's linguistic antics, it makes us aware of the power, and of the weaknesses, inherent in this very process of translation, and of those of the translator/interpreter. For it is not only (the lack of) his linguistic skills but also his emotional involvement which contribute towards the division and shifting of the testimonial moment in a proliferation of meaning.

Yet the narrative quality of testimony—and this is another effect the novel illuminates—is seen to facilitate the transmission of trauma which, once again is symbolised in the text through the act of translation and the figure of the translator, because it involves the assimilation of the testimony prior to its reiteration and its reconstruction through reiteration. Naomi Mandel firmly criticises "a rhetoric of trauma" in relation to the Holocaust, because "positing the Holocaust as a 'traumatic' event reiterates its presupposed heterogeneity to conceptual structures, subtly emphasizing the assumption that it is unspeakable" (214). She argues that the notion "that contemporary culture is 'traumatized' by the Holocaust constructs contemporary culture as the (essentially passive) victim of the Holocaust's impact on its (constructed) collective psyche—effacing the issue of volition and subsequent responsibility raised by the Holocaust's presence in contemporary history" (214). Foer's novel, it seems to us, by having the translator/interpreter admit the trauma into his own psyche but not simultaneously disavowing the implications of this 'traumatic' history because he dares to speak the unspeakable, attempts to offer a solution to the ethical conundrums outlined by Mandel.

The exploration of the 'impossibility' of narrative choices in relation to the impossibility of moral choices in Foer's novel is a dimension which has been severely curtailed in Liev Schreiber's film adaptation. In a comparative analysis, the film thus contributes to bringing out in strong relief the ambivalences negotiated in *Everything is Illuminated*. Perhaps the most basic of these narrative choices is whether to subject oneself as well as the potential listener to the imposition of the "unspeakable". Foer's choice, as symbolised by Alex, is to speak the unspeakable and to take hold of the listener, because to listen—or to read—is no less important than to speak—or to write.

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**PART IV:**  
**NEW LITERATURES:**  
**THE POETICS OF SILENT VOICES**